



**THE PREVARICATION OVER SEXUALITY IN MYANMAR THERAVĀDIN
CULTURE IN CONTEXT WITH SEX EDUCATION****Komala****Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Buddhist Studies, Acharya Nagarjuna University,
Nagarjuna Nagar, Guntur, AP, India.****ABSTRACT:**

This study critically examines the misinterpretation of Buddhist canonical terms such as Hīna, Asaddhamma and Vasala in the Myanmar Theravāda culture, which has contributed to the stigmatization of sexuality and the construction of Sex as intrinsic wicked, evil, or sinful. Through involvement with canonical sources such as the Vinayapiṭaka, Dīgha Nikāya, and Majjhima Nikāya, in addition to modern scholarships, the essay shows that Buddhist ethics evaluates sexuality does not as a metaphysical sin, but in terms of healthy and unfavorable mental states. Misreadings have cultural shame, resistance to sex education, and widespread social damage, including unsafe abortion, victim-guilt, and the vulnerability of women and adolescents to exploitation. By situating sexuality in the Buddhist framework of kusala and akusala instead of sin, and by recovering a hermeneutic of compassion and responsibility, the essay states that comprehensive sex education is not only a social necessity, but also in accordance with The ethical goals of Buddhism.



KEYWORDS: Methuna, asaddhamma, hīna, vasala, evil, sin, shame culture, stigmatization, sex education, public health, patriarchy, victim blaming, embarrassment, exploitation, safety, respect, right, responsibility, cultural misinterpretation, mindful discipline.

INTRODUCTION

The ethical status of sexuality in Buddhism is not to be reduced to cultural prohibitions or simply moralizing, but must be within the broader philosophical framework of Buddhist soteriology. The central tension lies in how desire (*taṇhā*) and its manifestations especially sexual desire - are interpreted in relation to the path of liberation. The Buddha himself states in the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, the origin of suffering lies in "*taṇhā ponobhavikā nandirāgasahagatā*" "craving that leads to furthering, accompanied by delight and lust," suggesting that unrestricted desire is a root of existential bondage.

Nevertheless, the same canonical framework distinguishes between the obligations of the monastery cereal and the lay follower. The Theravāda tradition, by the Vinaya Piṭaka, explicitly requires monks to abandon sexual intercourse, declaring that "*methunaṃ dhammaṃ paṭisevati pārājiko hoti asaṃvāso*" One who engages in intercourse is defeated and no longer in the community,. However, for the laity, the Buddha only founded the third precept *kāmesu micchācārā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi* - which, as Gethin explains, not to sexuality as such refers but to "sexual abuse defined in

terms of damage, deceit, or exploitation". This distinction shows that the strict celibacy that was required of monks was never intended to impose on the laity, for whom sexual activity, as responsible and without harm, does not constitute a sin.

The philosophical problem arises when cultural interpretations collapse this distinction, and transforms monastic celibate into a universal prohibition. Bhikkhu Bodhi notes, "the misapplication of rules intended for monks for the general population distorts the moral compass of Buddhism, turning discipline into repression instead of liberation". The translation of pāli terms such as *hīna* ("low") or *vasala* ("outcaste") in categories of "worthlessness" or "evil" connects the problem, displacing the semantic register of contextual disciplinary advice to universal condemnation. In truth, as Richard Gombrich reminds us, Buddhist ethics is "intentionally rather than ontological: it evaluates acts by their roots in greed, hatred and delusion, not by their conformity with rigid taboo".

Therefore, the misinterpretation of sexuality in the Buddhist majority cultures like Myanmar does not reflect the essence of Buddhist morality, but a hermeneutic failure that has merged celibate ideals with laymen responsibilities. The philosophical interests of this failure are high: if Buddhism must remain true to its own principle of reducing suffering, then the canonical doctrine must be dissolved from cultural misinterpretation. In this way, sexuality should not be recognized as an embarrassing taboo, but as a field of moral cultivation where wisdom, compassion and responsibility are paramount.

