

SD 63.12

Sanaṅkumāra Sutta

The Discourse on Sanaṅkumāra

S 6.11

Theme: On the most evolved of beings

Translated by Piya Tan 2017; ©2025

1 Sutta summary and significance

1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY

The **Sanaṅkumāra Sutta** is a short text from the Brahmā Saṃyutta of the Saṃyuttia Nikāya wherein Brahmā Sanaṅkumāra (Skt *sanat kumara*), in the Sanaṅkumāra Gāthā, declares the supremacy of the kshatriya (*khattiya*), the warrior noble, as a social class in ancient India. However, the Buddha, “endowed with wisdom and conduct,” is *the best amongst gods and humans*, that is, the highest of all evolved beings.

1.2 SUTTA SIGNIFICANCE

1.2.1 The 2 aspects of Sanaṅkumāra’s verse

Sanaṅkumāra’s verse (*sanaṅkumāra gāthā*)¹ [S 596, §3] is significant in that it combines both the sentiment of an ancient gnomic saying and the spirit of the Buddha’s teaching [2.2.2]. The verse both promotes the social reality of the day (kshatriya dominance), and the ideal of early Buddhism (the Buddha’s awakening). [2.3.2]

1.2.2 Sanaṅkumāra’s verse in other contexts

1.2.2.1 The Sekha Sutta (M 53) records that Ānanda utters the same Sanaṅkumāra Gāthā [S 596] in another context, that is, he gives a detailed analysis of the term, *vijjā, carāṇa*, “knowledge and conduct.”² That is to say, “**conduct**” (*carāṇa*) refers to the totality of moral conduct (keeping the precepts and to right livelihood), and of mental calm (*samatha*), when the mind is free of any distraction of the senses, as the basis of dhyana; “**wisdom**” (*vijjā*) refers to attainment of dhyana-based calm and clarity, from which arises insight as the basis for spiritual powers, leading to liberation.

Another term for this is the 3 trainings (in moral virtue, concentration and wisdom) or, more fully, **the fruits of recluship** (*sāmañña, phala*), that is, the trainings and their fruition in arhathood.³ This teaching was given by Ānanda to Mahānāma, leader of the lay community in the assembly-hall of the Sakyas at Kapila, vatthu.⁴

1.2.2.2 The Sanaṅkumāra Gāthā recurs in **the Ambaṭṭha Sutta** (D 3),⁵ where the Buddha himself utters it in his teaching to the brahmin Ambaṭṭha. The Buddha then explains to Ambaṭṭha the meaning of being “accomplished in wisdom and conduct” (*vijjā, carāṇa, sampanna*). The path to the accomplish-

¹ On this term, see **Sekha S** (M 53,24.2), SD 21.14.

² **M 53**,25/1:358,28 f (SD 21.14).

³ M 53,6-25/1:354-358 (SD 21.14).

⁴ M 53.6/1:354 (SD 21.14).

⁵ **Ambaṭṭha S** (D 3,1.28/1:99), SD 21.3.

ment in wisdom and conduct begins with the abandoning of any talk or view regarding class (birth), clan, conceit, and of taking and giving in marriage.⁶

The Buddha then expounds the full gamut of **the fruits of recluseship** (*sāmañña, phala*)—the 3 trainings and their fruits [1.2.2.1]—in the following way:

- (1) the training in moral virtue, including the abstinence from wrong livelihood;
- (2) training in mental cultivation: sense-restraint, mindfulness and awareness, contentment, abandoning the mental hindrances, and attaining the 4 dhyanas;
- (3) insight knowledge, knowledge of the mind-made body, the supernormal powers, and the training in wisdom (viz, awakening).

While 1 and 2 constitute the accomplishment in conduct, 3 constitutes the accomplishment in wisdom. Thus, the liberated saint is one “accomplished in wisdom and conduct.”

1.2.2.3 The Aggañña Sutta (D 27) is an elaborate critique of the brahminical ideologies of caste (*jāti*) and rituals (*kamma*). The Buddha goes to great length—right to the very beginning of the world, to be exact—to show how wrong and unnatural the brahminical worldview is. The world, that is, human society, evolved in different ways by discovering how people should be governed and grow with **Dharma** (*dhamma*), that is, natural morality and goodness.

By **dharma** is meant that which is necessary for the good society to exist and grow, there should be common values of respect for *life, property, freedom of the person, truth and mindfulness*. These are, in fact, the values underpinning the universal and natural **5 precepts** for humanity and social progress.

In other words, people should not be defined by class, that is, by birth and status, but be accountable for their own actions, that is, karma. It is one’s intentional actions that define one as bad or good. It is karma that ultimately brings one suffering or happiness. In such a good society, the “foremost” (*agga*) of individuals is **the arhat**, who has overcome all defilements, especially those of *sensual lust, existence and ignorance*.

The Aggañña Sutta closes with the Buddha quoting and approving of the Sanañkumāra Gāthā. The best of society’s members is the kshatriya, that is, society’s noble defenders; but the best amongst both gods and humans, of all evolved life, is “the one endowed with wisdom and conduct,” the one who is liberated from suffering and ignorance, and who liberates others, too, in the same way.⁷

1.2.3 Sanañkumāra teaches Dharma to the Tāvatiṃsa devas

1.2.3.1 At the close of **the Jana,vasabha Sutta** (D 18), Sanañkumāra made a dramatic appearance before the devas of Tāvatiṃsa and of the 4 great kings assembled in the Sudhamma Hall. Sanañkumāra, being a brahma of the 1st dhyana realm, had to assume a gross bodily form so that he was able to appear in Tāvatiṃsa and be visible to the devas. Rejoicing in the serenity of the assembled devas, Sanañkumāra rose into the air, sat cross-legged, and praised them in verse, speaking in a brahma-voice, one that was *distinct, clear, charming, pleasant, full, fluent, deep, and resonant*.

Sanañkumāra projected 33 forms of himself, and each form sat on one of the 33 divans, each beside a Tāvatiṃsa deva. When he addressed them, each of the devas heard him as if he were speaking to him alone. Sanañkumāra spoke on how the Buddha’s teaching had brought them rebirth in that heaven and the higher realms of the sense-world heaven.

⁶ D 3,2.1/1:99 f (SD 21.3).

⁷ **Aggañña S** (D 27,32/3:97 f), SD 2.19.

1.2.3.2 Then, Sanañkumāra assumed his single self again and sat on Sakra’s throne at the head of the assembly. Sanañkumāra then spoke on how the Buddha, in his wisdom, had formulated **the 4 bases of power** (*iddhi,pada*), that is, those of *will, energy, mind and investigation*.⁸

Sanañkumāra then spoke **on the 3 attainments of the opening** (*okāsādhigama*) for true Dharma practice, that is, on hearing the Dharma, (1) one’s grosser formations of body, speech and mind are “entirely stilled”; (2) with the stilling of these formations, one experiences mental joy; and (3) listening and practising Dharma, one overcomes ignorance and gains wisdom, and happiness.

Then, Sanañkumāra spoke on how the Buddha has wisely laid down the teachings of **the 4 focuses of mindfulness** (*satipaṭṭhāna*), that is, *the contemplations of the body, of feelings, of the mind, and of dharmas*. These are, in turn, body-based meditation, feeling-based meditation, mind-based meditation and dharma-based meditation. Properly practised, any of these 4 focuses will bring mental concentration and dhyana. With dhyanic calm and clarity, one then goes on to examine true reality in terms of impermanence, and so on.⁹

1.2.3.3 Then Sanañkumāra went on to show how the Buddha wisely teaches **the 7 requisites of concentration** (*samādhi,parikkhāra*), that is, how each of the path-limbs leads to the next one, beginning with the first 7 limbs of the noble eightfold path—right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort and right mindfulness—which leads to right concentration, which leads to right knowledge, which leads to right freedom. These teachings are also known **as the tenfold rightness** (*sammatta*).¹⁰

Cultivating in this manner, one opens wide “the portals to the deathfree,” the path to awakening, comprising *streamwinning, once-returning, nonreturning* and *arhathood*. The deva **Vessavana** (of the heaven of the 4 great kings), having personally heard these teachings given by Sanañkumāra to the Tāvātimsa devas, reported them to his own following, including Janavasabha (who was previously king Bimbisāra), who then reported them back to the Buddha himself.¹¹

2 Brahmā Sanañ,kumāra¹²

2.1 THE NAME SANAÑ,KUMĀRA

Sanañ,kumāra (Skt *sanat,kumara*) is one of the great brahmas (*mahā,brahmā*), a High God of the 1st-dhyana form realm.¹³ **The Sutta Commentary** and **the Majjhima Commentary** say that when, in his former life, Sanañkumāra was the celestial minstrel Pañca,sikha,¹⁴ he practised dhyana “while yet a boy with his hair tied in 5 knots” (*pañca,cūlaka,kumara,kāle*). In due course, he was reborn in the Brahma world with his dhyana intact, but maintained his boyish look. Because he retains the appearance of a boy (*kumāra*), he is referred to as **Kumāra**, but because of his great age, he is called **Sanañ,kumāra**, “ever young.”¹⁵

⁸ On the 4 bases of power [success] (*iddhi,pāda*), see **Cattāro Iddhi,pāda**, SD 10.3 (1.1.1).

⁹ On *satipaṭṭhāna*, see SD 13.1; **Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna S** (D 22), SD 13.2; **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (M 10), SD 13.3.

¹⁰ The 10-limbed rightness is the nature of the full spiritual life: SD 10.16 (1.2.2); **Saṅgīti S** (D 33,3.3(6)), **Das’utta-ra S** (D 34,2.2(10)); **Micchatta S** (A 10.103).

¹¹ D 18,16-29/2:210-219 (SD 62.3).

¹² Much of the notes that follow is based on SD 54.3d (2.2).

¹³ On his appearance to the devas of Tāva,tīmsa and teaching them Dharma, see **Jana,vasabha S** (D 18,12-20/2:-207-220), SD 62.3.

¹⁴ Pañca,sikha is a gandharva (celestial musician), Sakra’s minstrel in Tāvātimsa: SD 54.8 (4.1).

¹⁵ *Sana*, “ever, forever,” from Skt *sanah*, “old, ancient; forever, always.” SA 1:219,12-16; MA 3:33 f. Cf AA 3:171; VvA 90; CA 48.

2.2 SANAÑKUMĀRA'S VOICE

Sanañkumāra's voice is said to have 8 qualities: it is “*distinct, clear, charming, pleasant, full, fluent, deep, and resonant.*”¹⁶ When Brahmā Sanañkumāra addresses an assembly, the sound of his voice does not stray beyond the assembly.¹⁷ Such too is said of the Buddha's voice, which is the 28th of the 32 marks of the great man, as stated in **the Lakkhaṇa Sutta** (D 30)¹⁸ and **the Brahm'āyu Sutta** (M 91).¹⁹

Having a good voice means that one's audience simply wants to listen to one and to *hear* whatever one speaks. We are thus captivated by the resonant voice of great orators, leaders, actors, singers and teachers. This verbal aspect of the teaching process may be said to be the “consonant or letter” (*vyāñjana*), from which we need to tease out the spirit (*attha*) of the Dharma through study and practice.

2.3 SANAÑKUMĀRA GĀTHĀ (S 596*)

2.3.1 The social aspect of the Sanañkumara Gāthā

2.3.1.1 Brahmā Sanañkumāra is recorded to have uttered his verse (*gāthā*) to the Buddha in **the Sanañkumāra Sutta** (S 6.11), of which the Buddha approves [§§3 f]. “**The kshatriya is the best in this generation | for those who look up to clan**” means that in family-centred society those who uphold and defend freedom, law and order are the best of citizens. “**The one endowed with wisdom and conduct: | he is the best among gods and humans**” means that, universally speaking, the best being is the one who is the most highly evolved, that is, the one liberated by wisdom and whose compassion benefits the world.

