

honeymoney

A currency of care



Oliver Maxwell
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“To have any chance at building a sustainable and inclusive future, we need to re-think and re-organise money”

Ester Barinaga Martin, ‘Remaking money for a sustainable future’ 2024



Introduction

Finding a way to better connect economic activity with acts of ecological and community care is perhaps the most important challenge of our time. In her new book, the economist Ester Martin suggests that an answer can be found by redesigning the infrastructure and organisation of our money system. Drawing on examples from around the world and throughout history, she shows how such reforms do not need to be centrally organised or even replace the existing system. New currencies emerge from the bottom, operate alongside the status quo, and still offer the opportunity to direct our collective behaviour and nourish collective values. These 'complimentary' currency systems range from digital currencies like bitcoin, to carbon credits and local currencies introduced to jump-start broken economies after economic breakdowns. They also exist in more subtle forms, often overlooked by traditional economists: bottles of wine exchanged at dinner parties; jams and preserves gifted among families at Christmas; rounds of beer exchanged among friends in a pub; and in different traditions going back thousands of years, honey.

Currencies like these are as old as human culture itself. They can operate at both large and small scales, with different rules and forms of administration and accounting. If we are to aspire to an ecological and inclusive future, it is these currencies, that create and sustain relations across human and ecological communities that we can look to for inspiration.

of care. This requires the delineation of a community, an infrastructure for the creation and circulation of honeymoney and a mechanism of exchange with conventional currency.

Bybi – with an infrastructure of community-based bee keeping across the neighbourhoods of Copenhagen is an ideal container for this initiative.



We propose the re-invention of honey as honeymoney: a currency

What is the problem with money?

Money has failed when it comes to community and ecological care. From the refusal of rich nations to compensate poor countries for climate breakdown, to the precarious struggles of regenerative entrepreneurs, farmers and artists, money is simply not present in reliable quantities in many of the places where the most important questions about ecological survival are being asked.

Martin suggests that this is a consequence of the money system itself: 97% of modern money is created by banks from debt. This provenance entrenches inequalities, fuels boom and bust cycles, and, because it is leant with interest, is embedded in a growth model that is inherently unsustainable. The dual functions of money – as both a store of wealth and a means of exchange – creates an inbuilt contradiction. How can money both need to circulate, but also act as an investment object for individuals to accumulate for their private gain? Finally, the role of money as a supposedly neutral means of comparing value reduces our economic activity into units of time, work, volume and energy that are experienced subjectively in real life. Money, in this constellation, is the wrong tool for the job.

Honey, which has long been treasured by human communities, offers an alternative scaffolding for a complementary imaginary of wellbeing and exchange. Honey is created through the encounters and actions between bees, flowers and people. Outside of the industrial farm system, bees and honey connect multiple layers of property, society and space. Honey circulates – creating relations of care among families, neighbours and living systems. Honey's meaning and value changes according to the way it was made, the person enjoying it, the place it comes from and how it is prepared and presented.

If honey was money, how might it change our way of interacting and our way of caring for each other and the environment?



