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## The concept of Kāma (Lust) in early buddhism

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### Abstract

The religious, cultural and philosophical sources bear ample testimony to the fact that the term sensuous lust (*kāma*) has been discussed broadly and differently among the Indian thinkers and philosopher since the pre-Vaidik and Vaidika eras. This word has been in usage in other sources of external meanings as well as in religious and cultural meanings. Sensuous lust (*kāma*) is an inherent and intrinsic characteristic in human mind and it is a natural element, phenomenon and mental state common to all people. It is impossible to discuss the nature of human behaviour leaving aside the concept of sensual lust (*kāma*) which is closely associated with psychology, ethics and epistemology in the philosophy in both the Orient and the Occident.

**Keyword:** Kāma, pema, raga, tanha, Saṃsāra

### Introduction

There are many synonyms and similar usages for the term sensual lust (*kāma*) found in the early Buddhism and in subsequent Buddhist sources. They are desire, craving, love, longing, yearning, greed, carnal love, inclination, avarice etc. Sensuous lust (*Kāma*) literally means the wish for satisfying and gratifying the sensual desires and sense organs. This meaning is intended in the discussion done in this short study. Because we like something, it is called sensual lust (*kāma*)<sup>[1]</sup>. What do we like? We like figures and forms (*rūpa*) that satisfy and please our eyes, odour and scent that satisfy and please our nose and tangibles and touches that satisfy our body. Sensual lust (*Kāma*) can be introduced as liking, longing, desire, covetousness, penchant, happiness and affection, attachment, greed, predilection and carnal love etc. Going beyond the recognized and accepted standards and norms of sexuality between men and women is considered to be sexual misconduct and moral turpitude and it is closely connected to lay life. Nobody can deny the fact that proper management and control of sexual desires would be greatly conducive and helpful for the good survival and happiness of the people in the world. Sexual desires not properly controlled and managed would invariably affect the decline and deterioration of both the society and the individual.

India during the time of the Buddha was teeming and rife with a wide range of religious philosophies, beliefs, various tenets, heresies, creeds, credos and dogmas and they created a multiplicity and array of truths. Buddhism introduces them as a net of views and net of ideologies<sup>[2]</sup>. There were many thinkers and philosophers who argued in different ways based on the tradition, worldly experience and logic asserting “this itself is the truth and all others are false and fake” and “my point of argument is true” and “your point of argument is false”<sup>[3]</sup>.

Leaving aside religion, philosophy, culture, norms and mores, materialists believe only in what is cognizable by the senses. They directed, motivated and guided people towards the enjoyment of sensual desires and pleasures and material pleasures which are introduced as sophism, materialism or *Cārvakāvāda*. They are introduced in Buddhism as annihilationist (*uccheda vadeen*) who propagated the concept of hedonism and other *Ajithakesakambala* ideals. *Ajithakesakambala* who accepted that man is composed of the four great elements i.e. earth, water, fire and air induced, incited and compelled people to enjoy material and sensual pleasures and all other comforts and luxuries in life. This is considered a kind of eternalism (*śhāsvatha vādāya*). This is introduced as ten-fold pernicious false beliefs and views (*miccā drusti*). *Ajithakesakambala* further goes on to say that when man who is composed of the four elements dies, the earthly elements returns and relapses into earth and the fiery element returns and relapses into fire and so are the other two elements too. What remains is only the ash of the dead man.

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They believed and accepted only matter alone as real and they do not accept spiritual and moral attainment and purification nor do they accept the existence or becoming after death <sup>[4]</sup>.

In the very first discourse (*Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*) of the Buddha, the first principle that should not be practiced by an ascetic is the Self-indulgence which means not to get addicted, attached and glued to sensual pleasures and desires <sup>[6]</sup> and not to indulge in them <sup>[7]</sup>. Sensuous lust (*kāma*) is a volition, mental state, immoral deed and misdeed and it is the first one mentioned in the discourse of the three immoral volitions (*akusala cetanā*) and the other two are anger or aversion (*vyāpāda*) and violence or cruelty (*vihiṃsā*). The doctrine of the Buddha which is described as 'going against the stream' (*patisothagāmi*) persuades and compels ordinary people to develop renunciation (*nekkhamma*), non-enmity (*avyāpāda*) and non-violence (*avihiṃsā*) which are diametrically opposed to anger or aversion (*vyāpāda*) and violence or cruelty (*vihiṃsā*) <sup>[8]</sup>. Sensuous lust or sense desires (*kāma*) is also introduced as a kind of concept in Buddhism and it too is of three-fold i.e. lust or sense desires (*kāma*), anger or aversion (*vyāpāda*) and violence or cruelty (*vihiṃsā*). Buddhism directs and guides to develop renunciation (*nekkhamma*), non-enmity (*avyāpāda*) and non-violence (*avihiṃsā*) <sup>[9]</sup>. It is mentioned in Pali canon that lust is an erotic and salacious mental state that arise in a person <sup>[10]</sup>. According to Buddhism, ignorant ordinary human beings are washed away in a four-fold strong deluge and stream of water subjecting themselves to diverse sufferings. They are introduced as four-fold flood of water <sup>[11]</sup> (*caturoga*). The first one is the flood of lust, and the other three are flood of becoming or realms (*bhava*), view or vision (*ditti*) and ignorance (*avijjā*). These torrents or floods (*oga*) are introduced as defilements or passions (*āsava*) elsewhere. Defilements (*āsava*) are called passions or desires. Here too, the first one in the list of defilement is sensuous lust or sense desires (*kāma*) <sup>[12]</sup>. All physical objects included into the sense sphere (*kāma vacara*) are called desire for material wealth (*vastu kāma*). Lust or desire for defilements (*kilesa kāma*) means lust, carnal love, concupiscence, lasciviousness, libido, eroticism, love, sexiness etc <sup>[13]</sup>.