2.3.1.2 On the other hand, the ancient Indian theologians, thinkers and leaders exploited society by making false claims to their superior class or status. They falsely legitimized their social status, priestly power, religious teachings and rituals, and their actions by a “*fiat*,” especially by composing holy scriptures, that is, putting words into the mouth of their God, gods or some superhuman being, and belittling others.²⁰

The brahmins (high-caste priests) fabricated the myth that the brahmins issued forth from the mouth of Primeval Man (*puruṣa*), the kshatriya (warrior caste) from his arms, the vaishyas (business caste) from his thighs, and the shudras (menial workers caste) from his feet.²¹ The lower classes' duty was to serve and support those classes higher than them. Brahmā is often taken as synonymous with the Puruṣa.

2.3.1.3 Hence, **the Aggañña Sutta** (D 27) and **the Assalāyana Sutta** (M 93) reject the brahmins' false claim that: “Brahmins are Brahmā's own sons, the offspring from his mouth,²² born of Brahmā, created

¹⁶ The 8 qualities of Brahma's voice (and speech) (*aṭṭha, samannāgata sara*): distinct (*vissatṭha*), clear (*viññeyya*), charming (*mañju*), pleasant (*savanīya*), full (*bindu*), fluent (*avisarī*), deep (*gambhīra*) and resonant (*ninnādī*). (D 18,19/2:211), also at **Mahā Govinda S** (D 19,18/2:227), SD 63.4. The Buddha's voice is said to be “Brahma-like” (*brahma-s, sara*), eg, **Lakkhaṇa S** (D 30,2.22.3), SD 36.9.

¹⁷ **Jana, vasabha S** (D 18/2:211 f), SD 62.3.

¹⁸ **D 30,2.22.1+3/3:173** (SD 36.9 (4.1)).

¹⁹ **M 91,21.2/2:140** (SD 63.8).

²⁰ See eg **Vāseṭṭha S** (M 98 = Sn 3.9), SD 37.1.

²¹ Rg,veda 10.90 (Puruṣa Śūkta); DAṬ 3:46. The brahmins also claimed that recluses arose from Brahma's soles (DA 254 = MA 2:418).

²² See Rg,veda 10.90 (Puruṣa Śūkta); DAṬ 3:46; also Gombrich 1992a:163 f, cf 167. The phrase *orasā mukhato jatā*, lit, “the breast-born ‘sons’ born from the mouth,” is ironic as it suggests two different and incompatible places of origin. They suggest that they are born from the “upper parts,” ie, noble offspring. *Orasa* tr as “offspring, son.”

by Brahmā, the heirs of Brahmā.”²³ To correct this false ideology, the suttas record the Buddha as turning the tables on the brahmins by giving the following responses, among others:

- (1) Mahā Brahmā masters the Buddha Dharma so well that he becomes a nonreturner;²⁴
 (2) Brahma Sanañkumāra declares that the kshatriyas are the best of “the two-legged.” [S 26a*; 2.2.3]

The Sanañkumāra Gāthā thus recurs in the conclusion of **the Aggañña Sutta** (D 27) [2.2.1.1]. The verse is uttered by the Buddha himself in **the Ambaṭṭha Sutta** (D 3) [1.2.2.2].

2.3.2 The spiritual aspect of the Sanañkumāra Gāthā [S 26a*]

2.3.2.1 The Khattiya Sutta (S 1.14) is said to have recorded a verse by an unnamed deva from Tāvātimsa.²⁵ The verse (S 26*) records the deva uttering to the Buddha a gnomic²⁶ that goes thus [2.2.2.2]:

the Khattiya Sutta Gāthā (S 26*)

*The kshatriya is the best of the two-legged,²⁷
 of the four-legged, it is the ox;
 a maiden is the best of wives,
 of sons, it is the first-born.*

the Buddha’s reply (S 27*)

*The self-awakened is the best of the two-legged,
 of the four-legged, it is the thoroughbred;
 an attentive woman is the best of wives,
 of sons, one who is amenable.*

(S 1.14/1:6), SD 54.3d

The lines of deva’s verse might have originally been separate sayings on their own, or they could have existed as a popular quatrain of slokas.²⁸ These sayings represent worldly or human proclivities, probably from before the Buddha’s time. By the Buddha’s time, agriculture (represented by “**the ox**” in S 26b) was displaced by “**the thoroughbred**” (S 27b) as being more valuable to the kshatriya rajah and his army that governed the country and kept it prosperous.

2.3.2.2 The first line of the Sanañkumāra Gāthā (S 596a = S 26a) is a social statement that “**the kshatriya is the best of the two-legged**” (*khattiyo dvi,padam seṭṭho*) [2.2.2.1]. This statement acknowledges that the goodness and safety of a good society depends on its *warriors, defenders, leaders and citizens*. This does *not* refer to social hierarchy—such class and status can easily be manipulated or misinterpreted for the powerful to exploit or demean others. Rather, for any society to stay prosperous, progressive and wholesome, that society must be defended by those with strength and courage, and governed with wisdom and compassion.

²³ D 27,3/3:81 (SD 2.19) = M 93,5/2:148 (40a.2). On the Cosmic Man vs the great man, see SD 21.3 (2.2.1.3). On the Buddha’s knowledge of the brahminical texts, see SD 1.8 (2.1.3).

²⁴ See SD 12.2 (2.3.4), esp (2.3.4.3).

²⁵ **Khattiya S** (S 1.1.4) is the 4th sutta of the Nandana Vagga, the 2nd chapter of Devatā Saṃy of the Sagāthā Vagga, the opening section of the Saṃyutta Nikāya.

²⁶ On gnomic sayings, popular ancient sayings, see SD 54.2 (3.1.3).

²⁷ *Khattiyo dvi,padam seṭṭho*.

²⁸ **Sloka** is anglicization of Skt śloka (P *siloka*), a quatrain with each line having 8 syllables, designed for rhythm and recitation, such as in Dhammapada: SD 49.13 (2.2); SD 54.11 (1.1) n; also found in Skt literature, such as Ramayana and Mahabharata.

2.3.2.3 The well-known phrase *khattiyo seṭṭho* (S 596a = S 26a) is found in a number of suttas and often quoted in the Commentaries. However, it is almost always attributed²⁹ to Brahma Sanaṅkumāra [2.2.3.1], as shown here:

			<u>sutta contexts</u>
Ambaṭṭha Sutta	D 3,1.28/1:99	SD 21.3	Buddha approves of the verse
Aggañña Sutta	D 27,32/3:97 + 98	SD 2.19	Buddha approves of the verse
Sekha Sutta	M 53,25/1:358	SD 21.14	Ānanda to Mahānāma who approves
Khattiya Sutta	S 1.14/1:6	SD 54.3d	uttered by a deity to the Buddha
Sanaṅkumāra Sutta	S 6.11/1:153	SD 63.12	Sanaṅkumāra to the Buddha who approves
Mahā Kappina Sutta ³⁰	S 21.11/2:284		spoken by the Buddha, with Dh 387
Mora,nivāpa Sutta ³¹	A 11.110/5:327 f		the Buddha quotes Sanaṅkumāra

2.4 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BRAHMĀ SANAṅKUMĀRA

2.4.1 Sanaṅkumāra's roots

2.4.1.1 The oldest mention of **Sanat,kumāra** (Skt) outside of Buddhism is in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad (ch 7). He also appears in the post-Buddha epic Mahābharata,³² where he expresses a sentiment very similar to that of the Sanaṅkumāra Gāthā. T W Rhys Davids³³ sees the Sanaṅkumāra story as the Indian counterpart of the Arthurian legend of Galahad.³⁴

2.4.1.2 One of the Buddha's most successful skillful means is his use of brahminical categories. This is like using fire to fight fire: only that while the brahminical fire burns with heat to debunk or assimilate the Buddha's teachings, the Buddha's fire shone with light clarifying the teachings and refining them. The suttas are spicily peppered with helpful brahminical terms in Buddhist guise—*brahma, brahma,-cariya, brahma,vihāra, brāhmaṇa, jhāna, uposatha, veda*, and so on. This is a profoundly potent skillful means known as **natural adaptation**.³⁵

2.5 RELEVANCE OF BRAHMĀ SANAṅKUMĀRA TODAY

2.5.1 Perception of wealth as status

2.5.1.1 In a highly urbanized modern world that is widely characterized by notions of *health* and defined by a show of *wealth*, many who are caught in such self-centredness tend to be intoxicated by notions of **youth, health and life**—and of **status**. Such people tend to be profoundly drawn to the pleasures of *youth, health and life*, which it seems can be commanded by the power of wealth. One's status is also used to define one's status above and apart from others, and to connect with those perceived as being in the same "class" or higher, and to alienate others who are "different."

²⁹ But here (S 1.14), a deity utters the verse [S 26a*].

³⁰ Or (**Bhikkhu**) **Mahā Kappina S**.

³¹ A 11.10 is a composite of A 3.143+144+145, with an additional dyad, making it an "eleven" item.

³² Mahābharata, *Vana parva* 3.184 (Bombay ed 3:185).

³³ D:RD 2:292 n3, cf 1:121 n1.

³⁴ Further see **Aggañña S** (D 27,32) n, SD 2.19. Cf Collins, "The Discourse on What is Primary," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 21, 1993a:376 n31.1. Further see SD 54.3d (2.2.3).

³⁵ On the early buddhicization of brahminical terms, see SD 12.1 (6).

When one enjoys youth (or youthfulness), good health and long life, one may be easily deluded to perceive oneself to be “god-like,” living a “heavenly” life of plenty, pleasure and power; that is, until age catches up, one falls sick or is hurt, or one faces death; or one becomes bored with what wealth is able to buy one, or one fails to get what one wants despite one’s wealth, or loses what one dearly has.

Since one is defined by **wealth**, one is also alienated when one lacks it or is perceived as having “less” than others. One’s wealth thus impoverishes one by one’s failure to live richly and generously with *love, kindness, joy, and peace*—that is, the truly divine life.

2.5.1.2 The 3 intoxications (*mada*)—with youth (*yobbana mada*), with health (*ārogya mada*) and with life (*jīvita mada*)³⁶—afflict not only those obsessed with wealth, power and status, but *they intoxicate all unawakened beings*. So long as we are unawakened, we tend to be obsessed with looking and acting young, healthy and alive. In significant ways, these intoxications are more likely to afflict those who lead lazy, easy, leisurely lives than those who are mindfully involved in diligent work, social engagement and spiritual practice.

To be “**intoxicated**” means that we have clouded up our senses and minds on account of being obsessed with “something.” We thus see *youth, health and life* as “things” that we can *have*, or as “something” that we desire or hope for. In other words, we have failed to see that they are all impermanent; hence, it is their nature to bring suffering; and, being *impermanent and suffering*, they have no essence whatsoever: they are **nonself**.

Thus, in **the Jarā,dhamma Sutta** (S 48.41), Ānanda remarks that the Buddha’s body is decaying, and the Buddha, reflecting on his own body, declares:

In youth, one is subject to **age** [decay];
in health, one is subject to **ill-health**;
in living, one is subject to **dying**.

jarā,dhammo yobbaññe
vyādhi,dhammo ārogye
maraṇa,dhammo jīvite

(S 48.41,6/5:217), SD 63.10

2.5.1.3 The figure of **Sanaṅkumāra**, the “ever young” brahma, presents an irony of youth and age in the same being. He was previously Pañca,sikha, the gandharva (*gandhabba*)³⁷ who was Sakra’s personal minstrel in Tāvatiṃsa, whose devas live for 1,000 celestial years.³⁸ A gandharva may not live as long as a Tāvatiṃsa deva, but lives certainly very much longer than any human being, that is, at least for a few hundred celestial years.

