

## Streamwinners “enjoying sensual pleasures”

Source: *SD 60.1f Handbook of Meditation in Society 6: A psychopathology of Mindfulness*  
© Piya Tan, 2023c (forthcoming).

**4.2.1.2** Every unawakened meditator will be confronted by some form of **lustful desire** (*kāma-c, chanda*), which ranges from a simple need for some comfort to an instinctive drive for sexual pleasure. This is where the body takes over as *the* doer, demanding sensual satisfaction: to see, to hear, to smell, to taste, and to touch. The self here is **the doer**, in the sense of driving us to want to see, to hear, to smell, to taste, and to touch for even a moment’s pleasure, but it never ends there. Hence, lust is regarded as the 1<sup>st</sup> of the 5 hindrances (*pañca, nīvaraṇā*).<sup>1</sup>

On a deeper and darker level, the doer lurks as **sensual lust** (*kāma, raga*),<sup>2</sup> one of the 10 fetters (*saṃyojana*)<sup>3</sup> that keeps us chained to this samsaric cycle—in psychological terms, this is **the will-to-live**. While the 5 hindrances induce us to slave for our body, the 10 fetters drive us on as veritable hamsters to gleefully run the samsaric wheel as if this is all there is to life. When these drives are totally self-driven and self-satisfying, it is called **sex**, and becomes the most selfish of sentient acts.<sup>4</sup>

The world thrives on sex; sex thrives on sense-pleasures; hence, sense-pleasures holds us back in the world, and they are regarded as contradicting spiritual liberation. The problem with sexual pleasure is that it is usually addictive (and is functionally meant to be so, that is to keep life going and the species evolving). Apparently, the Buddha once seems to hint that sensual pleasure (*kāma*)—including the sexual act in its moral context—does not hinder us from reaching the past as a streamwinner.

### 4.2.2 Streamwinners “enjoying sensual pleasures”

**4.2.2.1** Lay Buddhists desiring to live a full and happy lay life should understand that **the 3<sup>rd</sup> precept** is about respect for our bodies (self and others). It means that we should keep it healthy with proper and moderate eating, good care and habits, and sufficient leisure, exercise and rest. The 3<sup>rd</sup> precept is also about “sexual freedom,” in the sense that we should respect a “no” just as we rejoice in a “yes” regarding sex with our spouse or partner.

Informed lay Buddhists, especially those who meditate, understand that **sexual pleasure** is really a mental experience. In other words, wholesome love between partners should be expressed through the body as joyful gestures of mutual appreciation of being. The early saints are said to live “in concord, with mutual joy, without disputing, mixing like milk and water, seeing each other with kindly eyes” and that they constantly cultivate lovingkindness

---

<sup>1</sup> The 5 hindrances (*pañca nīvaraṇa*) are (1) sensual desire, (2) ill will, (3) restlessness and worry, (4) sloth and torpor, and (5) doubt: *Nīvaraṇa*, SD 32.1.

<sup>2</sup> SD 6.11 (2).

<sup>3</sup> The 10 fetters (*dasa saṃyojana*) are (1) self-identity view, (2) doubt, (3) attachment to ritual and vows, (4) sensual lust, (5) aversion, (6) lust for form existence, (7) lust for formless existence, (8) conceit, (9) restlessness and (10) ignorance: SD 10.16 (1.6.6-8); SD 11.1 (5.1.4); SD 3.3 (2); SD 56.1 (4.4).

<sup>4</sup> See **Sexuality**, SD 31.7.

through *bodily action, speech and thought*.<sup>5</sup> We should emulate these joyful habits in our own lay lives so that we live fully and happily.

**Sexuality** is the gateway to samsara. It is time-consuming; it also consumes us; and it keeps us in this cyclic world. It also brings beings into samsara: we are thus responsible for them, our children. Our beholden tasks are to give them wholesome love and joyful space so that they grow well as humans, to go on to contribute well in terms of truth and beauty to others and society in time. In short, sexuality is our karmic door, and we should guard it with wholesome love, respect and restraint.<sup>6</sup>

**4.2.2.2** The Buddha’s first 60 disciples were all monks who are arhats, celibate and awakened. As the Buddha’s teaching spread, the Buddhist community of practitioners also include nuns, laymen and laywomen. As evident from **the Dhammika Sutta** (Sn 2.14), a very early sutta, and **the (Tad-ah) Uposatha Sutta** (A 3.70), the Buddha recommends that even the laity keep rules of celibacy (*brahma,cariya*),<sup>7</sup> moderation of food (*bhojane mattaññuta*)<sup>8</sup> and a simple bed (for watchfulness, *jāgariyā’nyoga*),<sup>9</sup> over and above the regular 5 precepts.<sup>10</sup> [5.1.1.1]

This moral training is based on **the 8 precepts**,<sup>11</sup> recommended for observance during the full moon and new moon days—hence they are called *uposatha* or “sabbath” (observance-day) precepts.<sup>12</sup> The simple life and moral observance are used as a support for *Dharma learning and meditation*—to emulate the way of the arhats. In other words, this is to expedite the lay practitioner’s progress towards the path of awakening.