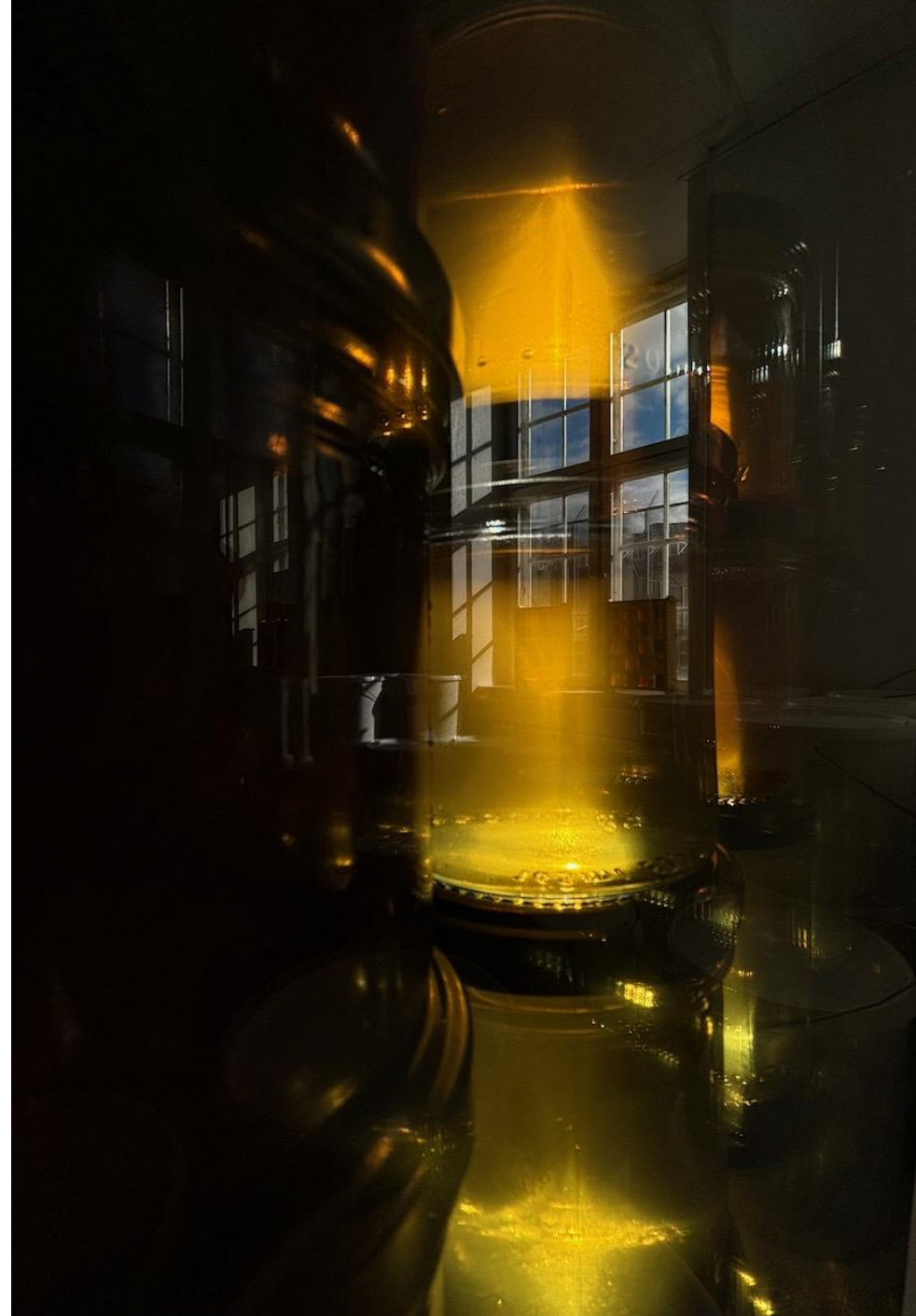
Honeymoney – A piece of place

In the neolithic, exquisitely crafted flint axes circulated around Europe as objects of trade and exchange. Archaeologists have been able to trace their origins to ancient quarries, which are often not found in the most accessible spots, but in the most beautiful. This has led some archaeologists to describe the axes as 'pieces of place'. Functional artworks that capture the colour of the sky, the composition of the landscape, and the human work and care invested in transforming these landscapes and making them habitable. The axes were not just tools, but a physical invitation to care for the landscapes they came from.

Honey has some of the same power to connect and represent the physical space – a piece of place that literally tastes of the human and non-human encounters within each specific landscape. These landscapes are intimately connected to human communities, but not as exclusive groups. Rather honey and bees blur the boundaries across and between neighbourhoods, businesses, municipalities and spaces. Once invited to taste, you become part of an ecological and more-than-human landscape and become indebted to it.

Like the neolithic axes, the honey itself is an invitation to participate in the care and sustained health of a place. We intuitively understand, as humans in a relationship of care, that we can't receive without giving back. As every child instinctively understands, you say 'thank you' to the bees by planting a flower.

The act of care and appreciation is also open-ended. The seed may be eaten by a bird, or the flower may be visited by one of nearly 300 species of wild bee. Human participation becomes an act that also helps the wider ecosystem to manage itself.





