

Buddhism, Sex, and Relationships

1. As Ron mentioned in the past week, last semester, we talked more about the heavier aspects of Buddhism- things like the aspects of the eightfold path, the four noble truths and so on.
 - a. In many ways, sex is a basic driving force in us mammals, and for the most part, sex and relationships can get us in all sorts of trouble.
 - i. So sex is rather a staple for religions in general
 - ii. And you see it dealt with in some depth, quite often
2. So we thought many of you would be curious about Buddhism's attitudes to sex and relationships and so on.
 - a. Today, I want to talk about
 - i. The Buddhist Attitude to Sex
 - ii. The Buddhist Attitude to Relationships
3. Buddhism's approach to the question of sex is, fundamentally, different to that of other religions in general
 - a. As with all other aspects of Theravada Buddhism, there are no "Rules and Punishments"
 - i. There are no lists of kinds of acceptable sexuality
 - b. For Buddhism, sex is sex, and Buddhism does not distinguish between sexual orientation, sexual preferences, etc.
 - i. In fact, the pali word that is associated with sexuality, (Pali being the language the Buddha spoke) is Kama,
 1. And Kama is closer to "sensual pleasure" than to just sexuality.
 2. All our senses wish to be pleased,
 - a. Whether they be the sense of sight
 - b. The sense of smell
 - c. The sense of taste and so on
 3. For the Buddhist, the sex drive is not distinct from these other sensual desires, and all of them are lumped together and addressed together.
 - ii. So Buddhism cautions against all sensual desire equally
 1. Of course, sexuality is indeed a unique problem, and as Ron wrote to me when I sent him the draft of this Dhamma talk
 - a. He mentioned that you don't really find flower addled people rolling around florists shops with lilies up their nose
 - b. So the idea that sexuality is indeed a unique issue is reflected by the fact that the Sangha is a celibate community.
 - c. At the same time though, in most of the therevada suttas, the Buddha does in fact refer to sexuality in the context of various other forms of sensual pleasure,
 - i. Things like gluttony, and so on...

- c. But I said before that there are no rules and Punishments
 - i. Let me Clarify
 - ii. As with everything else in Buddhism, the objective is awareness
 - 1. Awareness about the implications of whatever you engage in
 - iii. So what are the implications of sexuality?
 - d. Well, as in the case for other sensual pleasures, addiction to sex will have negative implications.
 - i. The parabhava Sutta (causes of downfall) says that one who is addicted to a life of debauchery will squander his earnings and wealth, and thus face downfall
 - 1. It also says that if one is not satisfied with one's own wife, and consorts with "Whores and the wives of others" that will lead to his downfall, presumably because this would cause him to have a diminished reputation in society
 - 2. It also mentions that if a person past his youth takes a teenager for a wife, that would cause downfall, because that person would not be able to sleep for jealousy!
 - ii. The vyaggapajja sutta says much the same thing
 - 1. Debauchery in sex, debauchery in drink, gambling and evil friendship drains one's store of wealth.
 - iii. It is important to note that the above two excerpts were from sermons the Buddha gave to lay people, which is why he addresses things like the loss of personal wealth.
4. So, what about Buddhism and "healthy relationships?"
- a. The interesting thing is that Theravada Buddhism doesn't focus on social engineering, and instead tends to focus on the individual, for the most part.
 - i. It studiously avoids laying down laws for society
 - ii. And so Buddhism has next to nothing to say about marriage
 - 1. In fact, where I come from, priests have no part in a marriage ceremony
 - 2. They might bless the newlyweds after the ceremony, but they do not officiate and have no say in anything that goes on as part of it.
 - 3. In contrast to Christianity, marriage is not any kind of "Sacrament"
 - b. So thus far, Buddhism sounds very permissive and open when it come to sexuality, and I hope that you're now asking yourself what the snag is.
 - i. Well, the issue is that when it comes to relationships in general
 - 1. They revolve around attachment
 - 2. Sexual or emotional pleasure is not inherently "Evil" or bad
 - 3. But attachment, according to the Buddha, tends to push one away from the path to enlightenment, and it is extremely hard to engage in relationships, be they sexual or emotional in nature, without becoming significantly attached

4. And Buddhism does warn that strong attachment does bring unpleasant consequences in future, at least with regard to the attainment of nibbana (or enlightenment)
 - a. At the same time though, like I said before, this is not a rule, but rather a condition that can help one make an informed decision about their life
 - b. Ron used a wonderful metaphor that I would like to steal: Carrying a backpack full of rocks isn't inherently bad, but if you are trying to climb a mountain quickly, it isn't going to help.
 - c. Likewise, relationships aren't inherently bad; they would just slow your journey to reaching enlightenment
5. And that's the best broad picture I could give about Buddhism, sex and relationships
 - a. That Buddhism does not lay down a list of ways to have and not to have sex
 - b. That it does not distinguish between sex and other sensual pleasures but cautions against all of these across the board
 - c. And that, at the end of the day, relationships, be they primarily emotional or sexual in nature, lead to attachment, which invariably leads to unpleasant consequences.
6. Ultimately, I believe that Buddhism is primarily concerned with the pursuit of enlightenment through the pursuit of the eightfold path
 - a. And the understanding of the four noble truths
 - b. If you follow the eightfold path, and as you begin to understand the four noble truths,
 - c. Everything else, sex and relationships included, fall into place