Apparently sensuous lust or sense desires (*kāma*) are of five kinds. They are figures and forms (*rupa*), sound, (*śabda*) scent and odour, (*gandha*) taste (*rasa*) and contact and touch (*sparsha*) all of which should be experienced by eye, ear, nose, tongue and body respectively <sup>[14]</sup>. Accordingly, the five sense desires are lust for figures and forms (*rupa*), sound, scent and odour, taste and contact and touch. In this same sense, gratification and pleasing of eye, ear, nose, tongue and body is meant by five sense desires (*panca kāma*). Because of our liking and being desirous is meant that we are bound <sup>[15]</sup>.

The Buddha preaches His doctrine in a regular and sequential order i.e. from simplicity to complexity <sup>[16]</sup> (*anupubbāsikkhā*, *anupubbakiriyā* and *anupubbapatipadā*). First, He teaches about generosity (*dāna*), secondly virtuous conduct or morality (*sīla*) and thirdly teaches how to experience divine pleasures and bliss <sup>[17]</sup>.

All happy sensations and feelings are temporary enchantments, enjoyments and pleasures. (it will exist for a short time and later turn into a big suffering and grief) They will bring about exertions and endeavours and its bad effects and dangers are many <sup>[18]</sup>. A bird that flies in the sky with a piece of flesh held in its beak suffers from the fear of being killed or nearly being killed. Sensual desires (*kāma*) bring about and cause sufferings, immense physical and mental exertions, endeavors and strains to man. In the same way that

a man who with a flaming torch walks against the direction of the wind suffers, in the same way a man pushed into a pit of coals with burning inferno suffers, in the same way that a man who sees lovely and alluring scenes in his dreams suffers when he doesn't see those fascinating sceneries when he is awake, in the same way that a man who returns something borrowed suffers from being deprived of it and in the same way that a man being in a tree and eating the fruits of it suffers from the fear of that tree being cut down by another man, sensual desires (*kāma*) bring about and cause sufferings, immense physical and mental exertions, endeavors and strains to man <sup>[19]</sup>.

Buddhism which teaches that lustful and sensuous mental states cause fear and grief clearly indicates and points out that a person completely devoid of these sinful and immoral mental states suffers no fear, grief and sorrow <sup>[20]</sup>. The person who becomes displeased and insatiable for the enjoyment of sensual pleasures finally dies with dissatisfaction <sup>[21]</sup>.

According to Buddhism the whole world rests on a mass heap of suffering. All people being blind-folded with ignorance and intoxicated and entwined by craving live with the suffering of birth, decay and death. Hindrances (*nivarana*) are those states and elements of defilements (*kilesa dharma*) that preclude, prevent and blocks the way for the escape from the senseless, squalid and filthy life which is replete with grief and sorrow and to gain real and true redemption and deliverance from all kinds of sufferings. All good and meritorious deeds that would definitely pave the way for spiritual development and for attaining *Nirvana* are called wholesome or moral deeds (*kusal*). Hindrances (*nivarana*) serve to deter, discourage and dissuade the determination, potentiality, energy and perseverance that one possesses to further develop the already existing merits and to generate new merits. This negative force by hindrances (*nivarana*) makes the person a weak, feeble and less courageous one. Hindrances (*nivarana*) are those states of defilements (*kilesa dharma*) that eclipse and cover merits, suppress the mind and hinder and impede the growth of wisdom and the development of mind <sup>[22]</sup>.

Sense desire (*kāmacchanda*) simply means strong sexual desire (*rāga*) and urge. Except for the attachment to Realms of Forms (*rupa rāga*) and attachment to Formless Realms (*arupa rāga*), all other kinds of craving are similar to sense desire (*kāmacchanda*). Although there are five hindrances (*nivarana*), it is mostly associated with sense desire (*kāmacchanda*) <sup>[23]</sup>. Hindrance of sense desire (*kāmacchanda nivarana*) is compared in Buddhism to a loan taken on interest. As a person takes a loan on interest and starts a business and if his business becomes successful and pays all his loans, and if he has some money left behind, it will be utilized for his family, and he may thus think and be happy, "I borrowed a loan and started a business and I have made some profit out of it.", an ascetic in the same way becomes happy by destroying sense desires <sup>[24]</sup>.