As a gandharva, Pañca,sikha masters dhyana, and upon dying from Tāvatiṃsa he brings over his dhyanic ability into his new life, that of a “great brahma” (*mahā,brahmā*) in the 1st-dhyana brahma realm. His brahma lifespan is 1 aeon or world-cycle (*kappa*), which is from the time that our universe starts to re-evolve to just before the next new cosmic cycle—which is an unimaginably long time to us.³⁹

Now, the gandharva Pañca,sikha had the appearance of a boy (*kumāra*), but as a celestial being, he was immense in size. His body was three-quarters of a league (3 *gāvuta*) in height. He wore 100 cartloads of ornaments and rubbed 9 pots of perfume on his body. He wore red robes, and on his head a chaplet of

³⁶ See **Mada S** (A 3.39), SD 42.13; **Sukhumāla S** (A 3.38), SD 1.11 (3.2).

³⁷ Gandharvas (*gandhabba*) are traditionally the followers and soldiers of Dhataratṭha, guardian-king of the east: SD 7.10 (3); SD 36.13 (4.3 f, 4.5.2). Gandharvas are also said to be dryads or arboreal deities, earth-bound deities living on the fragrant parts on trees and plants (roots, heartwood, softwood, leaves, flowers, fruits, sap and scent) as described by the Buddha in **Gandhabba S** (S 31.1,4/3:250), SD 86.5.

³⁸ 100 human years is but a night and a day in Tāvatiṃsa: **Patī,pūjīkā V** (DhA 4.4), SD 54.15. Vbh 422-426; Vism 7.40-44; Abhs ch 5. For a list of the 31 planes, see SD 1.7 (App); DEB App 3.

³⁹ On *kappa*, see SD 2.19 (9); SD 49.8b (15.2).

red gold, with 5 locks (*pañcahi kuṇḍalakehi*) of his hair bunched up, which fell back as in the case of a young boy (*pañca, cūḷaka, dāraka, parihāren'eva*).⁴⁰

2.5.1.4 We have noted that because Brahmā Sanañkumāra keeps the appearance of a boy (*kumāra*), he is referred to as Kumāra, but because of his great age [2.5.1.3], he is called **Sanañ, kumāra**, “ever young”⁴¹ [2.1]. Thus he is young or boyish in appearance but profoundly senior in wisdom. He is no ordinary youth but symbolizes the “youthfulness” or “timelessness” of a wholesome mind and wisdom.

Sanañkumāra is not only young-looking but as a brahma, he is also sickness-free and long-lived. Hence, he is blessed with *youth, health and life*, without being intoxicated with them. He does not need to seek these qualities nor even need to cultivate them; he earns these blessings with his past good karma of mental training in mindfulness and dhyana, meaning that he has transcended the limitations of the senses. His youthful beauty and celibacy symbolize all that is good in the spiritual life.

2.5.2 Significance of celibacy

2.5.2.1 The name **sanañ, kumāra** means “ever young” or “forever virgin,” which very well fits his boyish look, suggesting one of innocent celibacy. Like the true brahmins of old, Sanañkumāra lives “the celibate divine life” or “virginal celibacy” (*komāra, brahma, cariya*, A 5.192),⁴² a term, I think, better rendered as “living the celibate life ever since he was just a boy” or “life-long celibacy,” since *brahma, cariya* itself connotes celibacy.

Buddhaghosa says that in his former birth, Sanañ, kumāra practised dhyana while yet a boy (*kumāra*) when his hair was tied up in 5 top-knots. He was reborn in the 1st-dhyana brahma world but he retains his boyish looks;⁴³ hence, his name [2.5.1.4]. Sanañ, kumāra, then, represents, to the early Buddhists, the ideal brahmin, one who is a spiritual exemplar, far from being the worldly status-conscious priest of latter-days.

The Buddha declares that an ideal brahmin is identical with **the ideal celibate renunciant** of early Buddhism. He is not one bound by sensuality, or incelibacy, or worldliness, but one who has overcome the influxes of lust, existence and ignorance, that is, an arhat. The Buddha uses the term “brahmin,” rejecting its birth-based class and superiority claim, and redefines **brahmin** as one who has attained the true state of awakened liberation, arhathood.⁴⁴

2.5.2.2 It should be understood that the term “**Forever Virgin**” (*sanañ, kumāra*) does not imply that sexuality is “unholy” or bad. Rather, **virginity** here represents one’s closing the doors to the samsaric course of births and deaths, so that this dualistic cycle is broken forever. Since a brahma lives naturally in dhyanic bliss, he has transcended the senses and has neither need nor desire for sensual pleasures at all. The name, then, is a foretaste of the necessity and possibility of self-awakening and nirvana, the liberation of the death-free.

2.5.2.3 Wholesome celibacy is profoundly significant in 2 important ways. The first is biological and personal reality, and the second is religious and spiritual accountability.

⁴⁰ DA 2:647.

⁴¹ MA 3:33; SA 1:219.

⁴² **Doṇa Brāhmaṇa S** calls him a “brahma-like brahmin” (A 5.192,3/3:224 f), SD 36.14.

⁴³ The switch to the present tense here shows that Sanañkumāra still exists as a brahma in the 1st-dhyana realm.

⁴⁴ As described in **Doṇa Brāhmaṇa S** (A 5.192/3:224 f), SD 36.14. On the “true brahmin” as arhat, see eg Dh 383-423 (ch 26).

By **biological reality** is meant that when we are physically and sexually immature humans, we are naturally neither ready nor capable of having sex with another. As a rule, this natural celibacy goes without saying since, under normal circumstances—without external influence or inducement—a young person, especially a prepubescent or even an adolescent, is unlikely to express himself or herself sexually with another by nature or without external inducement.

By **personal reality** is meant that a sexually mature human may choose not to have any sexual relations with anyone for various wholesome reasons, especially because one wishes to cultivate one's mind without being distracted by the body. This is in fact the spirit of Buddhist renunciation, and this joy of renunciation is beautifully represented by the radiant figure of Brahmā Sanañ,kumara. In significant ways, we may see Sanañ,kumara as representing a spiritual ideal of an unawakened being who is able to joyfully live an incredibly long life free from the physical body and its needs, especially sexuality.

This is the theme we will now explore.

3 Sex and spirituality: Some reflections⁴⁵

3.1 WHY SEX?

3.1.1 Samsara feeds on itself

3.1.1.1 On a simplest level, samsara (*saṃsāra*)—the cycle of living and dying—is rooted in sex. Samsara feeds on sex, and sex feeds on itself, and deliciously so. “Mother Nature” (that is samsara), as it were, makes sex enticing and delectable for her own survival; hence, in the prime of their lives, people are often insatiably drawn and prone to sex when the body is primed for it.

Indeed, in **the sense world**, we are all born with a body that *senses* things. Whenever we are awake, our physical body is always sensing something (*kiñcana*), both real, remembered but mostly imagined. The deepest and subtlest root of **sex**⁴⁶ is when we seek to reproduce and accumulate what we see as desirable and ownable; we want to have and to be *it*.

However, our sense-based body is nothing but the 4 elements—*earth, water, fire and wind*—just like everything else around us. These elements are a shorthand for our physically solid parts, our fluid parts (which is 50% to 75% of our living body), the heat that generates warmth and brings decay, and our movement. What we see, hear, smell, taste, and touch are simply manifestations of these *solid, fluid, heat and moving states* in our being, in all beings and in all things that we can *sense*.

3.1.1.2 What makes us alive is not just our body but **the mind**. The senses do not function in themselves but are driven by the mind. The senses are thus rooted in the mind, and the mind is rooted in samsara. We may imagine our mind as samsara's child, Nature's offspring, growing, changing, maturing, decaying in us, but at different rates in every being, in everyone. To grow is to change; indeed, we can say that the mind is *change* itself, **impermanence**. However, it is not easy for change to see itself, not while we are habitually busy with sensing things as long as we are awake.

Over time, a very long time, the mind learns or notices that it cannot have everything that it senses. The more the mind wants something, the greater the sense of loss that follows this frustration, the separation from what the mind wants and from what it senses out there.

⁴⁵ This section attempts to broadly examine sexuality and meditation as experience. For an intro to early Buddhist views on sexuality, see **Sexuality** (SD 31.7); **Saññoga S** (A 7.48), SD 8.7.

⁴⁶ “Sex” here, as a rule, refers to the act as well as the attitude towards it; hence, it is a convenient short form for sexuality.

3.1.1.3 The very elements of this body of *earth, water, fire and wind*, are themselves unstable; they are always seeking stability; this is also called homeostasis in our times. This balancing process is not just an internal or personal affair; even right now, the 4 elements are being consumed, processed and reproduced. While we live, even when we are unaware or unconscious, we keep taking in these elements from around us, from the earth, the water, the sun, and the air.

This stabilizing exchange is not always smooth, especially when we do not keep up with the changing nature of the elements. We are burdened with bulk and weight with too much *earth*; our body fluids (like blood, lymph, saliva and urine) can be unhealthy and bring pain and discomfort; we burn with fever; and become uncomfortably tight with too much wind). This is physical **suffering** (*dukkha*).⁴⁷

3.1.1.4 In short, samsara or Nature is processing us even now (so long as we are alive). “We” is used consciously here; we are not alone; we all each have a body. Samsara is processing us, parenting us, driving us as her child, as her memes—our natural drive is to reproduce ourselves. We really have no say; we just do and die. By “natural selection”—by rightly and cunningly (so we think) sensing things—we have been dictated by our lust and hate—we have chosen to do as samsara says; so we have come thus far. We *have* no voice really and no body, too, really; it all belongs to samsara. Not many of us can see this true state of reality; we are too busy enjoying “our” body, even though it's really samsara's body.

The Buddha was the first in our current history to notice this non-ownership of our own body and life. We are but the elements which come from Nature and go back to Nature. The moment we take in these elements, they change, and dance with other elements, return to Nature, binding us to Nature, to samsara. This happens even while we breathe. [3.1.2.3]

This reality is that there is no fixed or real self; all this has nothing to do with an abiding “self”; it is all **nonself**, declares the Buddha.⁴⁸ This is the principle behind all things, animate and inanimate. When we understand this, samsara's hold on us is weakened and loosened. When we fully understand nonself, we are liberated from samsara; we attain nirvana.⁴⁹ [3.1.2.1]

3.1.2 Minding the senses

3.1.2.1 Where does the view that there is **an abiding self** come from? This false view arises from 2 persistent conditions:

- (1) the fact that we think we are sensing “something” (*kiñcana*), and
- (2) the fact that we recall our experiences, we remember things.

Whenever we are awake and mindful, we see, hear, smell, taste, or touch *something*, or rather, we make “something” of what we sense. We see *sights and shapes*; we hear *sound and speech*; we smell *odours*; we taste various *flavours*; and we feel a variety of *touch* on our skin. The reality is that we are merely seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching (or feeling)—they are passing actions or states, not fixed entities. These are simply **happenings** when a sense-faculty (say, the eye) is directed to an external object (say a person or event), and there is attention or consciousness of this process; this is called “contact” (*phassa*), that is, the meeting of the conditions for sense-experience: we then “see”; the same process happens for the other sensings and for thinking.

3.1.2.2 However, we normally do not experience an **action**, that is, an event or a state, something that is *ever-changing*. We tend to experience “things” as nouns rather than as **verbs**. We are so used to using and thinking with nouns, such as “person” or “happiness,” we often unthinkingly take them to be

⁴⁷ See **Dhamma,cakka Pavattana S** (S 56.11), SD 1.1 (4); **Anurādha S** (S 22.86,21), SD 21.13,

⁴⁸ See **Anatta Lakkhaṇa S** (S 22.59) SD 1.2 (2); **Is there a soul?** SD 2.16; **Self and selves** SD 26.9.