Clearly this approach works wonders, that is, both renunciants and laity successfully attain the noble (*ariya*) state of *streamwinning, once-returning, and non-returning*, as evident from **the Mahā Vaccha,gotta Sutta** (M 73). In response to the wanderer Vaccha,gotta’s questions on whether there are such saints, the Buddha states that there are, in the noble sangha, *many hundreds* of saints of each of these 6 categories:<sup>13</sup> (1) monk arhats, (2)

---

<sup>5</sup> **Dhamma,cetiya S** (M 89,11), SD 64.10; (**Anuruddha**) **Upakkilesa S** (M 128,11), SD 5.18.

<sup>6</sup> See **Sexuality**, SD 31.7.

<sup>7</sup> On celibacy, SD 29.6a (5.3.2).

<sup>8</sup> On moderate eating: **Kakacūpama S** (M 21,7.2), SD 38.1; **Bhaddāli S** (M 65,2), SD 56.2; **Mahā Assa,pura S** (M 39,9), SD 10.13; **Kīṭa,giri S** (M 70,4), SD 11.1; **Āma,gandha S** (Sn 2.2), SD 4.24 (3.4.1); SD 32.2 (5.1); SD 37.13 (1.2).

<sup>9</sup> On watchfulness, see **Jāgara S** (S 1.6), SD 54.2f; **Jāgariya S** (It 47), SD 54.2f(5).

<sup>10</sup> **Dhammika S** (Sn 2.14/\*376-404/66-70), SD 87.1; (**Tad-ah’**) **Uposatha S**, also called (**Tika**) **Uposatha S** (A 3.70/1:205-215), SD 4.18.

<sup>11</sup> On the 8 precepts, see SD 4.18 (2.2).

<sup>12</sup> On the observance day (*uposatha*), see SD 4.18 (1.2).

<sup>13</sup> **M 73**,7-12/1:490 f (SD 27.4).

nun arhats,<sup>14</sup> (3) laymen non-returners, (4) laymen streamwinners,<sup>15</sup> (5) laywomen non-returners, (6) laywomen streamwinners.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, in **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16), they Buddha tells Ānanda that there are many lay saints.<sup>17</sup>

**4.2.2.3** There are teachings for renunciants (who are celibate), and there are teachings for lay practitioners, who may live the celibate life or live the family life, that is, those “enjoying sensual pleasures” (*kāma,bhogī*). Such lay followers enjoy sensual pleasures guided by the spirit of the 5 precepts, that is with respect for life, happiness, love, truth and mindfulness.

**The Mahā Vaccha,gotta Sutta** (M 73) recounts that when the wanderer Vacchagotta asks the Buddha whether there are streamwinners who are laymen and laywomen “enjoying sensual pleasures” (*kāma,bhogī*), the Buddha replies:

Not just one, Vaccha, nor 100, nor 200, nor 300, nor 400, nor 500, but far more laymen, who are my disciples, householders dressed in white, who enjoy sensual pleasures (*kāma,bhogī*),<sup>18</sup> who are doers of the teaching, followers of instructions, *crossed beyond doubt, become free of uncertainties, gained fearless confidence, and independent of others*,<sup>19</sup> dwell in the teaching. (M 73,10/1:491), SD 27.4; also SD 54.9 (4.2)

This interesting passage shows that the Buddha’s path of training also includes those who live the lay life—including having families and running worldly affairs—in keeping with the 5 precepts and are diligent in overcoming the unwholesome roots of lust and hatred. It thus clear that the Buddha is neither anti-family nor misogynist.

R829 Inspiration 482  
TAN Beng Sin ©2023

---

<sup>14</sup> Note that there is *no* mention of lay arhats (male or female) here. The best known cases of lay arhats are those of (1) the youth **Yasa**, who ordains on the same day (Mv 1.7.22 (V 1:17)), SD 11.2(7); and (2) the wanderer **Bāhiya**, who dies within days of attaining arhathood, (**Arahatta**) **Bāhiya S** (U 1.10), SD 33.7; SD 60.1c (6.3.2). Clearly, lay arhats do exist but are rare: see SD 37.4 (4); SD 8.6 (15); SD 4.9 (5.3.5); SD 60.1c (6.2.1.3). On the destiny of a lay arhat, see SD 8.6 (19). On why there is no mention of lay arhats, see SD 8.6 (13-20). That a lay arhat must ordain or die, see SD 39.3 (1.4.5).

<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, **laymen once-returners** and **laywomen once-returners** are not mentioned here. The possible explanations are that either there are very few of them (the more likely possibility) or that this category is not yet added to the list of aryas or noble saints.

<sup>16</sup> M 73,10/1:491), SD 27.4; also SD 54.9 (4.2).

<sup>17</sup> In **Mahā Parinibbāna S** (D 16,2.7), the Buddha mentions over 50 lay non-returners, over 90 lay once-returners, and over 500 lay streamwinners (SD 9).

<sup>18</sup> On the 10 kinds of kāma,bhogī, see **Rāsiya Gāmaṇi S** (S 42.12/4:331-337); SD 91.3; **Kāma,bhogī S** (A 10.91-5:177-182), SD 100.8.

<sup>19</sup> This italicized passage defines a streamwinner and includes the once-returners, too. At this early stage in the Buddha’s ministry, it is very likely that these 2 stages have not be differentiated.