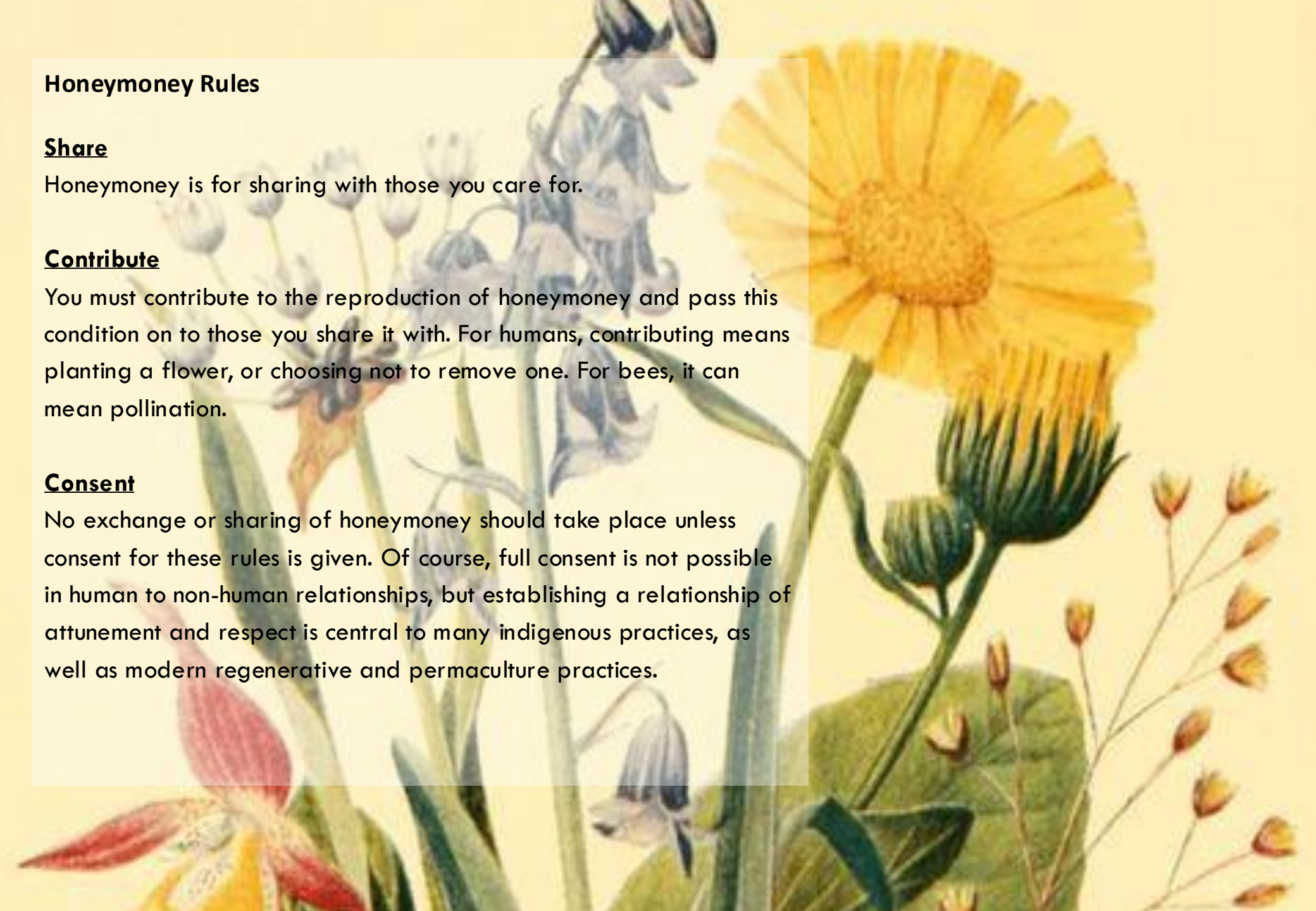
How Does Honeymoney Work?

Bybi has about 25 apiaries and about 150 bee colonies that collectively gather between five and seven tons of honey per year. Each apiary is connected to a business, social project or institution representing a community of people and a physical landscape. The amount of honey the apiaries can gather can vary, according to the weather, health of the bees, and available forage. More than this number, would require more staff, space and travel time. Rather than consider this a question of an economy of scale, we can see this as a comfortable limit. There is a limit to the honey gathered, the pressure on the other resources, and the ability of the organisation to contain the relationships around each apiary. There is a natural limit to growth in honey production, but a huge potential for deeper relationship and trust building across and between the different human and ecological communities in the city.

The apiaries are a focus for the gathering of honey by the bees. To become honeymoney, the honey needs to be invested with some specific values in order to function as complementary currency of community and ecological care.

The idea of shared responsibility is central. This responsibility is distributed between the bees, people and flowers, all of whom are necessary, since no honeymoney could exist without all three: Bees to gather, flowers to grow, people to cultivate. In contrast to a commercial production, the notion of 'profit' is not present. You can't have profit in a relationship of equal responsibility where access to the mechanisms of production – the bees, flowers and people – is by consent and invitation rather than employment or coercion. Each encounter, each agreement to share, needs to be constructed to encourage improved communication and trust.

Within this principle of shared responsibility, a few simple rules are enough to guide the circulation of honeymoney. These rules should be as relevant for the non-human partners, the bees and the flowers, as they are for the humans. Once gathered, and as long as the rules are followed, honeymoney can be shared among the community within which it originated, or more widely to expand the practice of ecological and community care into new layers in the city or beyond.



Honeymoney Rules

Share

Honeymoney is for sharing with those you care for.

Contribute

You must contribute to the reproduction of honeymoney and pass this condition on to those you share it with. For humans, contributing means planting a flower, or choosing not to remove one. For bees, it can mean pollination.

Consent

No exchange or sharing of honeymoney should take place unless consent for these rules is given. Of course, full consent is not possible in human to non-human relationships, but establishing a relationship of attunement and respect is central to many indigenous practices, as well as modern regenerative and permaculture practices.