⁴⁹ **Dhamma Niyāma S** (A 3.134), SD 26.8.

“things,” that is, some kind of unchanging or fixed entities. A person we well know is made up of matter (the 4 elements) and mind—both matter and mind change all the time. Happiness too is not a fixed feeling; we feel a sense of well-being, and then it goes away, or we when we feel something even more “happy,” we change our mind about that previous happiness, and so on. These are all *changing, conditioned states*.

Take another beautiful and natural example; we see a **rainbow** as a colourful arc in the sky. A rainbow is an optical and meteorological phenomenon that occurs as a multicolored vision when light refracts, that is, enters water droplets, bends and separates into its constituent colours, and then reflects and refracts again, dispersing the light, as it exits. Rainbows also appear in other forms of airborne water like mist, spray, or dew, and requires the sun or some light-source to be behind the viewer.

The rainbow only exists from where we are; but there is no such colourful arc in the exact spot that we think it is. It is an optical illusion; we see it as real even though it does not really exist! The “rainbow” is thus merely a process—an ever-changing event or set of conditions—just described. When we think of a “rainbow,” we usually imagine it to be a colourful arc, but we do not consider it to be the result of *dynamic and changing conditions*, the effects of many other causes. We usually perceive a rainbow as a thing or as “something” fixed and unchanging. All our experiences and thoughts—such as of persons, of happiness, of rainbows and so on—are *impermanent, unsatisfactory* (they are not exactly what we think them to be), and *without any essence*. They are all conditioned states.

3.1.2.3 Another common yet vital experience that helps us to see and know things (such as our self) as a changing conditioned process rather than a fixed state is our own **breathing** or breath. It is simply a reflexive process of moving air (one of the 4 elements) into and out of the lungs. The body takes in oxygen, relaxes us physically and mentally, and, breathing properly builds up the chest cavity for a better voice, and so on.

Breath meditation is a key contemplative practice in early Buddhism as the basis for calming the mind so that it becomes clear and we can see into true reality, that is *impermanence, suffering and nonself* that pervades all existence.⁵⁰ As we breathe, we take in air from outside (that is, the universe), and absorb it into our being. Having taken in air (oxygen), we give it back laden with the earth element (carbon dioxide). When it is cold, we will notice water vapour forming when we exhale; this is water element. We can feel the warmth of our breath; that is, the fire of life. Our chest moves and expands to inhale and exhale; this is the wind element.

As we **breathe**, it is also a good time to reflect on true renunciation. As we breathe in, we take in air; our body (such as the chest and belly) rises; as we breathe out, we give back air to the universe. What we take, we become; we become earth, water, fire and wind [above], just like the elements around us.

Having breathed in, we then breathe out. The in-breath was the past; the out-breath is the present. When we take it in again, it is the present; the out-breath was the past. And so time passes, with moments of peace in between. We may hold our breath but we cannot stop it. We cannot even point at any moment of the breath to say, “This is *the* breath.” At best we can say, “We are the breath,” or better: *We are breathing*.

Our breath is an unfinished process; it is life completing itself in the moment. It is our dance of life with the universe in time while we are awake, even when we sleep, so long as we live. Time only moves; it stops not. There is no time that is the self; there is no time for the self. Time moves on. There is only **nonself**.

Reflecting on the breath can thus be an effective practice of seeing and knowing true reality of existence, that it is all conditioned, the result of many causes bringing more effects, which in turn become causes, with even more effects, and so on.

⁵⁰ See Ānāpāna,sati S (M 118,5-7 + 15-22), SD 7.13.

3.2 SEXUAL PLEASURE AND MEDITATION

3.2.1 Sexual experience

3.2.1.1 Very briefly, early Buddhism defines **the sexual act** or sexual experience⁵¹ as any kind of lust-induced engagement with or between the sexual organs of either sex, whether of the opposite sex or the same sex or with a non-human (such as an animal). For monastics, such an engagement automatically entails “defeat” (*pārājika*).⁵² Monastics are also warned of “**the bonds of sexuality**” (*methuna, saṃyoga*), that is, any kind of sensual engagement (including speech and sight) that hints at or arouses sexual pleasure and that may lead to the sexual act.⁵³ [3.4.2.1]

3.2.1.2 The problem with sex is that it tends to be addictive; it engages one’s senses with promise of pleasure, but since one is usually not easily satisfied with such pleasures, one tends to continue to pursue it. To this end, one then resorts to violence, coercion or deceit to have sex with another, especially when the partner or victim is underaged, unwilling, or promised, engaged or married to another. Such a sexual act is unwholesome and breaches the 3rd precept.⁵⁴

Even when one feels satisfied with sex, one is then driven for more of it. Hence, the Buddha quips that sex is “**time-consuming**” (*kālika*).⁵⁵ On a deeper level, sex “takes time,” in the sense that it brings birth and it binds us to rebirth. We do time on of account it, caught in the wheel of time. Ānanda thus admonishes a nun who was physically attracted to him that sex is a “bridge” (*setu*) to rebirth and samsara.⁵⁶ We are thus fettered to samsara and suffering. [3.1]

3.2.1.3 In significant ways, sex is regarded as the antithesis of and a hindrance to the spiritual life of renunciation and meditation. The spiritual life of **renunciation** arises from a life of moral restraint, mental calm and clarity, and of insight wisdom. Renunciation is rooted in letting go of sensual pleasures, from being held back by the gravity of the senses, so that the renunciant is free from the senses’ persistent demands and distractions. Only when the mind is free from the senses, from the body, is it able to attain full focus and great bliss that is subtler and beyond sensual pleasures. It is then that the mind is able to look directly into true reality and see freedom from suffering.

Sex, on the other hand, arises from the pleasures of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches; these are pleasures of the body. Since the body of 4 elements [3.1.1.1] is by nature fleeting, its pleasures are also fleeting; hence, the pleasure-seeker is caught in the rut of seeking bursting bubbles of pleasures. The pleasure-seeker makes *something* out of the pleasure-bubbles that have come and gone. He or she thus identifies with that sight, sound, smell, taste and touch.

3.2.1.4 Sex is, as a rule, self-centred interest invested in **the body**—one’s own and another’s—so that one is driven to grasp and cling to the other body, to become *one* with it. In a way, the sexual act does reward one with a sense of *unity* with another. At best, the experience of orgasm makes one feel as if one’s sense of self has dissolved and merged with the other.

⁵¹ See **Sexuality** (SD 31.7); **Saññoga S** (A 7.48), SD 8.7.

⁵² SD 31.7 (2.2.6); also SD 52.12 (1.2.1.1); SD 58.4 (2.1.1.3).

⁵³ On the bonds of sexuality, see **Methuna S** (A 7.47), SD 21.9; SD 31.7 (2.3).

⁵⁴ On cases of unwholesome sex, see **Doṇa Brāhmaṇa S** (A 5.192,6/3:228), SD 36.14.

⁵⁵ (**Devatā**) **Samiddhi S** (S 1.20,5.2/1:9), SD 21.4 Samiddhi quotes the Buddha; (**Sagāthā**) **Sambahula S** (S 4.21/-1:117 f) Māra uses the phrase *kālika*; **SD 31.7** (1.4); SD 32.2 (3.1.3); SD 10.16 (4.5.1).

⁵⁶ (**Taṇhā**) **Bhikkhunī S** (A 4.159,7/2:146), SD 10.14; SD 8.7 (1.2).

However, neither seeing nor understanding the nature of true and full bliss as *the absence* of the self—when one is free from the body—one is mistaken by the notion that the bliss comes from the body or the bodies. Thus, one identifies with the body, and one’s desire for it and what it seems to promise. In this sense, **sex is the most selfish of human acts.**⁵⁷

3.2.1.5 Although biologically, all mature humans are capable of sex, the reality is that not everyone is prone to sex for various reasons. Every society has some kind of rules or taboos regarding the sexual act, not to mention attitudes towards gender. Some factors for the abstention from sex may be family or religious conditioning, social restrictions and conditions, lack of suitable partners, health conditions, or that people are preoccupied in other things, that limit or prevent one’s sexual performance. In time, of course, old age catches up or ill health inflicts people, incapacitating them from acting sexually.

Then again, not every healthy individual is capable of *enjoying* sex. The lack of sexual ability or even celibacy does not mean that the person lacks the desire for it or the thought of lust and dislike. Delusion pervades everyone who is unawakened. In terms of moral training, the 3rd precept is not broken even when one *thinks* of sex but does *not* act on it. However, the thought of sex or being caught up with the “bonds of sexuality” [3.2.1.1] will in time induce one to act sexually. Hence, one’s mental and moral strength depend on not thinking about sex and avoiding any bond of sexuality, that is, not allowing lust to touch and flood one’s mind.

3.2.2 Kāma-related terms

3.2.2.1 The beautiful and blissful teaching that sex can be selfless is not merely theoretical; there are practitioners, that is, lay followers, who wholesomely enjoy sensual pleasures in a Dharma-spirited manner. **The Mahā Vaccha,gotta Sutta** (M 73) even mentions a special group of disciples, that is, householders who are streamwinners, “dressed in white, **who enjoy sense-pleasures** (*kāma,bhogī*).”⁵⁸

What does *kāma,bhogī* mean here? We have some clues from discourses related to Nakula,pitā and Nakula,mātā (the foremost of lay disciples, those who are intimate with one another).⁵⁹ **The Sama,jīvi Sutta** (A 4.55), for example, records both these loving husband and wife as having never “wronged or transgressed” (*aticaritā*) one another, that is, never committed adultery since they were married.⁶⁰

The Nakula,pitu Sutta (A 6.16) records loving Nakula,mātā as declaring to her beloved husband, Nakula,pitā, thus:

Household, both you and I know that throughout our 16 years of household life, I have observed celibacy [the holy life] (*brahma,cariya*).⁶¹

⁵⁷ See SD 31.7 (6.2); SD 32.2 (3.1.3); SD 54.3g (2.1.2.4).

⁵⁸ **M 73**,10/1:491 (SD 27.4); SD 54.9 (4.2). *Kāma,bhogī* used in a positive sense, **D 30**,2.3(4)/3:163), SD 36.9. On “a householder, dressed on white, who enjoys sense-pleasures,” *gihī odāta,vasano kāma,bhogī*, see SD 47.1 (1.1.2.4); SD 52.11 (1.2.3.3). Of the 10 kinds of kāma,bhogī, the 10th or last kind is fully blameless: **Rāsiya Gāmaṇi S** (S 42.12/4:330-340), SD 91.3; **Kāma,bhogī S** (A 10.91/5:177-182), SD 100.8. See SD 60.1f (4.1.3).

⁵⁹ Both Nakula,mātā and Nakula,pitā are declared by the Buddha to be foremost of his disciples who are “intimate or close” (*vissāsikānaṃ*, A 1.257+266/1:26, 2.55/2:61 f, 6.16/3:295-298, 8.117/4:348; AA 1:401; SA 2:251,16; KhpA 2:251). See SD 5.1 (1.6). See SD 5.2 Intro.

⁶⁰ A 4.55,2/2:61 (SD 5.1).

⁶¹ A 6.16,2.2/3:296 (SD 5.2). “I have observed celibacy,” *aham ... brahma,cariyam samāciṇṇam*, ie lived “the holy life” (*brahma,cariyā*). The 16 years here refer to the latter part of Nakula,mātā’s life. *Samāciṇṇa* is past part of *samācarati*, “she had conducted herself, practised, behaved” but the context requires it to be rendered as present.

It is possible to translate *brahma, cariya* in the context of **A 6.16** as “chastity” (instead of “celibacy”), meaning that she has been faithful to him. However, since there is no hint at all of sexual relationship between Nakula, pitā and Nakula, mātā, we can safely say that they did not indulge in any sex during “the 16 years of their marriage,” that is, presumably *after* their only child, Nakula, was born, and since they attained streamwinning.

