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## (Taṇhā) Bhikkhuṇī Sutta

The Discourse to a Nun (on Craving) | A 4.159

Theme: Fighting poison with poison

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2005, 2023

### 1 Introduction

**1.1 The (Taṇhā) Bhikkhuṇī Sutta** is a short instructive sutta of psychological interest, as it is one of the earliest historical mentions of “sublimation,” that is, an unconscious defence mechanism of channeling our unacceptable impulses (eg lust and conceit) in acceptable ways.<sup>1</sup> 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)

**1.2 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 speaks 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.

**1.3 The (Taṇhā) Bhikkhuṇī Sutta** should be studied with the story of **Vakkali** (on homosexuality),<sup>2</sup> and the following suttas:

**The Saññoga Sutta** (A 7.48),<sup>3</sup> where the Buddha explains how sexual feelings arise.

**The Alaggadūpama Sutta** (M 22),<sup>4</sup> where Ariṭṭha thinks that it is all right for monastics to indulge in sex since some of the sensual pleasures are permissible to lay-followers, even those who are streamwinners. The Buddha’s reply is very clear:

“Indeed, bhikshus, 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), SD 3.13

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<sup>1</sup> On unconscious defence mechanisms, see **Khaluṅka S** (A 8.14/4:190-195), SD 7.9; also SD 24.10b (2).

<sup>2</sup> See **Vakkali S** (S 22.87/3:119-124), SD 8.8.

<sup>3</sup> A 7.48/4:57-59 (SD 8.7).

<sup>4</sup> M 22/1:130-142 (SD 3.13).

## (Taṇhā) Bhikkhuṇī Sutta

### The Discourse to a Nun (on Craving)

A 4.159

#### A nun falls in love with Ānanda

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

Then, a certain nun summoned a certain man and told him:

"Come, my good man, go and meet the noble Ānanda.<sup>5</sup> Then, salute the venerable Ānanda on my behalf with your head at his feet and say to him thus:

'Bhante, a nun of such and such a name has fallen sick, she is in pain, and gravely ill. She pays homage with her head at the feet of the noble Ānanda.'

And then say this:

'It would be good, bhante, if the noble Ānanda would, out of compassion, visit the nunnery and meet that nun.'<sup>6</sup>

"Yes, ayya<sup>7</sup>," the man replied the nun in assent, and he approached the venerable Ānanda.

1.2 Then, having approached [145] the venerable Ānanda, he saluted him and sat down at one side. Seated thus at one side, he said this:<sup>8</sup>

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

The venerable Ānanda consented by his silence.

2 Then, the venerable Ānanda, having dressed himself and taking robe and bowl, went to the nun's quarters.<sup>9</sup>

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

#### Ānanda admonishes the nun

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

<sup>5</sup> *Ayyo ānando*. This mode of address is very rare, and here reflects the nun's infatuation with Ānanda.

<sup>6</sup> Comy says that the nun has sent for Ānanda because she is in love with him (AA 1:136).

<sup>7</sup> *Ayyā*, the nun's equivalent of *bhante* (a polite way of addressing a monastic, esp a senior monastic).

<sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> *Atha kho āyasmā ānando nivāsetvā patta, cīvaram ādāya yena bhikkhunūpassayo ten'upasaṅkami*.

3 “Sister, this **body** has come into being through **food**.<sup>10</sup>  
 It is dependent on food, food should be abandoned.<sup>11</sup>  
 Sister, this *body* has come into being through **craving**.  
 It is dependent on *craving*, craving should be abandoned.<sup>12</sup>  
 Sister, this body has come into being through **conceit**.  
 It is dependent on *conceit*, conceit should be abandoned.  
 Sister, this body has come into being through **a sexual act**;  
 and regarding *the sexual act*, the Blessed One  
 has advised the destruction of that bridge.<sup>13</sup>

*āhāra,sambhūto ayaṃ bhagini kāyo*  
*āhāraṃ nissāya āharo pahatabbo*  
*taṇhā,sambhūto ayaṃ bhagini kāyo*  
*taṇhaṃ nissāya taṇhā pahātabbā*  
*māna,sambhūto ayaṃ bhagini kāyo,*  
*mānaṃ nissāya māno pahātabbo*  
*methuna,sambhūto ayaṃ bhagini kāyo*  
*methune ca setu,ghāto*  
*vutto bhagavatā.*