BODY:

The Buddhist perspective on sexuality cannot be collapsed into categories of evil, sin, curse or vice. Rather, it works within a nuanced framework of intentional, unfavorable and soteriological gradation, where sexual activity may be allowed for laymen, but abandoned by monastics. The real ethical issue lies not in the act itself, but in the spiritual states that accompany it. Damien Keown clarifies, "sexual desire is not a problem in itself; what matters is the manner in which it is gratified and the consequences it produces. While Buddhist texts did not mark sex as intrinsically sinful, the historical fusion of Buddhist precepts with local patriarchal norms and moralism from the colonial era has led to excessive stigmatization of sexual activity. Philosophically, this underlines the danger of confusing culturally constructed morality with canonical ethics.

Peter Harvey makes it clear that the ethical principles of Buddhism should be understood in terms of intention, consequences and spiritual development, not in terms of arbitrary taboos. Thus, the real challenge for today's Theravāda societies is to dissolve canonical ethics from cultural moralism so that sexuality can be approached with honesty, mindfulness and responsibility instead of shame and oppression. The interpretation of Buddhist canonical terminology has always involved a subtle hermeneutic tension between philological precision and cultural reception. Nowhere is this more evident than in the case of the Vinayaṭṭaka, especially the episode regarding respectable Sudinna, who was punished for engaging in sexual intercourse with his former wife, despite entering the saṅgha. Myanmar monastic interpreters often equate such sexual abuse to categories of absolute moral evil, evoking terms such as *asaddhamma*, *hīna* and *vasala*. However, further research shows that such renderings are both linguistically inaccurate and doctrinally misleading, collapsed nuanced ethical distinctions in rigid moralistic condemnations.

The case of Sudinna appears in the Vinayaṭṭaka, Parajikakaṇḍa, where the Buddha declares that for the rest of his life Sudinna should be treated as defeated (*parājika*) and not in the communion. The term *parājika* gives here from the expulsion from the monastic community, neither eternal condemnation nor metaphysical sin. However, Myanmar interpreters often intensify this story by translating associated terms as "wicked" or "evil crimes", thereby importing a moral absolutism that is strange to the canonical text.

Peter Harvey clarifies, in Buddhism, the concept of 'sin' is absent; rather, actions are assessed unskillful (*akusala*) insofar as they maintain ignorance and desire. Thus, to equate Sudinna's offense with intrinsic evil is to misunderstand the canonical and ethical framework of the Vinaya. The term *hīna*, often illuminated in the use of Myanmar as "wick and evil," actually carries a more relative

meaning. K.R. Norman explains: "Hīna in Pali use generally means 'inferior, low, deficient', without connotations of moral decay." In the context of sexual abuse, the implication is not that the sexuality itself is intrinsic evil, but that the indulgence in it by a monk forms a reduction in spiritual aspiration, an abandonment of higher discipline. This interpretation connects to the Buddha's own framing of the path, where consideration is a pragmatic choice for liberation, not a universal moral law imposed on the lay society. Similarly, the term *asaddhamma* is often mistranslated in Myanmar as "immoral evil." However, philological evidence suggests a more nuanced view. In the *Saddhammapaṭirūpaka Sutta*, *Saddhamma*, true teaching, "the good dhamma" contrasts with *asaddhamma*, false or false teaching.

Rupert Gethin observes, "The term *saddhamma* does not emphasize moral virtue per se, but the peace and authenticity of the teachings of the Buddha, while *asaddhamma* a distortion or absence of that peace indicates." To combine *asaddhamma* with sexual immorality, therefore reflects a hermeneutic overextension, which misplaces doctrinal categories in ethical discussion. The case of the term '*vasala*' further shows the distortion of meaning. In the *Vasala Sutta*, the Buddha *vasala*, which is traditionally used in Brahman society, to point out "existences", not as a matter of birth, but of behavior: "Not by birth is one extinct, not by birth, one is a Brahman; by deeds one becomes extinct, through deeds one becomes a Brahman."