3.2.2.2 What does it mean to say that there are streamwinners who “enjoy sensual pleasures” (*kāma, bhogī sotāpanna*)? The Commentary to **the Anaṅa Sutta** (A 4.62) explains the term *kāma, bhogī* as meaning that “(enjoying) objective sense-pleasures (*vatthu, kāma*)⁶² and (knowing) the defilement that is desire (*kilesa, kāma*).”⁶³ The term **kāma** thus refers to 2 things: desirable sense-objects and the desire itself as mental defilement (*kilesa, kāma*).

The canonical commentary, **Mahā, niddesa**, explains the terms *vatthu, kāma* and *kilesa, kāma* as follows:

What are **objective sense-pleasures** (*vatthu, kāma*)?

Pleasing visual forms, pleasing sounds, pleasing smells, pleasing tastes, and pleasing touches; rugs, blankets, female and male servants, goats, sheep, chickens, pigs, elephants, cows, horses, donkeys, paddy fields, land, silver, gold, houses, villages, royal towns, states, countries, armies, and royal treasuries—whatever sense-objects that are the bases for attachment are called “objective sense-pleasures.”

Furthermore, all objects of desire existing in the past, present, and future; existing internally, externally, or both internally and externally; those that are base, middling, and superior; those belonging to beings in unhappy states of existence, belonging to human beings, and belonging to the celestial realms; those that are immediately at hand (*paccupaṭṭhitā*), those that are self-created (*nimmitā*), and those that are created by others (*paranimmitā*); those owned and those not owned; those coveted and those not coveted; those that belong entirely to the sense-sphere (*kāmāvacara*), those that belong entirely to the form sphere (*rūpāvacara*), and those that belong entirely to the formless sphere (*arūpāvacara*)—which are the bases for craving, the objects of craving; they are called objects of desire on account of being a basis for desire, on account of being a basis for infatuation. All of these are called objective sense-pleasures.

And what is **defilement that is desire** (*kilesa, kāma*)?

Delight is desire (*kāma*), lust is desire, lustful attachment is desire; intention (*saṅkappa*) is desire ... lustful intention is desire; sensual desire (*kāma-c.chanda*), sensual lust (*kāma, rāga*), sensual delight (*kāma, nandi*), sensual craving (*kāma, taṇhā*), sensual attachment (*kāma, sineha*), passion for sensual pleasure, infatuation for sensual pleasure, obsession with sensual pleasure, sense desire engulfing the mind, sense-desire binding the mind, grasping to sensual pleasure, the hindrance of sensual desire, sense desire in the phrase:

“Look here, sense desire, I see your root—you arise from intention. I will no longer be intent with you; thus you will no longer remain.”⁶⁴—

All these are called defilement that is desire.

(Nm 1:1 f, 28)

⁶² “Sensual joy” (*kāma, sukha*) are those connected with the “5 cords of sense-pleasure” (*kāma, guṇa*): **Mahā Dukkha-k, khandha S** (M 13,7/1:85), SD 6.9. They are sense-based: **Vekhanassa S** (M 80,12/2:42 f), SD 40a.15; **Pañcaka’āṅga S** (S 36.19/4:225); **(Navaka) Nibbāna S** (A 9.34/4:415 f), SD 55.1; Nc 66 f.

⁶³ **Kāma, bhoginā ti vatthu, kāme ca kilesa, kāme ca paribhuñjantena** (AA 3:100 on A 4.62, SD 2.2). See SD 4.7 (1.3).

⁶⁴ J 3:450; Mvst 3:190.

In simple terms, then, *vatthu,kāma* is the sense-object that is pleasurable and desirable, and *kilesa,kāma* is the desire or defilement attending to such objects. Both the ideas of *object* and *defilement* are encompassed by the term *kāma*.

3.2.2.3 In the **Kāma,bhogī Sutta** (A 10.91), the Buddha describes 10 kinds of lay people as “**those who enjoy sensual pleasures**” (*kāma,bhogī*), the last or 10th of whom is said to be the best. Among the characteristics of this most excellent lay follower is that of his Dharma-spirited way of dealing with wealth, which can be summarized as follows:⁶⁵

- (1) Income: to seek wealth in righteous ways, without abusing or harming others.
- (2) Expenditure, including both living in moderation and saving money:
 - (a) to provide for one’s own happiness, and the happiness of one’s family members and of those for whom one is responsible.
 - (b) to be charitable, that is, to wisely share one’s wealth with others.
 - (c) to use one’s wealth for meritorious purposes, including for teaching and spreading the Dharma. [3.2.2.2]

The term *kāma* can thus have a broad compass relating to a lay person’s life and its enjoyment. The term *kāmesu micchācārā* (of the 3rd precept) can thus be interpreted to include wholesome conduct towards any kind of sensual pleasure as described above; but specifically it refers to sexual conduct, that is, one should refrain from unwholesome sexual conduct. In other words, sex should be considered within the context of *love-based marriage, partnership and family life*, that is, one should keep to the 5 precepts.

We will now explore how such a happy lifestyle is possible and properly lived in the spirit of the Buddha’s teaching.

3.2.3 The way of love, the way of wisdom

3.2.3.1 From our discussion thus far, we should understand that the term *kāma,bhogī*, when applied to the laity who are committed to the 3 refuges (the Buddha, Dharma and sangha)⁶⁶ and the 5 precepts,⁶⁷ has a broad sense, referring to those *enjoying worldly pleasures*: wealth, health, social wellbeing and perhaps⁶⁸ sexuality. This, as we have discussed elsewhere, is known as **discipleship**,⁶⁹ that is, the Dharma practice committed to the 3 refuges and the 5 precepts. This Dharma-spirited living can be also broadly called **the way of love**. *Kāma,bhogi* is thus here taken to mean “love” in a broad positive sense, which may include wholesome sex, that is within the spirit of the 5 precepts.

Upon attaining the path as a **streamwinner**, the lay practitioner may still enjoy sensual pleasures—in the sense of enjoying wealth, good health and socializing—but the streamwinner is naturally not inclined to sexual relations—for the simple reason that they habitually have great mental joy [3.2.2]. At the same time, they are capable of showing remarkable happiness, kindness, charity and love. Hence, it is called **the way of love**.

⁶⁵ A 10.91/5:177-182 (SD 100.8). For further details, see **Ādiya S** (A 5.41), SD 2.1.

⁶⁶ The 3 jewels: SD 47.1 (3.2.2.1); SD 51.8 (1.3.3.1). Refuge-going, SD 45.11 (3). Reflections: *Buddhānussati*, SD 15.7; *Dhammānussati*, SD 15.9; *Saṅghānussati*, SD 15.10.

⁶⁷ **Dīgha,jānu S** (A 8.54,13), SD 5.10; **Veḷu,dvāreyya S** (S 55.7), SD 1.5 (2); **Silānussati**, SD 15.11 (2.2); SD 21.6 (1.2)

⁶⁸ Strictly speaking, “sexuality” here refers to sex within marriage or, where socially acceptable, between committed partners rooted in love.

⁶⁹ On **discipleship**, see SD 62.11 (3.2).

3.2.3.2 In practice, the way of love—the Dharma-spirited life of one committed to the 3 jewels and the precepts—is rooted in **the 4 divine abodes**, that is, *lovingkindness, compassion, gladness and equanimity*. Living in this way, they veritably create and sustain a heavenly community even here and now.

The way of love is firstly characterized by **an unconditional acceptance** of self and others. This means that we accept ourself just as we are, understanding our strengths and learning from our weaknesses. With our strengths, we work to transform our weaknesses into strength. In the same way, we **compassionately** work with others to transform their weaknesses into strengths.

Further, we **rejoice** in their strengths and goodness, and together celebrate our being. Having done our best, we are **at peace**, standing on our strengths, and knowing that our weaknesses are teaching us; at the moment we have done our best, and we are thus at peace.

3.2.3.3 Walking the way of love, we see ourselves as being reflected in others. Our differences make us interesting individuals; our common qualities bond us as friends and partners. Our bodies change, our feelings *change*, our perceptions *change*, and our formations *change*, as our consciousness *grows*. We **do not identify** with any of these self-conditioning aggregates—they are but stages in our learning and growing as *true individuals*.

We are inspired by the truth and beauty of the Buddha, his Dharma and the noble sangha. As our understanding of the 3 jewels grows, so does our faith in them. We are well aware of our lack of wisdom, but we have **no doubt** we can learn by way of self-reliance. When a doubt arises, we see it as a key to new learning for us.

We are responsible for our own actions; as we think so we will be. For, in our minds, *evil begets evil, good begets good*.⁷⁰ We thus make every effort to abstain from evil, promote the good and purify the mind. We can learn from others, understanding that *everything is teaching us*; that is, so long as we keep an open mind. We understand that keeping to rules and vows as mere rituals, but lacking mindfulness and awareness, keeps us in a rut of **superstition**, that is blinded by ignorance, fear and luck.

With mindfulness and awareness, we learn from others and from everything, but we are **not dependent** on them for our salvation. Only by freeing our own minds we are fully free from suffering.⁷¹

3.2.3.4 When we have fully broken **the 3 fetters** of *self-identity view, doubt, and attachment to rituals and vows*, we gain the path of streamwinning (*sot'āpatti*). The 3 fetters bind us to a narcissistic self-view that sees ourself as *apart* from others; hence, we lack the charity that humanizes us to be *a part* of others, the love that joyfully bonds us with others, and the learning that frees us from selfish ignorance and fear.⁷²

Further, with the weakening of *greed, hatred and delusion*, after returning to this world only one more time, we will make an end of suffering. This is called **once-returning**.⁷³ There are 3 kinds of once-returners: one who awakens in the sense-world itself, or in the form brahma-world, or in the formless brahma-world (KhPā 182).⁷⁴

⁷⁰ The context of this statement on karma is vitally significant: SD 3.5 (1.1).

⁷¹ See **Emotional independence**, SD 40a.8.

⁷² See **Entering the stream**, SD 3.3.

⁷³ **(Tika) Uddesa S 2** (A 3.86/1:232-234), SD 80.13; **Sa, upādi, sesa S** (A 9.12/4:380 f), SD 3.3(3); SD 10.16 (12.1.2.1).

⁷⁴ Vism Mahāṭīkā mentions 5 kinds of once-returners: 1. who attains the state here, and attains parinirvana here; 2. who attains the state here but attains parinirvana in the deva-world; 3. who attains the state in the deva-world and attains parinirvana there; 4. who attains the state in the deva-world, dies, and is reborn here where he awakens; 5. who attains the state here, is reborn in the deva-world; dies there, and is reborn here, where he attains parinirvana. (Vism MAṬ:Se 3:655). However, only this 5th type is mentioned in the suttas.

3.2.3.5 A nonreturner (*anāgāmī*) is a path-saint who has broken the first 5 of the 10 fetters, that is:⁷⁵

(1) self-identity view,	<i>sakkāya, diṭṭhi</i>
(2) spiritual doubt,	<i>vicikicchā</i>
(3) attachment to rituals and vows,	<i>sīla-b, bata, parāmāsa</i>
(4) sensual lust, and	<i>kāma, rāga</i>
(5) repulsion. ⁷⁶	<i>paṭigha</i>

This means that the nonreturner has fully exterminated greed and hatred. He is reborn in one of the pure abodes (*suddh'āvāsa*)⁷⁷ and goes on to attain nirvana there.