According to the words of the Buddha, both Self-indulgence and Self-mortification are extreme practices and they should not be practiced and followed. In the Discourse of Blessings (*Mangala Sutta*) by the Buddha, it is emphasized that an ascetic should not in any way adhere and follow none of these two extremes, instead they should be forsaken <sup>[25]</sup>.

Asceticism is purely for the attainment of *Nirvāna*. Leaving everything including one's lay life, material wealth, cultivation and crops and their relatives, one enters into a life of a recluse in the Holy Order (*sāsana*) and receives ordination to develop virtues and moral practices that lead to achieve his final goal <sup>[26]</sup>. It is the ascetic who understands

and sees the enjoyment, dangers and evil consequences of the sensual pleasures and understands the escape from them as well. There are many discourses (*Suttas*) that persuades and motivate the disciples for this purpose. There are also decrees, diktats and edicts imposed (*Suttas*) in the Basket of Discipline (*Vinaya Pitakaya*) that persuades and motivate the disciples for non-sensuality. Those who entered the Holy Order (*sāsana*) and were ordained in it must be more inclined towards being non-sensuality. They are sublime, noble and holy (*Brahmacāri*) in conduct. They prevented themselves from living a life of luxury, extravagance and comforts including enjoying dance, music, songs, bearing fragrant flowers, comfortable beds and couches, wearing gold and silver and anything associated with the five sense desires. All the disciples living in this Holy Order (*sāsana*) practice the Sublime Conduct (*Brahmacariyāwa*)<sup>[27]</sup>. They detest and loath sensual desires and the Buddha admonished them to live in dispassion, non-attachment and without grasping.

Once a layman who met the Buddha and briefly described his sensuous domestic life being spent requested Him to preach a suitable discourse to him. He thus said “Venerable Sir, we live a very comfortable life filled with all luxuries and comforts, we wear very costly and smooth and soft clothes and enjoy fragrant perfumes and unguents, wear garlands, use gold and silver ornaments.” It is apparent that enjoying sensual pleasures is a key feature in lay life<sup>[29]</sup>. It is mentioned in *Dhamma* that the lay life is the breeding ground and foundation that causes lust, aversion and ignorance<sup>[30]</sup>. Craving and burning desire for jewelry, gems, affection and love for offspring etc. are the fetters and bonds of lay life<sup>[31]</sup>. According to the practice in the Holy Order (*sāsana*), practicing the morality of Five Precepts, *Upostha* Eight Precepts, and other kinds of virtuous conduct (*sila*) should be done by the householder<sup>[32]</sup>. Accordingly, there is no objection for him to enjoy the sensuous pleasures within the righteous and moral limits. In the *Mangala*, *Parābhava*, *Vyagghapajja* and *Vasala Suttas* is found the code of conduct and ethics prescribed for laymen. They are introduced as discipline (*Vinaya*). The way or the path of the layman leading to *Nirvana* is slow and tardy. His journey and trek towards *Nirvana* without leaving sensual pleasures and bonds and fetters is like the gait and deportment of that of a peacock<sup>[33]</sup>. The main cause and factors that contributed for the deterioration and decline of the peaceful, virtuous and righteous, happy, moderate and simple life style and existence was the craving that developed in human mind in the course of social evolution. With the social evolution, society became more complex, replete with misconduct, misdeeds, inequalities, impurities and irregularities. This negative and intolerant tendency which developed gradually in the society is what scholars identified as social suffering, travails and grief. Longing, craving, strong liking, burning desires, greediness and lust became the basis for this miserable state<sup>[34]</sup>. A line cannot be drawn between the expectation and aspiration for five sensual desires and the craving based on the enjoyment of those sensuous desires. This in turn demands security measures. Brawls, fracas, scuffles, fights, blames, arguments and altercations arise<sup>[35]</sup>. How conflicts, problems, strife, discord, disagreement and crimes and many other various bad consequences occur due to sensual desires is mentioned in a discourse as follows.

“Because of sensual desires, kings and kings confront, clash and argue with one another. So do Brahmins and clansmen, mother and son, son and mother, father and son and son and father and brothers and sisters. In the course of their

arguments and clashes, they attack and strike each other with cudgels, clubs, weapons etc. and they are killed and they all suffer from the fear of being nearly killed”.

Thus Buddhism shows the evil effects and consequences of sensual desires and how people suffers from them. It is mentioned in Buddhism how man is compelled to commit killing, stealing and etc. and to do all others all other nefarious and immoral misdeeds due to sensual desires and how they are punished by the king and how they are subjected to immense suffering even after their death<sup>[36]</sup>. A Buddhist has the freedom of enjoying sensual pleasures within the accepted frame of decorum and propriety. Buddhism does not approve the notion that the Highest Bliss can be achieved by enjoying sensual pleasures to the maximum. The Nobles like Buddha who followed the Middle-Path live without being addicted to sensual pleasures and without harboring enmity and aversion among those people affected by them<sup>[37]</sup>.

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