The implication is that *vasala* indicates exclusion based on adverse behavior, not metaphysical evil. However, in Myanmar cultural discussion, the term is reified as synonymous with "evil" itself, thereby extending its semantic range beyond canonical warrant. What emerges from these misinterpretations is a broader pattern of cultural moralization, where monastic codes intended for renunciants are imposed as universal standards for laymen society. This not only distorts canonical teaching, but also promotes social shame, as seen in Myanmar's stigmatization of sexual activity as "disgusting" or "criminal." Damien Keown notes, "Buddhist ethics, at its core, is neither deontological nor utilitarian, but a teleological virtue ethics, focused on the cultivation of healthy states of mind and the realization of *nirvāṇa*."

To reduce sexuality to wickedness, its place overlooks within the lay life, where the five precepts do not prohibit consensual sexual relations, but only sexual abuse defined in terms of harm. Thus, a good hermeneutics of *vinaya* terminology must resist cultural moralism and remain attentive to doctrinal nuance. Sexual activity is low (*hīna*) for monks because it undermines the pursuit of liberation, but it is not inherently evil for laymen. *Asaddhamma* gives deviation from peaceful dhamma, not criminal immorality. *Vasala* indicates exclusion through unfavorable acts, not eternal degradation. To regain these subtleties is to restore the semantic integrity of Buddhist ethics and prevent their distortion into oppressive moral absolutism.

The interpretation of sexuality within Buddhist majority societies is often colored by cultural biases and incorrect readings of canonical texts. In Myanmar, as in many Theravāda countries, sexual activity is often interpreted as intrinsic wicked, sinful or evil, not only for monks, but for the lay society in general. Such interpretations reflect neither the textual foundations of Buddhism nor their ethical intention, but rather the sedimentation of cultural shame and social fear of sexuality. The consequences of this distortion are grave: resistance to sex education, the stigmatization of women, the lack of protection for sex workers, and the increase of sexual violence and public health crises.

From a canonical point of view, the Buddha does not describe sex as a metaphysical sin. Instead, mistreatment is contextually defined, in terms of damage. The *sigālovāda sutta* prescribes to lay followers: "One must avoid sexual abuse, because it brings suffering to others." Here the ban is not against sex itself, but against exploitation, harm and damage, such as adultery or coercion. As Damien Keown makes it clear, "For Buddhism, the problem is not sexuality per se, but the unfavorable states of the mind may contain it; there is no idea of impurity or sin associated with sex in itself." Thus, treating any sexual activity as wickedness or evil is the imposition of a moral absolutism alien to Buddhist ethics. However, in Myanmar, sex is entangled with discussions of shame, fear and disgust, creating a culture that is hostile to sexual openness and education.

The anthropologist Ward Keeler notes, "Burman (or Myanmar) attitude towards sexuality tends to emphasize shyness, concealment and a sense of indecency, producing an atmosphere in which sexual

matters are left unspeaked and therefore not investigated." This cultural silence increases damage: Prostitution remains unprotected, sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS spread in the lack of prevention programs, and unsafe abortions are rampant. The stigmatization of sexuality therefore becomes not only a private matter of morality, but a disaster for public health. The lack of sex education further increases the exploitation and abuse. In a society where children as young as eleven or twelve enter puberty without systematic instruction, misinformation flourishes.

International studies confirm that "comprehensive sexuality education... is associated with delayed sexual initiation, reduced risk taking, and increased use of contraceptives." However, in Myanmar, sex education is often announced as pornography or immorality, a cultural error rooted in the misinterpretation of Buddhist moral categories. This refusal to educate leaves young people vulnerable to rape, harassment and guilt of victims. The Buddha's own teaching suggests that desires like sex are natural and not inherently evil, but should be understood and disciplined. In the *Madhupiṇḍika Sutta* (MN 18), the Buddha states that "depending on contact, feeling arises ... what one feels, one notices; what one perceives, one thinks about it." Desire is then part of the cognitive process; It can lead to unhealthy desire or to mindful consciousness. By reducing sex to "disgusting evil," Burmese cultural attitudes hide these dynamics and prevent the development of responsible, ethical frameworks. Furthermore, feminist scholars of Buddhism have highlighted how cultural misreadings strengthen patriarchal control.