The “pure abodes” are a group of 5 of the highest **form brahma-heavens** inhabited only by non-returners, and where they in due time attain arhathood and nirvana. The inhabitants of the respective pure abodes and their respective lifespans, according to **the Saṅkhār'upapatti Sutta** (M 120), are:

Āviha	“Non-declining,”	1000 full world-cycles (<i>mahā, kappa</i>) ⁷⁸
Ātappa	“Untroubled”	2000 full world-cycles
Sudassā	“Beautifully visible”	4000 full world-cycles
Sudassī	“Clear-visioned”	8000 full world-cycles
Akaṇiṭṭha	“Peerless”	16,000 full world-cycles (M 120/3:102 f), SD 3.4 ⁷⁹

In other words, a nonreturner is freed from rebirth in the sense-world.⁸⁰

3.2.3.6 The arhat or fully self-awakened one (like the Buddha) has broken all **the 10 fetters** (*dasa saṃyojana*),⁸¹ that is, the 5 lower fetters [above] and also the 5 higher fetters, which are:⁸²

(6) greed for form existence,	<i>rūpa, rāga</i>
(7) greed for formless existence,	<i>arūpa, rāga</i>
(8) conceit,	<i>māna</i>
(9) restlessness,	<i>uddhacca</i>
(10) ignorance.	<i>avijjā</i> (S 5:61; A 5:13; Vbh 377).

The first 5 are the lower fetters (*oram, bhāgiya*), so called because they bind us to the lower realms, that is, the sense-world. The rest are the higher fetters (*uddham, bhāgiya*), that bind us to the higher realms, ie, the form world and the formless worlds.⁸³

3.2.3.7 These 4 noble individuals (*ariya puggala*)—the streamwinner, the once-returner, the non-returner and the arhat—are path saints, those who have gained the path (*magga*) of awakening. They

⁷⁵ On the 5 lower fetters, see **Oram, bhāgiya S** (S 45.179) + SD 50.11 (2); SD 10.16 (1.6.7).

⁷⁶ In some places, no 5 (*paṭigha*) is replaced by ill will (*vyāpāda*), which is a synonym.

⁷⁷ **The pure abodes** (*suddh'āvāsa*) are a special dimension of the universe inhabited only by non-returners: SD 10.16 (13.1.6); SD 23.14 (Table 3).

⁷⁸ A “full world-cycle” (*mahā, kappa*) is the full cycle of a world-period or universe’s cycle (V 3:4 = D 3:51, 111 = It 99; D 1:14; A 2:142). For cosmological map, see **Kevalā S** (D 11), SD 1.7 Appendix; for world cycle, see **Aggañña S** (D 27), SD 2.19.

⁷⁹ Also D 33,2.1(17)/3:237; Vbh 425; Pug 42-46.

⁸⁰ See SD 10.16 (13).

⁸¹ SD 10.16 (1.6.6-8).

⁸² On the 5 higher fetters, see **Uddham, bhāgiya S** (S 45.180) + SD 50.12 (2.4); SD 10.16 (1.6.8).

⁸³ On these worlds, see SD 1.7 (Table 1.7).

may be renunciants or lay disciples, but in the case of arhats, they are mostly renunciants (but lay arhats are very rare). At each successive level of the path, these saints gain greater wisdom that liberates them. Since here it is wisdom (*paññā*) that frees them, this is also called **the way of wisdom**.⁸⁴

3.3 SEX, HUMANITY AND SPIRITUALITY

3.3.1 Sex and the streamwinner

3.3.1.1 Can sex be a selfless act? According to early Buddhism, sex can be *selfless* and *must* be selfless, if one is to be truly human, and not to fall into the rut of any pleasure-seeking body-centred *sub-human* state. To be **human**, and to sustain the human state, is *to cultivate the mind*, which entails knowing and seeing the body as impermanent, feelings as unsatisfactory, and the mind as nonself. When we habitually cultivate these three, we attain the focuses of mindfulness. That is when we see and understand true reality—*impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and nonself*—in *the body, feelings, perception and the mind* [1.2.3.2].

3.3.1.2 What is the Dharma-spirited attitude towards sex that will not hinder our spiritual lives as practising Buddhists, that is, as those who are not renunciants but lay practitioners? The fact that the suttas actually mention a particular category of disciples—the pleasure-enjoying lay streamwinners [3.3.1.3]—shows that the path of awakening is also open to non-renunciants, even to those disciples who enjoy sense-pleasures.

My understanding here is that **a streamwinner** (especially when he has dhyana experience) would *not* indulge in sex, even when he “enjoys sense-pleasures” [3.2.2.2]. From the suttas, we may deduce that the streamwinner seeks and enjoys sense-pleasures:

- (1) “in a Dharma-spirited way, non-violently,”
- (2) “he makes himself happy and pleased,” “he shares his wealth and does meritorious deeds,” and
- (4) “he uses his wealth without being attached to it, uninfatuated with it, not blindly caught up in it, but seeing its danger, understanding the escape from it.”⁸⁵ [3.2.2.3]

3.3.1.3 A streamwinner “sees the danger (of sensual pleasures)” (*ādīnava, dassāvī*) means that he knows when to stop when enjoying sensual pleasures (which is, after all, the primary function of keeping the precepts). He “understands the escape (from sensual pleasures)” (*nissaraṇa, pañña*) means that the streamwinner, on attaining the path, is free from being enslaved to samsara, that is, he is able to restrain his senses to some effective degree.

In simpler terms, this means that the streamwinner no more feels enticed to indulge in sex because:

- (1) he does not identify with any part of his being: *form, feeling, perception, formations or consciousness*;
- (2) he has no doubt regarding the teaching and true reality; and
- (3) he is not attached to rituals and vows; he is not superstitious.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ The term “way of wisdom” is used in contrast to the “way of love” [3.2.3.1 f]. Cf **disciplehood and discipleship**: SD 62.11 (3).

⁸⁵ **M 26,33/1:173** (SD 1.11); **S 20.9/2:270** (SD 69.12); **S 42.12/4:336 f** (SD 91.3); **A 10.91/5:178** (SD 100.8): negative passage, **D 13,27/1:245** (SD 1.8); see prec n.

⁸⁶ See **Emotional independence**, SD 40a.8.

A streamwinner has broken the 3 fetters of self-identity view, spiritual doubt, and attachment to ritual and vows. However, the fetters of sensual lust and of aversion and the 5 higher fetters remain.⁸⁷ In other words, the streamwinner still feels lust and its counterpart, aversion, but these emotions are seen for what they really are, body-bound and impermanent. These thoughts arise and pass away without entrapping the streamwinner. Hence, the streamwinner feels no need for sexual pleasure and does not indulge in it.

3.3.1.4 Sexuality is not an easy topic to discuss, much less write about, but there are sufficient early Buddhist teachings we can invoke, and also learn from our own faith and experience as lay Buddhists. These are thus the views of an unawakened practitioner that are to be tested and understood for modern lay Buddhist practitioners. We must be guided by the 5 precepts and the 5 values that give universal meaning and relevance to our lives as humans, as individuals and as a society.

As practising lay Buddhists who enjoy sense-pleasures, we must be guided and inspired by **the values** of *life, happiness, freedom, truth and the mind* for ourselves and for others [3.3.2]. These values are guiding principles that keep us human, even divine, in our understanding of our bodies and those of others.

In a committed relationship between 2 mature and responsible adults, the sexual pleasure is the highest pleasure the body can give, and this pleasure deepens our understanding of humanity when we see and accept the values underpinning this sexual relationship.

This is what we will now explore.

3.3.2 Sex and values

3.3.2.0 By **value** here is meant the relative importance, worth or usefulness of something. In the case of **sex**, it expresses something of value to us, and it also creates something of value to us. The plural agent “us” is purposive. Broadly speaking, sex is an important expression of love between 2 people, but it also produces other persons, who in turn can benefit more persons and society.

We must be accountable for our **sex act** because of the following values related to it (as well as our attitude to it):

- | | | |
|---|--|-----------|
| (1) the value of <u>life</u> , | sex creates life; | [3.2.2.1] |
| (2) the value of <u>happiness</u> , | sex can give pleasure and joy; | [3.2.2.2] |
| (3) the value of <u>the person</u> , | sex is an act of the whole person; | [3.2.2.3] |
| (4) the value of <u>truth</u> , | sex significantly affects others here and hereafter; and | [3.2.2.4] |
| (5) the value of <u>the mind</u> [being], | sex affects and moulds our humanity. | [3.2.2.5] |

These values thus respectively underpin each of **the 5 precepts**—the universal principles of natural morality—that is, the precepts to abstain (1) from killing, (2) from stealing, (3) from sexual misconduct, (4) from falsehood, and (5) from intoxication. What is of value also entails **purpose**, what we should do to nurture and enjoy the benefits of those values. That wholesome practice brings moral virtue (*sīla*), the foundation of Buddhist spirituality and of humanity as a whole.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ These 3 fetters, along with those of sensual lust and aversion form the 5 lower fetters (which hold beings back in the sense world). The remaining 5 fetters—those of lust for form existence, lust for formless existence, conceit, restlessness and ignorance form the 5 higher fetters (which hold beings back in the dhyanic realms).

⁸⁸ Further on moral **values**, see SD 1.5 (2.7+2.8); SD 51.11 (2.2.3.4); SD 54.2e (2.3.2.5). For a philosophical discussion, see SD 50.16 (1.1.1).

3.3.2.1 THE VALUE OF LIFE: Sex creates life.

The basic understanding we should have regarding sex⁸⁹ is that it can create **life**. We must be ready to nurture the life or lives that we have created. The first 7 years of such of our offspring vitally needs motherly love and care, and fatherly support and presence. We are born with a human **body**, but the potential for a human **mind** is only realized with the compassion and wisdom of loving parents. By “child-raising” is thus meant humanizing that child, providing the child or children with a healthy body, and more importantly, a healthy mind.

3.3.2.2 THE VALUE OF HAPPINESS: Sex can give pleasure and joy.

Wholesome sex (rooted in love) between two people is the celebration of their powerful feelings for each other, often, too, on account of their health and age. Thus the second consideration behind a sexual act is that it should bring happiness for both partners. In this sense, sex is less about *bodies* but more so about feelings, that is **happiness**. This is an important reason that early Buddhism is not against love and sex between either gender (who have not taken the vow of celibacy). Interestingly, there is no Buddhist term for what we today call “homosexuality,” but this acceptance is clearly implicit in Buddhist teachings.⁹⁰

A wholesome appreciation of the value of happiness is expressed in showing *charity, generosity and giving* to one’s beloved and partner—the purpose is to give well-being and happiness to him or her. True partnership must be nurtured with a wholesome emotional, psychological and spiritual environment. It should be a partnership and friendship rooted in *love, compassion, appreciative joy and equanimity*.

These are the 4 divine gifts of *love, compassion, joy and peace* [3.2.2.3] that one should constantly give to one’s beloved. Givers of these divine qualities would then receive them in return. For, it is said: “The giver is beloved.”⁹¹

3.2.2.3 THE VALUE OF THE PERSON: Sex is an act of the whole person.

When we are attracted to another merely by *looks, sound, smell, taste or touch*, we are doomed to be haunted by lustful desire. The other living person is more than just an anatomical part, and that person’s part will change, become other than what we thought, or have features we will find unattractive. To love another then is to know the whole person, not just *the body*, but more so the mind. The person is both body and mind.

To truly know another, we must **love** that person, accept that person as he or she is; indeed, this is the best place to begin true-hearted friendship.⁹² We are then mature to enjoy spiritual friendship.⁹³

Our **compassion** for the beloved means that we accept and forgive that person even when he or she seems to fail us. Compassion is the full perspective we have of our beloved by recalling the goodness and kindness of that person.

Appreciative joy is our celebrating the goodness, success and well-being of our beloved. This is when we look into each other’s hearts, like a mirror looking into another.

⁸⁹ In this context, “sex” refers to union between male and female; technically, it includes one’s creating life from human cells such as by vitro fertilization or “test-tube” babies.

