

Study Guide for MN 13

Mahādukkhakkhandha Sutta
The Great Mass of Suffering Discourse

Sensuality (*kāma*)

Don't give yourself to negligence,
Don't devote yourself to sensual pleasure.
Vigilant and absorbed in meditation
One attains abundant happiness. Dhammapada 27

Kāma is an important word in the Buddha's teachings and a key word in MN 13. The word has four primary meanings. First it refers to the things in the world, which bring sensual pleasure. Second, it refers to the sensual pleasure itself. Third, it refers to the desire for experiencing sensual pleasure. And fourth, it refers to the passion or attachment to the desires themselves. In addition, *kāma* sometimes refers more narrowly to sexual activity which generally involves all four of these meanings.

In passages where the word *kāma* appears it is not always obvious which of these meanings apply. It seems that in the time of the Buddha *kāma* commonly meant the world of sense objects. The Buddha, however, seemed to prefer to use it to refer to the desire for sensual enjoyment. The passage that makes this explicit is in the *Anguttara Nikaya*:

There are these five strands of sensuality (*kāmaguna*). What five? Forms cognizable by the eye that are wished for, enjoyable, pleasing, likeable, connected with sensuality and leading to passion (*rāga*). Sounds cognizable by the ear... Smells cognizable by the nose... Flavors cognizable by the tongue... Tangibles cognizable by the body... **These, however, are not true sensuality (*kāma*); in the Noble Ones' Discipline they are called merely 'strands of sensuality.'**

A person's sensuality (*kāma*) is the passion of intentions*;
Not the beautiful sense objects of the world.

A person's sensuality is the passion of intentions.
The beautiful things remain in the world as they are;
The wise subdue their desire for them.

*(*sankapparāga*; alt: passion for intentions) AN 6.63

There is an important distinction between sense desire on one hand and sense pleasure and the objects that bring this pleasure on the other. The **drive** for sense gratification, not the sense pleasure, is what is seen as an important condition for suffering. The Buddha does not blame or reject the pleasures of the objective world. In teaching the Middle Way, the Buddha was pointing to a path between **addiction to sensual pleasure** (*kāma-sukha-allika-ānuyoga*) and ascetic practice. In the key lists of things to overcome through practice, *kāma* as **wanting** sensual pleasure has a prominent place. For example, **sense desire** (*kāma-chanda*) is the first of the five hindrances. The **passion for sensual pleasure** (*kāma-rāga*) is the fourth of the ten

fetters that Awakening frees us from. The **taint of sensual desire** (*kāma-asava*) is the first of the three ‘taints’ the Buddha overcame to attain Awakening.

In the Buddha’s teachings sensuality is so much a characteristic of human activity that the human life is classified as belonging to the sensual world (*kāma-loka*), the sensual property (*kāma-dhatu*), and the sensual sphere (*kāma-vacara*). In Buddhist cosmology the various living beings populate three distinct realms: the sensual world, the form world and the formless world. In addition to human beings, the sensual world includes animals, beings residing in hell, and the gods of the six lowest heavenly levels. This is the realm where sensual passion, fulfilled and frustrated, predominates. The form and formless worlds are abodes belonging to still higher levels of gods.

The Buddha tended to have different teachings about *kāma* for laypeople than for monastics. For example, in the five lay precepts, sexual misconduct (*kāmesu micchācāra*) is to be avoided. Monastics are to avoid all sexual activity. As you read the suttas, it is helpful to notice for whom the teachings are intended and to consider how the teachings might have been specific to that audience.

Notes:

The key sentence in MN 13 is, to use Bhikkhu Bodhi’s translation,

What is the gratification, what is the danger, and what is the escape in the case of sensual pleasure?

How each of the nouns of this sentence is translated from Pali affects the meaning of the sentence. The following are the dictionary definitions of three of them:

Assāda (gratification) means tasting, enjoyment, satisfaction.

Ādīnava (danger) means wretchedness, evil consequences, disadvantage, danger.

Nissarana (escape) means going out, departing, giving up, leaving behind, being freed, escape.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu translates the sentence as:

What, friends, with regard to sensuality, is the allure, what the drawback, what the escape?

Another possible translation is

What is the enjoyment of sensual desire (*kāma*); what is the danger; what is the leaving behind?

Please notice how the meaning of the sentence might change for you depending on whether *kāma* is translated as sensual pleasure, sensuality, or sensual desire. Does the teaching in the rest of the sutta give some clues as to which are the most appropriate translations?

The Buddha explains that the “escape” from *kāma*, material forms and feelings, is in the abandoning of desire (*chanda*) and lust (*rāga*) for them. It is not necessarily the sensual

pleasure which is let go of. This suggests perhaps that in this sutta, *kāma* is best translated as sensual desire. (In MN 44.6, desire and lust are equated with clinging.)

Reflections:

The discourse sets up a clear contrast between the suffering experienced by laypeople in pursuing sensual desires and the well-being experienced by a monastic in practicing meditation. If you set aside the lay/monastic distinction, how might the distinction between the pursuits of sensual pleasures versus the pursuit of meditative well-being be useful for you?

Please give some serious thought and reflection to how much of your life is based on the pursuit of sensual pleasure. For example, what motivates you to live a lifestyle that provides you with a more comfortable life than what is really required to meet your basic needs? What part of this motivation is for your sensual enjoyment? What percentage of your income do you use for non-essential things that bring you sensual enjoyment? If a person first buys an expensive home because of the pleasure and comfort the home brings, and then has the stress of paying the mortgage, this stress would be one of the dangers of sensual pleasure. What are some of the disadvantages and drawbacks that come along with your pursuit of pleasure?

Why do you think it is important to have a clear understanding of: the enjoyment of, the danger from, and the escape from sensual desires? What attachments to sensual pleasure do you have that might obstruct your path of practice? Do you have any persistent resistance to the Buddhist teachings on the drawbacks of sensual desire? In what way?

The person obsessed
 With gathering flowers,
 Insatiable for sense pleasures,
 Is under the sway of Death. Dhammapada 48

Sitting alone, resting alone, walking alone,
 Untired and alone,
 Whoever has tamed oneself
 Will find delight in the forest. Dhammapada 305

Like water in a secluded place,
 That dries up without being swallowed up,
 So is the wealth of small-minded people
 Who neither enjoy it nor give [to others].

A wise and knowing person, on acquiring wealth
 Enjoys it and does [with it] what should be done:
 A leader, free of blame, and supporting one's kin,
 Such a person goes to heaven.

Samyutta Nikaya 3.19