Karma Lekshe Tsomo observes that "the velification of sexuality in Buddhist cultures often resulted in the subordination of women, their silence in sexual affairs, and their exclusion of decision-making on their own bodies." When religious terminology is mistranslated as "sinful" or "wickedless", women disproportionately bear the burden of shame, either by limited agency, lack of reproductive rights, or vulnerability to sexual violence. The philosophical problem here is the failure to distinguish between *akusala* (unhealthy states of mind) and "sin" in the Abrahamic sense.

Peter Harvey emphasizes, "To speak sex as a 'sin' in Buddhism is misleading, because Buddhist ethics evaluates actions not through their conformity with divine law, but by their consequences in promoting or hindering spiritual progress." The misinterpretation of sex or inherent evil changes the discussion of pragmatic ethics to ontological condemnation, encouraging stigma rather than wisdom. The consequences of this cultural misinterpretation are not abstract. They manifest in real damage: rising rates of rape, child abuse, exploitation and harassment of women who are culturally trained to remain silent, and cycles of victim-blaming. This damage undermines the very Buddhist values of compassion (*karuṇā*) and non-harm (*ahiṃsā*). Therefore, the solution lies not only in advocating for modern sex education, but also in the recovery of the Buddhist hermeneutics of sexuality as a natural, but in the need of mindfulness and ethical discipline. Well understood, Buddhist ethics can support comprehensive sexuality education for safety, respect, rights, responsibility, understanding cultural myths and diverse sexual orientations, and happy relationship by framing it as a cultivation of responsibility, mutual respect, and reducing suffering, rather than a guilty-pleasure.

CONCLUSION:

The analysis of sexuality in the context of Theravāda Buddhism shows a fundamental disjunction between canonical doctrine and cultural reception. The Pāli cannon does not construct sexual activity as inherently sinful; Rather, the behavior evaluates in terms of intent (*cetanā*), consequences, and their alignment with the cultivation of mentally healthy states (*kusala*). However, in Myanmar, cultural hermeneutics have reconfigured sexual desire in a symbol of evil, producing a discussion of shame and oppression that distorts Buddhist ethics and undermines social well-being. This incorrect reading of terms like *hīna*, *asaddhamma* and *vasala* turns the pragmatic renunciant discipline of the *saṅgha* into a moral absolutism imposed without distinction on the lay society. Philosophically, this shows the dangers of the collapse of relative ethical categories into ontological judgments.

When desire is misinterpreted as sin, the subtlety of Buddhist moral psychology is lost, and sexuality becomes an object of shame and fear rather than understanding. Such absolutism not only

contradicts the Buddhist rejection of intrinsic evil, but also generates real damage in society: silent discussion, insufficient sex education, public health crisis, and maintaining exploitation and gender-based violence. The task is therefore not to deny the intensity of sexual desire - in its strength comparable to anger or greed - but to situate it within the Buddhist project of mindfulness and ethical discipline. The Buddhist path does not write oppression for everything but insight: for monasteries, celibacy as a means of liberation; For laymen, sexual responsibility based on non-harmed, respect and compassion. In this way, sexuality is not revealed as a metaphysical curse, but as a domain of moral practice where wisdom and compassion should lead to human behavior. Thus, the philosophical lesson of this article is twofold: first, that Buddhist ethics must be interpreted with accuracy, opposition to cultural distortions that transform discipline into stigma; And secondly, which by integrating canonical insights with current social needs, Buddhism can support extensive sexual education, gender justice and public health, thereby fulfilling their soteriological goal of reducing suffering in both individual and collective life.

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