⁹⁰ However, the suttas reject as unwholesome acts of “unnatural lust” (*dhamma,rāga*), incl incest, “rampant greed” (*visama,lobha*), such as treating people as objects, and “deviant conduct” (*micchā,dhamma*), any sexual act that is against the law. In this last category, Comys incl sexuality “between men and men, women with women” (DA 3:853) but no such limitation is mentioned in the suttas; hence, this last remark is best taken as a Comy view of its own social conditions. On homosexuality and other aspects of sexuality, see SD 31.7 (7).

⁹¹ (**Pañcaka Dāna,phala**) **Sīha S** (A 5.34), SD 45.2.

⁹² See **Sigāl’ovāda S** (D 31,21-26), SD 4.1; **Dūta S** (A 8.16), SD 46.7 (8.2); **Group karma**, SD 39.1 (7.1).

⁹³ See **Spiritual friendship: Stories of kindness** SD 8.1; **Spiritual friendship: A textual study** SD 34.1.

Equanimity is our sense of peace in giving some space and freedom to our beloved so that he or she can continue to grow. After all, we are each an individual with our own mind and heart. Yet the bridges that bring us together are many, beautiful and strong. It is a joy just to cross those bridges, back and forth, enjoying the gardens of our love.

3.3.2.4 THE VALUE OF TRUTH: Sex significantly affects others here and hereafter.

Sex is a living part of true reality. Sex is samsara's presence in us and acting through us to perpetuate itself. We have already noted that our body is composed of the elements of *earth, water, fire and wind* [3.1.1.1], and samsara is made of these very same elements. Samsara flows into us as the elements, and then back into the universe every moment whether we are aware of it or not, whether we are awake, asleep or unconscious.

The truth then is that both we and samsara are impermanent, changing all the time. The elements are neither still nor stable. The very nature of the elements is that **the earth element** weighs down on us and crushes us, our bones and nails break, our teeth decay and drop off, our skin scrapes, tears and wounds itself. **The water element** is blood, lymph, sweat, tears, saliva, urine and other fluids that transport food that nourishes the body, and become waste that need to be cleared out through the 9 openings and the pores of our body.⁹⁴

The body may *appear, sound, smell, taste or feel* attractive or pleasurable, but it becomes plain or even foul when that attractiveness or pleasure is gone. When we only desire and seek that attractiveness or pleasure but not the whole person, we are very likely to dislike, even hate, that person—or what we imagine that person to be. In short, we have only a limited view of that person; it's not even *a person* but just a part of a being. Love is an appreciation of the whole being of a person.

Once we begin to appreciate **the person** as a whole, we begin to look as if through a window into a beautiful open garden. When we look attentively with love, we may even discover new and beautiful aspects of the person. We think we “know” the person, but what we can know is only the past. Yet reflecting on the past, and putting as much of it together as we can, we may realize something new and wonderful about that person. The past is often a construction, and with attention and love, we may often *reconstruct or review* the past, and so the present with that person becomes clearer and better.

When we truly love a person, we see that person as more than just *a body*. We see that beloved as *one in the making*—just as we are in the making, too. What we love doing may shape us, and when we show love to another, it helps change or shape that person to be *loving, kind, happy and at peace*.

3.3.2.5 THE VALUE OF THE MIND AND BEING: Sex moulds and affects our humanity.

Both the indulgence in sex and our attitude towards sex influence our minds and how we see and treat others. Psychologically, our attitude towards sex is shaped by our desire for sensual pleasures. How we are drawn to *sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touches* influences how we think about sex and our indulgence in sex.

- When we react violently to collect sexual experiences (such as in rape), then we have fallen into the rut of a **hell-being**.
- When we are *emotionally* violent and calculating, measuring and exploiting others as merely objects of pleasure, then we are **asuras**.

⁹⁴ The 9 openings (*nava sota*) are the body's 2 eyes, 2 ear-openings, 2 nostrils, mouth, anus and urethra (*navahi sotehi ti ubho, akkhi-c, chidda, kaṇṇa-c, chidda, nāsa-c, chidda, mukha, vacca, magga, passāva, maggehi*, Sn 197; SnA 1:248). For a more detailed reflection on the body, see **SD 62.10a** (3.1.1.3).

- When we are drawn to sex out of habit, with neither feeling nor love, merely driven to mate like beasts, we have become **animals**.⁹⁵

In simple terms, sex is rooted in a lustful mind that seeks to appropriate the kinds of feelings that we have been conditioned to experience as pleasurable. In this sense, sex is the mind that seeks expression through the body by way of self-extension. It is as if the mind is wildly driven to embody itself through *sight, sound, smell, taste and touch*. A sight, for example, is seen as a **thing** (*kiñcana*) to be appropriated, something to have and to hold forever, as it were. But, as we have noted, all these sense-experiences and the mind itself are fleeting moments. To enjoy it, we can and must only fully live the moment and let it pass. That is the way things truly are.

When we wisely see sex as but a passing moment, just like the breath that we take in and must give back, when we totally lose a sense of self, then we are more likely to fully enjoy that moment, so that our mind is at peace with our beloved and with others. We may even catch a glimpse of how our mind and heart work. We may even feel **divine** from that moment of *love, compassion, joy and peace*. We begin by keeping our mind human and sharing our humanity.

3.4 SEXUAL REALITIES

3.4.1 The 5 aggregates of sex

3.4.1.0 We are nothing but the 5 aggregates: *form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness*. Form is our **body** of the 4 elements [3.1.1.1]. The other aggregates constitute **the mind**. During a sex experience, one experiences nothing but these 5 aggregates. This vision helps us to see true reality so that we are not leashed subhumanly to our senses and imprisoned in our body; so that we are truly free with a mind of true divinity, of *love, kindness, joy and peace*.

3.4.1.1 We have so far stated that **the body** is composed of the 4 elements [3.1.1.1]. Generally speaking, this is the body—especially our own body—that we see and experience with our physical senses, and which the Pali word, *sarīra* (or more technically, *sarīra,kāya*) usually refers to.⁹⁶ This type of body is defined in the Suttas in this well-known pericope, found in **the Sāmañña,phala Sutta** (D 2) and elsewhere:⁹⁷

This body (of mine) is form,
made up of the 4 great elements [3.1.1.1], born from mother and father,
built up on rice and porridge,
subject to impermanence, rubbing and pressing, breaking up, crumbling away.
And this consciousness of mine is stuck here, bound up here.⁹⁸

(D 2,85/1:76,33), SD 8.10

Ironically, when we are attracted to the physical body, it is not the element-based body that we see, but rather it is a **virtual body**. This is a *perceived* physical body or *imagined* construct, best represented

⁹⁵ On the animal state, see SD 63.13a (3.2.2.4). On subhuman tendencies: SD 29.8a (4.1.4); SD 48.1 (5.2.4).

⁹⁶ *Sarīra* can also refer to a dead body or to bodily relics (*sarīrika dhātu*). The early Buddhist texts as a rule speak of the body “with consciousness” (*sa,viññāṇaka,kāya*) [SD 17.8a (12.3); SD 56.1 (4.3.2.2) n]. See **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16), SD 9 (7d.1).

⁹⁷ For other refs, see SD 29.6a (1.3.1.3).

⁹⁸ *Ayaṃ (kho me) kāyo rūpī cātum,mahā,bhūtiko mātā,pettika,sambhavo odana,kummāsūpacayo anicc’ucchādāna,parimādāna,bhedāna,viddhamsāna,dhammo. Idañ ca pana me viññāṇaṃ ettha sitaṃ ettha paṭibaddhan’ti*. This is the full pericope.

by the generic Pali word, *kāya*, which can mean “body” in the literal sense (as a perceived body) or the figurative sense (as a “group of parts”). Indeed, we do not really “see” a body; we project a vision of it, depending on what we desire and know (or don’t know).

3.4.1.2 The living human body at its barest minimum is **the naked body**. In early Indian society, and even in Buddhism in general, the naked body (both male and female) is never viewed in a sexual manner but as reflecting a *lack*. The body thus needs clothing or cover for very practical purposes, as stated in this pericope on reflective usage of monastic robes, given in **the Sabb’āsava Sutta** (M 2):

only for warding off heat, for the sake of warding off cold,
for the sake of warding off the touch of
mosquitoes, flies, creeping things, the wind, and the burning sun;
only for the purpose of covering up the privies, out of moral shame.

(M 2,14/1:10) + n (SD 30.3)⁹⁹

In the case of the laity and worldly religions, clothing is often worn to project status, power and wealth. In the case of the secular youth and the worldly, clothing is also worn to project beauty, fashion and sexuality. The worldly image is further projected in “socially constructed” gestures, postures, and movements.

3.4.1.3 In the ancient world, such as Greece and Rome, **nudity**, especially that of the athletic male body, is to depict health, vigour and prowess in sports. The gods, too, are often depicted naked or scantily clothed. The modern world, on the other hand, tends to regard public display of the naked body as being generally offensive or hilarious. Some world religions even regard the body, especially the naked body (meaning a display of sexual organs and the female breasts) as being “evil,” and thus needs to be hidden below clothing or should be covered in some way.

Again we see a more open or “artistic” licence in the depiction and **perception** of the unclothed or almost naked bodies, including women’s breasts, very common in temple paintings and sculpture. One key reason the naked human body is often depicted in Buddhist art, I think, is because it is meant to be reflected on as being subject to impermanence, suffering, decay and pollution. Indirectly, such art also reminds the viewer that when such bodies are depicted as beautiful, it is because they are the result of good karma or reflective of the divine form (that is, of the gods of the sense-world who enjoy divine sensual pleasures).

The bodies of monastics, on the other hand, are defined or refined by a range of features, such as a *shaven head, robes, an alms-bowl, and decorous posture and mindful gait*. This is to promote a whole-some *perception* of the monastic body, one that has renounced sex and the world. The monastic body is also meant to depict and be seen as a sex-free living embodiment of peace and freedom or renunciation and awakening.

We should thus perceive impermanence, and reflect on *impermanence* in the body, human or divine.¹⁰⁰

3.4.1.4 The 4th of the 5 aggregates is that of **formations** (*saṅkhārā*), which we will, for our study here, understand as referring to *karmic intentions behind our thoughts, speech and actions*. Let me begin on a positive note by saying that parenthood, having a child or children and raising them with love, dili-

⁹⁹ Also at **Pāsādika S** (D 29,22/3:130), SD 40a.6 abridged; **Āsava S** (A 6.58,4/3:388 f), SD 62.1; **Nm** 2:496. For details, see Vism 1.85-87/30 f.

¹⁰⁰ See Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 1994:142; Susanne Mrozik, *Virtuous Bodies*, 2007:31 f. On seeing the body as a whole: SD 29.6a (4.4).

gence and wisdom is a great blessing. Hence, the Buddha declares that “mother and father are God” (*brahmā ti mātā, pitaro*).¹⁰¹ Cognately, **the Maṅgala Sutta** (Sn 2.4 = Khp 5) states that “the supporting of mother and father is a supreme blessing” (*mātā, pitu upaṭṭhānam, etam maṅgalam uttamam*).¹⁰²

Further, according to the early Buddhist teaching on **karma and rebirth**, the Buddha states, in a series of related suttas, that:

A beginning point of beings roaming and wandering on, fettered by ignorance, obscured by craving, cannot be discerned. It is not easy, bhikkhus, to find a being who has not been **a mother ... a father ... a brother ... a sister ... a son ... a daughter** (to us and one another) before during this long journeying. (S 15.14 ... 15.19)¹⁰³

As human beings, we are thus all related by the karma of birth and rebirth as a cosmic or samsaric family; it behooves to love and accept one another wholesomely.

