

# Erotica in the Pali Tipitaka



S. Dhammika  
Essays on Buddhist Doctrines

## Erotica in the Pali Tipitaka

Virtually every reference to sex in the Pali Tipitaka is condemnatory. However, there are two passages which could be said to have a mildly erotic content. The first of these are the unusual verses in the Sakkapanha Sutta of the Digha Nikaya which compare sexual love to spiritual attainments. I reproduce Walshe's translation from *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*.

Lady, your father Timbaru greet,  
Oh Sunshine fair, I give honour to you  
By whom was sired a maid as fair as you  
Who are the cause of all my hearts delight.

Delightful as the breeze to one who sweats,  
Or as the cooling draught to one who thirsts,  
Your radiant beauty is to me as dear  
As the Dhamma is to Arahats.

Just as medicine to one who's ill,  
Or nourishment to one who's starving still,  
Bring me, gracious lady, sweet release  
With water cool from my consuming flames.

The elephant, oppressed by summer heat,  
Seeks out a lotus-pool upon which float  
Petals and pollen of that flower,  
So into your bosom sweet I'd plunge.

As an elephant, urged on by the goad,  
Pays no heed to pricks of lance and spear,  
So I, unheeding, know not what I do,  
Intoxicated by your beauteous form.

By you my heart is tightly bound in bonds,  
All my thoughts are quite transformed, and I  
Can no longer find my former course:  
I'm like a fish that's caught on baited hook.

Come, embrace me, maiden fair of thighs,  
Seize and hold me with your lovely gaze,  
Take me in your arms, it's all I ask!  
My desire was slight at first, O maid  
Of waving tresses, but it grew apace,  
As grows the gifts that Arahats receive.

Whatever merit I have gained by gifts  
To those Noble Ones, may my reward  
When it ripens, be your love, most fair!

As the Sakyans' Son in *jhana* rapt  
Intent and mindful, seeks the deathless goal,  
Thus intent I seek your love, my Sun.

Just as that sage would be rejoiced, if he  
Were to gain supreme enlightenment,

So I'd rejoice to be made one with you.  
If Sakka, Lord of Three-and-Thirty Gods  
Were perchance to grant a boon to me,  
It's you I'd crave, my love for you is so strong.  
Your father, maid so wise, I venerate  
Like a sal-tree fairly blossoming,  
For his offspring's sake, so sweet and fair. (D.II,265-7)

The second collection of verses with erotic content is found in a story from the Jataka. The story is a simple one. The Bodhisattva was an ascetic living in the Himalayas. He used to urinate in a particular pond and being celibate his semen would sometimes pass out with his urine. One day a doe quenched her thirst in the pond, ingested the semen, became pregnant and eventually gave birth to a son. The Bodhisattva took the boy, named him Isisinga and brought him up. The child grew up and later developed meditation to the stage where if he but looked at the sky the clouds would dry up. Unintentionally and without knowing it he caused a terrible drought. The king, desperate to save his parched land and coming to know that Isisinga was responsible, consulted Indra about what to do. Indra recommended destroying Isisinga's virtue and thereby his meditative power by having Nalinika, the king's daughter, seduce the young ascetic. Nalinika arrived at the Bodhisattva's hermitage while he was absent and got to work on Isisinga straight away. Never having seen a female before and being completely innocent, Isisinga thought that Nalinika was a young man. H. T. Francis who translated this Jataka for the Pali Text Society in 1895, considered the verses from the next part of the story so coarse that he simply left them out. I think this is the first time they have been translated into English.

**Isisinga** – What is this between your thighs?

I am asking you to please tell me.

Is your penis inside your body?

**Nalinika** – When I was going in the forest searching for roots

and fruit a fierce bear attacked me,

jumped on me and bit off my penis.

Now the wound is itching and irritated

so that I never get any relief.

Perhaps you can sooth my urge to itch it.

Please do what brahmans are supposed to do.

**Narrator** – Having believed her lies to be the truth he said, “If it will give you relief I will do it”, and looking at the wound carefully he continued -

**Isisinga** – Your wound is red, it looks serious.

It is not infected but it does have an odour.

I will prepare some medicine for you

so that you will be completely healed.

**Nalinika** – A brahman students should not practice

spells and medicine.

So why not use your own soft penis

to stop the itching?

Then it will be completely healed (Ja. V,197-8).

The inevitable happens. The young ascetic loses his virginity and with it his spiritual power, it rains and Nalinika quickly disappears from the scene. Soon Isisinga is pining for his beautiful ‘youth’ so much so that he neglects his duties. His father, the Bodhisattva, returns, sees that the hermitage is neglected and asks his son what's wrong with him. In the next 16 verses Isisinga describes the ‘young man’ he had met and in

doing so gives a detailed and fascinating description of the ancient Indian concept of feminine beauty and of the jewellery, coiffure and clothes women wore. Then Isisinga says; “The bear wounded him and he asked “Please cure me.” So I did and in doing so I too was healed” (Ja. V,204). The Bodhisattva is worldly-wise enough to know exactly what had happened and warned his son to avoid such ‘young men’ in the future.

It is often said that Jataka stories are a great way to introduce Buddhism to children. Some Jatakas certainly, but not all.