## The body arises from food

4 When this is said:

*‘Sister, this body has come into being through **food**.  
 It is dependent on food, food should be abandoned.’*

4.2 In reference to what is this said?

Here, sister, a monk, wisely reflecting, takes food<sup>14</sup>

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,  
 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.’<sup>15</sup>

4.3 Then some time later, *based on food, he abandons food.*

When this is said:

<sup>10</sup> The suttas speak of 4 kinds of food (*āhāra*): (1) material food (*kabalīṅkārahāra*), (2) contact (*phassāhāra*), (3) volition (*mano,sañcetanāhāra*) and (4) consciousness (*viññāṇāhāra*). See (**Bojjhaṅga**) **Āhāra S** (S 46.51), SD 7.15.

<sup>11</sup> *Āhāraṃ nissāya āharo pahatabbo.*

<sup>12</sup> Explained in §5 below.

<sup>13</sup> “The destruction of that bridge,” *setu,ghāta*. (Lit “the destruction of the bridge.” I have rendered it here by its sense.) Evidently, this is a metaphor reminding us 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)

<sup>14</sup> This reflection is one of the 4 on the use of monastic supports (robes, food, shelter and medicine) (see **Sabb’āsava S**, M 2,13-16/1:10 (SD 30.3) and found by itself at **Mahā Assa,pura S** (M 39,9/1:273), SD 10.13; **Sekha S** (M 53,9/1:355), SD 21.14; **Gaṇaka Moggallāna S** (M 107,5/3:2), SD 56.3; **Sāriputta Saddhi,vihārika S** (S 35.129/4:104); **Rathōpama S** (S 35.239/4:176, 177), SD 55.14; **Apaṇṇaka Paṭipada S** (A 3.16/1:114), SD 74.11; **Aparihāna S** (A 4.37,4/2:40); **(Taṇhā) Bhikkhuṇī S** (A 4.159,4/2:145), SD 10.14; **Nanda S** (A 8.9,3/4:167); **Nm** 1:240, 241, 368×2, 484; **Nc:Be** 292; **Dhs** 231; **Vbh** 249; **Pug** 25.

<sup>15</sup> 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)

*‘Sister, this body has come into being through **food**.  
It is dependent on food, food should be abandoned.’*

It is in reference to this that this is said.

### The body arises through craving

5 When this is said:

*‘Sister, this body has come into being through **craving**.<sup>16</sup>  
It is dependent on craving, craving should be abandoned.’<sup>17</sup> [146]*

5.2 In reference to what is this said?

Here, sister, a monk, hears:

*‘They say that a monk of such and such a name,  
by realizing for himself through direct knowledge, right here and now,  
with the destruction of the mental influxes,  
attains and dwells in the influx-free<sup>18</sup> freedom of mind, freedom by wisdom.’<sup>19</sup>*

5.3 Then, he thinks:

*‘O, when shall I, too,  
by realizing for myself through direct knowledge, right here and now,  
with the destruction of the mental influxes,  
attain and dwell in the influx-free freedom of mind, freedom by wisdom?’*

5.4 Then, some time later, based on craving, he abandons craving.<sup>20</sup>

When this is said:

*‘Sister, this body has come into being through craving.  
It is dependent on craving, craving should be abandoned.’*

It is in reference to this that this is said.

<sup>16</sup> See **Mahā Taṇhā,saṅkhaya S** (M 38,15-16/1:261,5), SD 7.10 (cf M 38,9).

<sup>17</sup> *Taṇhā,sambhūto ayaṃ bhagini kāyo, taṇhaṃ nissāya taṇhā pahātabbā ti*. This is related to §3.

<sup>18</sup> “Influx-free” (*anasava*), ie, free from being conditioned by the mental influxes (*āsavaṇaṃ apaccaya,bhūtaṃ*, SA 2:174). The older suttas mention 3 influxes (*āsava*), those of sensual lust (*kāma’sava*), existence (*bhava’sava*) and ignorance (*avijjā’sava*), **D 2**,99.1 n (SD 8.10); **M 11**,9 n (SD 7.13); SD 56.4 (3.8). The late suttas gives 4 influxes, adding that of “views” (*diṭṭh’āsava*) as no 3, thus: *kāma’sava bhava’sava diṭṭh’āsava avijjā’sava*: SD 30.3 (1.3.2).