Although it may then be argued that for beings so closely related, any sexual intercourse between humans would be regarded as incest. The consanguinity or relationship through rebirth is an existential relationship. It is incest when the close relationship is within the immediate family. Most social groups however accept marriage between first cousins (family members who have at least one of the same grandparents, that is, your parent’s sibling’s child).¹⁰⁴

Incest is considered wrong and harmful due to a combination of genetic, social, and psychological reasons. Genetically, sex between close relatives increases the risk of passing on harmful recessive genetic disorders to offspring. Socially, most cultures condemn incest due to historical, religious, and traditional reasons, and it can also lead to the breakdown of family structures and power imbalances. Psychologically, it can cause severe emotional distress and trauma for those involved (especially when it involves violence, abuse or forced marriage).

3.4.1.5 The 5th aggregate—that of **consciousness** (*viññāṇa*)¹⁰⁵—is simply our mind, that is, what we *were*, what we *will be*, and what we *are* right now. The rationale for the sequence of consciousness will become clear by the end of this section. “What we were” is a convenient phrase for our *memories* of our past. These memories are themselves merely rumblings, eruptions and lava-flow from the volcano that is our latent tendencies (*anusaya*), that is, the habits that we have been conditioned by our *lust*, *hatred* and *delusion*. In modern lingo, we can call this, **the unconscious**,¹⁰⁶ a useful term for our latent tendencies of which we are not conscious but which, as a rule, have a stranglehold over all our present actions.

What we have done in the past continues to influence, even drive, us now as we decide what to do. In most cases, however, we have really no choice but to be driven by our unconscious, which acts as the puppet-master pulling and playing our strings as we plan *what to do next*. When we understand the Buddha’s teachings, we will understand that this is our **preconscious**,¹⁰⁷ that is, a mind of its own just before we act, driving us with *lust*, *hatred* or *delusion*.

¹⁰¹ **Sa, brahmaka S** (A 3.31), SD 90.2; SD 3.1 (1.4.4.2) n; SD 38.2 (4.4.1.2).

¹⁰² **Maṅgala S** (Khp 5,8/3 = Sn 262), SD 101.5.

¹⁰³ **Mātā S** (S 15.14/2:189), SD 57.2; **Pitā S** (S 15.15/2:189), SD 57.3; **Bhātā S** (S 15.16/2:189) SD 57.4; **Bhaginī S** (S 15.17/2:189), SD 57.5; **Putta S** (S 15.18/2:190), SD 57.6; **Dhītā S** (S 15.19/2:190), SD 57.7.

¹⁰⁴ M Downing, “Incest,” in Gale Ency of Sex and Gender, 2007 2:758-764. A Baker, “Incest,” in (ed) H J Armstrong, Ency of Sex and Sexuality, 2021:475 f.

¹⁰⁵ On consciousness, see **Viññāṇa**, SD 17.8a (11.3).

¹⁰⁶ On the unconscious, see SD 17.8b (1).

¹⁰⁷ On the preconscious, see SD 17.8b (2.2).

When we act with <u>lust</u> , we are seeking more of	
what we are used to <i>seeing</i>	as pleasurable,
what we are used to <i>hearing</i>	as pleasurable,
what we are used to <i>smelling</i>	as pleasurable,
what we are used to <i>tasting</i>	as pleasurable, and
what we are used to <i>touching or feeling</i>	as pleasurable.

In short, we are prodded by our unconscious to reproduce ourselves, that is, our sense-base being, and to reject, that is, show hatred, for what seems to work against what we see as pleasurable, what we lust after. We just don't know why—the craving simply leads our blind, deluded mind.

3.4.2 Living the present

3.4.2.1 We have mentioned **the bonds of sexuality** [3.2.1.1], that is, our attraction to pleasant sights, sounds, smells, taste and touches. The attractions become “bonds” (*samyoga*) when we keep *thinking* of them, and so we keep *seeking* them, even unconsciously. When we indulge in these sensualities, and lust floods our mind and body, we are then driven to seek, to have and to hold other bodies in the same way. This is a dramatic but realistic description of how sexuality arises.

This is less likely to happen when we are aware of the “sexual” process that delusion is leading us into. As practitioners, the Buddha trains us with **moral awareness** to refrain from creating life when we are not ready and capable, when we cause unhappiness in others, when we have no consent from others, when we lie, and when we are deluded. We then break the natural precepts.

3.4.2.2 When we understand the 5 precepts and accept them as natural morality, guarding our lives from being driven by our sense-based desires, then we respect our life, we are happily free from blame and guilt, our body feels light and healthy, we feel true to the good life, and our mind is clear and bright. To the extent that we have such self-control, to that extent we are **celibate**. This is also the reason why we recite the precepts; to remind us that we can be celibate; but when we (as lay practitioners) choose to enjoy wholesome sensual pleasures, we are wise and morally chaste.

3.5 SANAÑ,KUMĀRA AND HUMAN SEXUALITY

3.5.1 Freedom from sensuality

3.5.1.1 The sexual quest, conscious or unconscious, is to taste the total beauty of the body and the abiding pleasure of the senses. However, because of the composite nature of the element-based body, it is conditioned *to change, to be unsatisfactory and to have no abiding essence*. This total beauty and abiding pleasure, however, is possible only in a body free from the senses, such as a body of form-dhyana, like that of the 1st-dhyana brahmas. The beauty is total and the pleasure abiding because there is *no self* in dhyanic bliss; so one is attached to nothing, but is everything.

3.5.1.2 Brahmā Sanañ,kumara was previously a gandharva, a divine minstrel, in the sense-world heaven of Tāvātimsa. There, while yet still a boy of divine beauty, he mastered dhyana. In due course, he passed away and was reborn as Brahmā in the 1st-dhyana form (*rūpa-j,jhāna*) heaven. As a 1st-dhyana brahma, he retains his boyish form. Having transcended sense-existence, Sanañ,kumara thus has no need of either sensual pleasures or sex, which are regarded as “gross” compared to his subtle form brahma-state.

3.5.2 Sanañ,kumara as symbolism of freedom from sex

3.5.2.1 Sanañ,kumara was, in his immediately previous life, the gandharva, **Pañca,sikha**, Sakra’s divine minstrel. Gandharvas are known to be sensual beings. In fact, Pañca,sikha fell in love with Bhaddā Suriya,vacchasā and won her with his music and love song.¹⁰⁸ Pañca,sikha’s song was powerfully erotic, yet intimately woven with his faith-inspired allusions to the Buddha, the Dharma and the arhats (the 3 jewels). He showed himself to be a gandharva who was passionate in his love for both Bhaddā and the Buddha Dharma. He was one of the Buddha’s personal attendants and a favourite with the Buddha. Hence, Sakra sought Pañca,sikha’s help with an introduction to meet the Buddha.¹⁰⁹

Pañca,sikha, despite his sensual nature and affair with Bhaddā Suria,vacchasā, went on to be a master of dhyana. Pañca,sikha’s transformation from a sensual gandharva into a dhyana-attainer was clearly the result of his close association with the Buddha. When Pañca,sikha passed away, on account of his dhyana meditation, he was reborn as the brahma Sanañ,kumāra.¹¹⁰

3.5.2.2 Although we have no record in the suttas of **Sanañ,kumara** (or of Pañca,sikha, his previous life) as being a streamwinner or as having gained the path of awakening, Sanañkumāra, a 1st-dhyana brahma, is said to be an “eternal virgin” (a broad sense of *sanañ,kumara*). It is thus natural for Sanañ,-kumāra to be a celibate—that is, he eschews sex and feels no need for it—because, as a 1st-dhyana brahma, he has transcended the sense-world (unlike when he was the gandharva Pañca,sikha in Tāvatiṃsa, a sense-world heaven). [2.5.1.3]

On account of his 1st-dhyana divine state, Sanañkumāra, one who enjoys dhyanic bliss, is thus a **natural celibate**. Since he is naturally and constantly blissful, he has no need of any stimulation for the sake of sense-based pleasure. It’s like someone who has had a good meal and is satiated. His celibacy, boyish beauty, deep understanding of the Dharma, and love for teaching it, are qualities that project him as a sort of ideal of spiritual celibacy.¹¹¹ [2.1]

3.5.2.3 In itself, **celibacy** is not an ideal in spiritual life; rather, it is a natural quality of a truly spiritual person, especially one who is rooted in dhyanic joy. Celibacy, as such, is a natural part of **the holy life** (*brahma,cariya*), which also describes a life of the true renunciant. A monastic, on his or her own initiative, has publicly taken the vow not to indulge in any sensual pleasure, especially sex. This abstention is a preparation for the cultivation of a calm and clear dhyanic mind for seeing into true reality.

For a **lay practitioner**, a non-renunciant, celibacy is not a rule but a *natural lifestyle* that one is drawn to when one has experienced the profound bliss of dhyana. Or, one could be simply happy and satisfied with oneself, that one feels no attraction for sex. Otherwise, the lay practitioner keeps to the 5 precepts, where following the 3rd precept, one abstains from “sexual misconduct” (*kāmesu micchārā*), that is, improper or inappropriate sexual conduct, such as adultery.

In closing, we can say that Sanañ,kumara’s dhyanic brahma state and beautiful boyish form (along with his joy in knowing and teaching the Dharma) symbolize **the holy life** that an unawakened but deeply devoted follower enjoys. Simply put, this is a case of a **healthy mind in a healthy body**. In this case, a healthy mind means that one is free from lust and hatred.¹¹² A healthy body means that one keeps to the 5 precepts (embodying right action and right speech) and not clouding up the mind. It also includes

¹⁰⁸ D 21,1.6 f/2:267 f & SD 54.8 (1.2.2.1).

¹⁰⁹ D 21,2.10/2:288 (SD 54.8).

¹¹⁰ Such stories are well known in Thai society, and serves to explain the Siamese warm and natural tolerance of gender preference (heterosexual or homosexual) in personal relationships and their related literature.

¹¹¹ On sexuality and celibacy: SD 29.6a (1.3.5).

¹¹² Since one is still unawakened, there are still pervasive delusions esp arising from not fully seeing nonself.

wholesome habits such as moderation in food and regular exercises to keep the body healthy for Dharma practice, wholesome engagement with others, and contributions to a wholesome society.¹¹³

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Sanaṅkumāra Sutta

The Discourse on Sanaṅkumāra

S 6.11

1 Thus have I heard.

At one time, the Blessed One was staying on the bank of the river Sappinī at Rājagaha.

2 Then, when the night was far spent,¹¹⁴ Brahmā Sanaṅkumāra, surpassing in beauty, lighting up the entire bank of the river Sappinī, approached the Blessed One.

Having approached the Blessed One and saluted him, he stood at one side.

2 Standing at one side, Brahmā Sanaṅkumāra spoke this verse before the Blessed One:

3 The kshatriya [warrior-noble] is the best of the generation
for those who look up to clan.

The one endowed with wisdom and conduct:¹¹⁵

he is the best among gods and humans.

(S 596)¹¹⁶

khattiyo seṭṭho jane tasmim

ye gotta,paṭisārino

vijjā,carāṇa,sampanno

so seṭṭho deva,mānuse ti.

4 Brahmā Sanaṅkumāra said this; the teacher approved.

5 Then, Brahmā Sanaṅkumāra, thinking, “The teacher has approved of me,” saluted the Blessed One, and keeping him to his right, circumambulated him sunwise, he vanished right there.

— evaṃ —

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¹¹³ See SD 29.6a (4.2.3).

¹¹⁴ “When the night was far gone” (*abhikkantāya rattiyā*), ie the middle watch (between 10 pm and 2 am) (UA 175).

¹¹⁵ Lines cd are explained in **Ambaṭṭha S** (D 3,1.28/3:99) in terms of the *sāmañña,phala*.

¹¹⁶ This verse recurs at **Ambaṭṭha S** (D 3,1.28/1:99), SD 21.3; **Aggañña S** (D 27,32/3:97 f), SD 2.19. [1.2.3]