Administration of Honeymoney

Having established the rules of Honeymoney, the question arises of how to embed these rules within a system of administrative practices. Normal money is embedded in a system of contracts, receipts, orders and invoices that have traditionally been on paper and are increasingly digital today. How might the contract, invoice or receipt for honeymoney be crafted to invest the exchange with trust, shared responsibility and care? What might the ceremony look like, that gathers the commitment of the person taking possession of honeymoney?

Imagine 25 artworks, one for each of the possible apiaries. Each artwork represents a partnership: The agreement of the organisation to create and share honeymoney, and to organise events that will seek the consent of its members to share and contribute to the system.

Each artwork represents an agreement, but the artworks cannot be owned. They circulate, each year, changing partners until they ultimately return to the same place. Each partner will mark the work with a coloured wax seal, so the work accumulates the commitments of the whole community of partners on a cycle that could last up to 25 years.

The acts of sharing and commitment can grow from existing practices that Bybi has been developing for 15 years. Inspired by artistic practices, these include 'honey ceremonies' where participants commit to 'thanking the bees' by planting flowers, theatrical performances with children and schools and public conversations directed at collectively exploring new perspectives on human and ecological perspectives. There is a wide range of variations and developments that grow along with wider curiosity and engagements with neighbours and new partners.

Touching all aspects of this community is the honeymoney itself – not a product, but a currency: presented and shared within a performative and aesthetic infrastructure that directs the exchange towards ecological and social care.

These ideas are not foreign to human culture and practice. In fact, as physical money disappears, a need for exchanges of resources that are conducted through ceremonies and rituals where obligations are performed, spoken out loud, or commitments are marked publicly on stones, posts or trees is needed. A wedding ring is one example of a contract embedded in a physical object. Others include the carved guild-sticks used to pass messages and call meetings in rural Danish society in the middle ages. More exotically, the societies in south pacific islands exchange elaborate pieces of shell jewellery to emphasise common norms of behaviour and connection between remote island communities. The contract, artwork and ceremony are one, invested with the commitment and trust of the community to collectively reproduce a way of being together – emphasising ecological and social care.



Shell armbands from island communities in New Guinea. The armbands travelled from island to island, becoming more elaborate over time.

Exchange of Honeymoney

Honeymoney has a method of creation, rules of circulation and an administrative system based on joint responsibility, commitment and articulation of these rules. But what of its relationship to real money? How is it convertible with the money needed to pay bills, wages, taxes and rents?

The central principle is that you can not 'buy' honeymoney, you can only exchange it for another currency. There is no commission, no fee, no profit and no fixed exchange rate. The person exchanging decides what the rate should be, based on their own responsibility and commitment to the rules of honeymoney. Partnerships with organisations or projects will support the creation of honeymoney and events to share it according to the rules. Individuals will be able to exchange Danish kroner for honeymoney provided they sign an art-contract and consent to the rules. There is no fixed exchange rate. Both parties must establish trust with each other to make the exchange.

Receiving national currency requires a commitment that mirrors the possession of honeymoney: Use it responsibly. Share it with those you care for, including the bees (in the form of care) and people (in the form of wages). National currency is also needed to contribute to honeymoney by expanding the community to new institutions, age-groups and neighbourhoods. The honeymoney exchange is what enables the organisation to exist in a broader economy of national currency.

But can honeymoney be exchanged the other way? Is it possible for anyone to trade honeymoney for Danish Kroner? A person in possession of honeymoney can exchange it with national currency with a third party, provided that the rules are still followed: share, contribute and consent. Honeymoney can also be exchanged directly for goods and services in the 'real' economy: haircuts, therapies, home productions of wine and preserves, professional services – all of which are real examples from within the Bybi community.

In this way, honeymoney can become a true currency of care within its own community, but can also direct a new language and practice of care within the mainstream 'money' economy. The invitation to share, contribute and consent, crosses over into the real economy.

Making Honeymoney Happen

Much of the infrastructure and the basic relational work to introduce honeymoney is already in place. Bybi already has an established network of 20 partners who have, in some cases, supported the project for many years. Converting from honey to honeymoney will require some research, experimentation and development. In particular, an open ended artistic process to develop the works that will form the honeymoney agreements, the performance of the exchange and its infrastructure. With existing resources, this could be achieved with a honeymoney trade: An exchange of honeymoney with Danish kroner, that would enable the support of an artist and a programme of research.

The ambition of creating and growing honeymoney, like honeymoney itself, needs to become a collective endeavour embedded in shared responsibility and trust. The 2024 harvest includes nearly 4000 kg of honey. It was made by bees, people and flowers all over Copenhagen, with the support of 20 organisations, businesses, municipalities and social projects. This honey is now ready to become honeymoney.

Now that you know what honeymoney is, how it works and how its made, do you wish to join?





www.bybi.dk
Sundholmsvej 34
Copenhagen 2300 S
Tlæl: 41 27 55 44 Bzzz@bybi.dk