

Understanding Kāma in the Context of Tāntric Buddhist Philosophy

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Abstract

Kāma (sensual desire) is one of the four defilements (āśravas) in Buddhism. It is said to be greatest hindrance on the path of enlightenment. Thus, all the Buddhist texts, including Tantras, advise to refrain from it. But the way of Tantra is quite radical: it emphasizes eradicating poison by poison itself. This article tries to examine Tāntric Buddhist way of handling sensual desires.

Keywords: āśravas; kāma; clinging; tāntric yogīns

[1] According to Buddhist philosophy, there are four-āśravas (Skt., āśravas) (lit. “Outflows”), namely (1) kāmāsava, (2) bhavāsava, (3) diṭṭhāsava, and (4) avijjāsava, that “lies behind the behaviour of all unenlightened beings” (Payutto 1994: 62). In addition, there are three-kinds of craving, namely (1) Kāmatanḥā- “craving for desirable sense objects”, (2) Bhavatanḥā- “craving for being, craving for particular life situations”, (3) Vibhavatanḥā- “craving for non-being”, or desire to escape “from disliked objects or situations” (Ibid: 52). Due to craving, the four-kinds of clinging arises, namely (1) Kāmupādāna: “clinging to sensuality”, (2) Diṭṭhupādāna: “clinging to views”, (3) Sīlabbatupādāna: “clinging to mere rules and rituals”, and (4) Attavādupādāna: “clinging to the ego-idea” (Ibid: 66-7). As per Buddhist philosophy, sensuality (kāma) is “an intensified form of craving for all pleasant, agreeable, and sensuous things”. As mentioned above, it is considered one of the four-factors of grasping (upādāna). This is the greatest hindrance on the path of freedom (MD [Manual of Dhamma] 121). As the Dhammapada says, “There is no fire like lust, no grip like hate, no net like delusion, no river like craving” (“Natthi rāgasamo aggi/ natthi dosasamo gaho// Natthi mohasamaṃ jālaṃ/ natthi taṇhāsamaṃ nadi//” (251). In Buddhism, ‘sensuality’ is considered a ‘disease’ or a ‘poison’. Thus, the Buddha advised his disciples to refrain from “addiction to sensual pleasures” (Kāma-sukha).

[2] Buddhist Tantras also advocate eradication of sensuality, but method is quite different. Their way is, — to eradicate poison by poison itself, thus turning “poison into nectar”. As Milarepā says: “If ye subdue not evil passions by their antidote, mere verbal preaching will be but empty sounds” (Evans-Wentz 1928: 272). And Tantra is that antidote. The Tantras proceed in a very rational way. Even though it focuses more on the practical aspects of dhamma, it also emphasises that all those practices must be based on sound theoretical knowledge too. Thus, Buddhist Tantras proceed in a very radical

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way to extinguish Kāma-tr̥ṣṇā. Focusing on the 'goal', they do not hesitate to use 'means' which other dares not. Their main emphasis is on the eradication of root cause of the sensual pleasures, the "craving", "the burning fire", (Pāli taṇhā; Skt, tr̥ṣṇā). Tantras do not believe in the suppression of disease; it believes in its cure. The yogīns and siddhas do they run away from the vices, instead transform them into virtues. It is so because Buddhist Tantras do not believe in the inherent dichotomy of 'good' and 'evil', since both came from the same source, which if skilfully employed lead one to highest realm of consciousness, but if used unskilfully, lead one to lowest realm of hell. Thus, it has been stated: "Having done even the prohibited, he renounces both proper and improper act. The one knowing the intrinsic nature is not adhered to (by sin), any more than is a lotus leaf by water" (YOG [Yoga of the Guhyasamāja Tantra] 33). The main emphasis is on the elimination of any kind of dualistic thought construction: as the Pañcakrama (V, 34, 35) states: "Having known suffering to be as happiness, the son as the despised person, heaven as the Avīci hell, sin as merit, the yogīn should do all deeds without fear" (cited in YOG: 309). ["yathā saukhyaṃ tathā dukhaṃ yathā duṣṭas tathā sutaḥ/ yathāvicis tathā svargas tathā puṇyaṃ tu pāpakaṃ// evaṃ jñātvā cared yogi nirviśankas tu sarvakṛt/ pracchannavratam āsādyā sidhyante sarvasampadaḥ//"]. Indeed, non-attachment is the essence of dhamma. It is so because attachment of any kind is a barrier on the path of freedom.

[3] Buddha disapproved both extremes, "self-mortification" (atta-kilamatha) and "addiction to sensual pleasures" (kāma-sukh) (BD 57) since both are harmful. Only majjhima-magga ("the middle path") is the ariyā-magga ("the noble path"). In Tantras, the most of the mahāsiddhas are depicted wandering with their consorts like Ḍombipā, Padmavajra, Saraha, Kaṇhā, Bhadrāpā, Tilopā etc. (BL [Buddha's Lions]). In addition, the most of tāntric rituals requires both male and female partners. But consorts should not be confused with wives; they are the spiritual partners of equal importance, complementing each other on the path of the dhamma. Lama Govinda also states that freedom "can only be achieved through a relaxed, serene, and blissful state of body and soul, but not through self-mortification, asceticism or artificial methods" (1960: 170). The Advayasiddhi (p. 35, 36) advises that "the hard rules of discipline, the practices of fasting, bathing, purifying the body and the mind through strict rules and regulations should all be avoided" (cited in Dasgupta 1946: 87). ["na kaṣṭa-kalpanāṃ kuryāt upavāso na ca kriyāṃ/ Snānaṃ śaucaṃ na caivā'tra grām-dharmaṃ vivarjayet//"]. It is so because following the rules and regulations slavishly is considered a kind of attachment. And attachment of any kind, — views and conventions, moral codes and conducts, and even the Buddha, dhamma, and sangha, — is considered a hindrance on the path of freedom.

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