(Taṇhā) Bhikkhuṇī Sutta

The Discourse to a Nun (on Craving)

[Fighting poison with poison]

(Aṅguttara Nikāya 4.159/2:144-146)

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2005

Introduction

The (Taṇhā) Bhikkhuṇī Sutta is a short instructive sutta of psychological interest, as it is one of the earliest mention of "sublimation," that is, channelling one's unacceptable impulses (eg lust and conceit) in acceptable ways. As Bodhi notes:

> The point of Ānanda's discourse is that even food, craving and conceit, which are normally factors of bondage, can be skillfully employed to attain arahantship; but with sexuality there is absolutely no skillful way it can be used for the goal of the holy life. (A:ÑB 294 n60)

The Aṅguttara Commentary says that the nun sends for Ānanda because she is in love with him (AA 1:136). Perceiving the nun's state of mind, Ānanda spoke to her gently on the foulness of the body to free her from her passions. The (Taṇhā) Bhikkhuṇī Sutta contains the expression, "the destruction of the bridge" (*setu,ghāta*) [§§3, 7], evidently, a metaphor exhorting that a monastic should uproot all sexual desire.

The (Taṇhā) Bhikkhuṇī Sutta should be studied with the story of **Vakkali** (on homosexuality),[1] and the following suttas:

The Saññoga Sutta (A 7.48),[2] where the Buddha explains how sexual feelings arise.

The Alaggadûpama Sutta (M 22),[3] where Ariṭṭha thinks that it is all right for monastic to indulge is sex since some of the sensual pleasures are permissible to lay-followers, even those who are stream-winners. The Buddha's reply is very clear:

> "Indeed monks, it is impossible that one can indulge in sensual pleasures without sensual desires, without perception of sensual desire, without thought of sensual desire!" (M 22.9/1:133)

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[1] See **Vakkali S** (S 22.87/3:119-124) = SD 8.8.
[2] A 7.48/4:57-59 = SD 8.7.
[3] M 22/1:130-142) = SD 3.13.

The Discourse to a Nun (on Craving)

(A 4.159/2:144-146)

1a At one time the venerable Ānanda was dwelling in Ghosita's Park near Kosambī.

Now at that time, a certain nun summoned a man and told him:

"Go, my good man, and meet the venerable Ānanda. Salute him on my behalf and say to him thus:

'Venerable sir, a nun of such and such a name has fallen sick, she is in pain, and gravely ill. She pays her homage at the feet of the venerable Ānanda.'

And then say this:

'It would be good, venerable sir, if the venerable Ānanda would, out of compassion, visit the nunnery and meet that nun.'"[4]

"Yes, venerable sister," the man replied, and he went to the venerable Ānanda.

1b Then, having approached **[145]** the venerable Ānanda, he saluted him and sat down at one side. Seated thus at one side, he said this:[5]

"Venerable sir, a nun of such and such a name has fallen sick, she is in pain, and gravely ill. She pays her homage at the feet of the venerable Ānanda. It would be good, venerable sir, if the venerable Ānanda would, out of compassion, visit the nunnery and meet that nun.

The venerable Ānanda consented by his silence.

2 Then in the morning, the venerable Ānanda, having dressed himself and taking robe and bowl, went to the nunnery.

When the nun saw the venerable Ānanda coming in the distance, she covered her head and lay down on her couch.

Then, having approached the nun, the venerable Ānanda sat down on the prepared seat. Seated thus, the venerable Ānanda said this to the nun:

3 "Sister, this body has come into being through food. Yet, based on food, food can be abandoned.[6]

Sister, this body has come into being through craving. Yet, based on craving, craving can be abandoned.

Sister, this body has come into being through conceit. Yet, based on conceit, conceit can be abandoned.

Sister, this body has come into being through the sexual act; and regarding the sexual act, the Blessed One has advised the destruction of that bridge.[7]

4 It has been said:

'**Sister, this body has come into being through food. Yet, based on food, food can be abandoned.**'

In reference to what is this said?

Here, sister, a monk, with wise attention, takes food

not for the sake of enjoyment,
not for sake of indulgence [being intoxicated],
not for the sake of beautifying oneself,
not for the sake of making oneself attractive,

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[4] Comy says that the nun has sent for Ānanda because she is in love with him (AA 1:136).

[5] Comy: Perceiving the nun's state of mind, Ānanda spoke to her gently on the foulness of the body to free her from her passions.

[6] On food (*āhāra*), see **Āhāra S** (S 46.51) = SD 7.15.

