

The Bodhisattva's sex life

Source: **Mahā Saccaka Sutta** (M 36) Introduction, SD 49.4 (5.4.2.3-5.4.3.6).

The term “Bodhisattva” is the anglicized form of the Pali *bodhisatta*, “the being bound for awakening.” This is a special term for the historical Buddha from the time of his birth to just before his awakening as the Buddha. Traditionally, the Bodhisattva's life would extend into the distant past when he first aspired to buddhahood. However, for our purposes here, it is sufficient to limit the term to his last life in this world.

Soon after renouncing the world, the Bodhisattva was said to have practised 6 years of self-mortification. As the result of this protracted self-mortification, the Bodhisattva's complexion was variously perceived by on-lookers as being black, brown and sallow. The suttas depict him as taking only jujube fruit (*kola*), only bean, only sesame, only rice—taking only their powdered (pulverized) form, their various concoctions, and down to merely a fruit, a seed or a grain a day.

Never in the quest of the human spirit has so much pain been borne by a single person for so long. After 6 long years, the Bodhisattva saw the futility of self-mortification, of which he rightly declared, “This is the utmost extreme, there is none beyond this!” Then, he turned to the middle way.

Contrast against sensuality

Why is the depiction of the Bodhisattva's self-mortification so dramatic and given such a prominence in the suttas? It is to contrast against sensual indulgence—the other extreme of bodily experience—it is to advocate the abandonment of bodily pleasure and sexuality. This worldly extreme is not depicted with such drama and detail as that of his self-mortification.

This is understandable—as such depictions would be construed (and rightly so) as pornography, and have the undesirable and wrong effects on us. For such lurid details would have no value as psychological reflections or spiritual meditations. But we do have hints of them, especially in the description of the 7 jewels (*satta ratana*) of the wheel-turner (*cakka,vatti*), the universal monarch—the world ruler that Gotama is prophesized to become if he does not renounce the world but lives a home life.

The 7 jewels

The 7 jewels of the wheel-turner, described in such texts as **the Mahā Sudassana Sutta** (D 17), are the wheel jewel, the elephant jewel, the horse jewel, the gem-jewel, the woman jewel, the steward jewel and the commander jewel—that is, the regalia and hallmarks of the wheel-turner or universal monarch (*cakka,vatti*).

The qualities of **the “woman jewel”** (*itthī,ratana*)—the world monarch's queen—are sensually described in **the Bāla Paṇḍita Sutta** (M 129): she is beautiful and graceful, of the best complexion, neither too tall nor too short, neither too thin nor too fat, neither too dark nor too fair, surpassing human beauty, though not reaching the beauty of the gods. Her touch is soft like a

tuft of cotton-wool or of kapok (silk-cotton). To the wheel-turner, when it is cool, her limbs are warm; when it is warm, her limbs are cool. Her body exudes the fragrance of sandalwood, and her mouth has the scent of lotuses. She rises before the wheel-turning king and retires after him. She is eager to serve, agreeable in conduct, and sweet in speech. Even in thought, she is never unfaithful to the wheel-turning king, how then could she be unfaithful in terms of her body?

Kāma Sūtra & Kāma Sutta

The classic depiction of sensual and sexual pleasures is found in a secular work, **the Kāma Sūtra** (the discourse on sensuality), compiled probably around the Buddha's time or just after (400-200 BCE), and in its present form is attributed to Vātsyāyana (2nd century CE). Although it is popularly perceived as a "sex manual," only 20% of it actually describes sexual pleasure, while the majority of it discusses a philosophy of love, the nature of desire, how it is triggered and sustained, and when it is good or bad. In short, it is a secular manual on worldly pleasures.

There is an early Buddhist text called **the Kāma Sutta** (Sn 4.1), which is the very first sutta in the *Aṭṭhaka, vagga*, one of the oldest of Buddhist texts. Unlike the Kāma Sūtra, the Buddha's Kāma Sutta warns against the dangers that attend the quest for sensual pleasures.

The short sutta of 6 verses (Sn 766-771) opens by saying, "If it prospers a mortal to desire sensual pleasure, | surely he is joyful hearted in gaining what he wishes" (Sn 766). The phrase "joyful hearted" (*pīti, mano*) is given in the simple present, reflecting a natural truth, something that will always be the case.

However, sensuality always fusses over what it likes, what it does not, and is caught up with running after the former and running from the latter. Moreover, sensual pleasure only works with a *right* sense-object: it is object-based. The "right" sense-object is what we have been conditioned to like, or what we deem as missing from us. We learn that we have lacks and lusts from measuring ourselves against others. We lust after those things that we think are *lacking* in us.

Pleasure is never enough

Without the right object in just the right setting, we will not be satisfied. In fact, even with the perfect sensual object, we are at best only momentarily satiated. Pleasures are only in the present moment. We cannot stretch them beyond this momentary life: we would be like Procrustes and his bed—only that we find ourself in that bed!

When pleasure weakens or ends, we miss it and want more (Sn 767). For the laity, sense-pleasure is meant to be enjoyed only in the moment, as it does not go beyond that. For the celibate renunciants, who have themselves avowed to eschew sense-pleasures, even meditative joy is only in the moment. When we understand the nature of impermanence, especially in sense-pleasure and mental joy, then we are more likely to feel gratified. If we are truly satisfied, we will not want when it is gone, or we might even not want it any more. This is

because we are mindful of this pleasure: we remember it, as it were, forever. That joy arises at any time when we recall it.

Psychologically, it is understandable to see the Bodhisattva, as a spiritually precocious child, naturally contemplative, and taking to deep meditation when the conditions are right. The life of sensual pleasures that the Bodhisattva's father has in store for him only floods him with all that an ordinary adolescent may naturally desire after. Or, deprived of it, he may spend his adult life in quest of them.

But overwhelmed by it, he surfeits and tires of it. Too much of a pleasure kills it. This must have only intensified his spiritual inclination. Such an experience at puberty or adolescence would effectively mould his adult pursuits, fruiting in what even all the world's pleasure cannot give—awakening and liberation.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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