<sup>19</sup> “The freedom of mind, freedom by wisdom,” *ceto,vimuttiṃ paññā,vimuttiṃ*. This is not a dvandva, but a single conjunct cpd that describes the same state, arhathood. Comy explains “the freedom of mind” (*ceto,vimutti*) as the attainment of the fruition of arhathood (*arahatta,phala,samāpatti*), and “the freedom by wisdom” (*paññā,vimutti*) as the wisdom of the fruition of arhathood (*arahatta,phala,paññā*) (SA 2:174). A common term for both aspects is “freed both ways” (*ubhato,bhāga vimutta*): see **Mahā,nidāna S** (D 15,36,2), SD 5.17. On the 2 kinds of freedom, see **Jhānābhiññā S** (S 16.9,29 n), SD 50.7. In the tenfold rightness (*sammatta*) of the path, *ceto,vimutti* is “right freedom” (*sammā vimutti*) and *paññā,vimutti* is “right knowledge” (*sammā ñāṇa*). Here, “freedom” refers to the 8 attainments (*attha,samāpatti*)—the 4 form dhyanas and the 4 formless attainments—mastered by the full-fledged arhat. The actual awakening is denoted by *sammā,ñāṇa*: see SD 10.16 (9+10). On *ceto,vimutti* as the mind’s freedom from the hindrances, see SD 38.5 (8.3).

<sup>20</sup> *Taṇhaṃ nissāya taṇhaṃ pajahati*. Comy says that based on the present “craving” to become an arhat, one abandons the previous craving. (AA 3:136)

## The body arises through conceit

6 When this is said:

‘Sister, this body has come into being through **conceit**.

It is dependent on conceit, conceit should be abandoned.’

6.2 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 realizing for himself through direct knowledge, right here and now,*

*with the destruction of the mental influxes,*

*attains and dwells in the influx-free freedom of mind, freedom by wisdom.*’

6.3 Then, he thinks:

‘O, when shall I, too,

*by realizing for myself through direct knowledge, right here and now,*

*with the destruction of the mental influxes,*

*attain and dwell in the influx-free freedom of mind, freedom by wisdom?*’

6.4 Then some time later, based on conceit, he abandons conceit.<sup>21</sup>

When this is said:

‘Sister, this body has come into being through **conceit**.

It is dependent on conceit, conceit should be abandoned.’

It is in reference to this that this is said.

## The sexual act is a bridge for rebirths

7 ‘Sister, this body has come into being through a **sexual act**;

and regarding the sexual act, the Blessed One has advised **the destruction of that bridge**.’<sup>22</sup>

## The nun seeks forgiveness

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:

‘Bhante, I have transgressed,<sup>23</sup> to have so foolishly, so confusedly, so unskillfully behaved as I did.

Bhante, may the noble Ānanda accept my transgression as a transgression, so that I may show restraint henceforth!’<sup>24</sup>

8.2 ‘Truly, sister, you have transgressed, to have so foolishly, so confusedly, so unskillfully behaved as you did.

But, sister, since you see your transgression as a transgression and make amends in accordance with the Dharma, we accept it.

<sup>21</sup> *Mānaṃ nissāya mānaṃ pajahati*. Comy: Hurt by one’s conceit that another had attained arhathood, one works towards arhathood oneself. (AA 3:137)

<sup>22</sup> *Methuna,sambhūto ayaṃ bhagini kayo methuno ca setu,ghato vutto bhagavata ti*.

<sup>23</sup> *accaya*.

<sup>24</sup> *Accayo maṃ bhante accagamā yathā.bālaṃ yathā,mūlhaṃ yathā,akusalaṃ sāham evaṃ akāsiṃ. Tassā me bhante ayyo Ānando accayaṃ accayato paṭiggaṇhātu āyatiṃ samvarāyā 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). Cf Ajāta,-sattu’s confession in **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2,99 f/1:87) & SD 8.10 (6).

For, sister, it is progress in the discipline of the noble ones when, having seen a transgression as a transgression, one makes amends in accordance with the Dharma, and shows restraint henceforth.”<sup>25</sup>

— evaṃ —

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<sup>25</sup> See **Dhātu Vibhaṅga S** (M 140,33/3:246 f), SD 4.17.