[7] "The destruction of that bridge," *setu,ghāta.* (Lit "the destruction of the bridge." I have rendered it here by sense.) Evidently, this is a metaphor that a monastic should uproot all sexual desire. "The point of Ānanda's discourse is that even food, craving and conceit, which are normally factors of bondage, can be skillfully employed to attain arahantship; but with sexuality there is absolutely no skillful way it can be used for the goal of the holy life." (A:ÑB 294 n60)

but only for the upkeep and sustenance of the body,
for keeping it from harm,
as a support for the holy life, thinking:
'Thus shall I end the old feelings (of hunger) and shall not rouse new feelings,
and I shall be healthy and blameless and live at ease.'[8]
Then some time later, based on food, he abandons food.
It is in this reference that it is said,
'Sister, this body has come into being through food. Yet, based on food, food can be abandoned.'

5 It has been said:

'**Sister, this body has come into being through craving. Yet, based on craving, craving can be abandoned.**' **[146]**

In reference to what is this said?
Here, sister, a monk, hears it said:
'They say that a monk of such and such a name, by the destruction of the cankers, here and now, enters and dwells in the cankerless liberation of mind and liberation by wisdom, having realized it for himself through direct knowledge.'
Then he thinks:
'O, when shall I too realize the cankerless liberation of mind and liberation by wisdom, having realized it for myself through direct knowledge?'
Then some time later, based on craving, he abandons craving.[9]
It is in this reference that it is said,
'Sister, this body has come into being through craving. Yet, based on craving, craving can be abandoned.'

6 It has been said:

'**Sister, this body has come into being through conceit. Yet, based on conceit, conceit can be abandoned.**'

In reference to what is this said?
Here, sister, a monk, hears it said:
'They say that a monk of such and such a name, by the destruction of the cankers, here and now, enters and dwells in the cankerless liberation of mind and liberation by wisdom, having realized it for himself through direct knowledge.'
Then he thinks:
'O, when shall I too realize the cankerless liberation of mind and liberation by wisdom, having realized it for myself through direct knowledge?'
Then some time later, based on conceit, he abandons conceit.[10]
It is in this reference that it is said,
'Sister, this body has come into being through conceit. Yet, based on conceit, conceit can be abandoned.'

7 '**Sister, this body has come into being through the sexual act; and regarding the sexual act, the Blessed One has advised the destruction of that bridge.**'

8 Then the nun rose from her couch, arranged her upper robe on one shoulder, fell at the feet of the venerable Ānanda, and said this:

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[8] This formula is one of the four reflections on the monk's requisites (*paccaya*): robes, food, lodging and medicine. Comy notes that based on the present intake of material food, that he partakes of wisely attentive, he abandons the "food" that is previous karma. The craving for the present material food, too, has to be abandoned. (AA 3:136)

[9] *Taṇhaṁ nissāya taṇhaṁ pajahati.* Comy says that based on the present craving based on the present "craving" to become an arhat, one abandons the previous craving. (AA 3:136)

[10] *Mānaṁ nissāya mānaṁ pajahati.* Comy: Hurt by one's conceit that another had attained arhathood, one works towards arhathood oneself. (AA 3:137)

"Venerable sir, I have committed an offence[11] when I behaved in such a foolish manner, in such a confused manner, in such an unwholesome manner!

May the venerable Ānanda accept this confession of the offence and pardon me, so that I may restrain myself in the future!"[12]

"Truly, sister, you have committed an offence when you behaved in such a foolish manner, in such a confused manner, in such an unwholesome manner.

But, sister, because you see your offence as such and make amends in accordance with the Dharma, we accept your confession.

For, sister, it is a cause of growth in the Dharma and Discipline of the noble ones when, seeing an offence as such, one makes amends in accordance with the Dharma and shows restraint in the future."

—evaṁ—

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[11] *accaya.*

[12] *Accayo maṁ bhante accagamā yathā.bālaṁ yathā,mūḷhaṁ yathā,akusalaṁ sāham evaṁ akāsiṁ. Tassā me bhante ayyo Ānando accayaṁ accayato paṭiggaṇhātu āyatiṁ saṁvarāyâ ti.* Both this confession and the foll para (Ānanda's response) are stock monastic formula used when confessing transgressions (V 1:314 4:18-19). For more references, see CPD: *accaya.*. See **Sāmaññ,phala S** (D 2.99 f/1:87); **Vuṭṭha S** (A 9.11.6/4:378).