



MICHAEL DILLON

OUT OF THE ORDINARY



S. Dhammika

Miscellaneous Essays

Out of the Ordinary

We are used to thinking of the world in black and white terms, of things being either right or wrong, up or down, one thing or another. A good example of this would be the popular but mistaken understanding of *kamma* as either good or bad. The Buddha by contrast, said that *kamma* can be good, bad or a mixture of the two (*vītimissā dhamma*), which of course accords much more with reality. In fact, few things are either 100% good or 100% bad. When it comes to gender we commonly assume that people are either male or female whereas the categories are not always that clear, a truth that the Buddha recognized centuries ago.

He was aware that there were those who were of indeterminate or mixed gender (i.e. partly male and partly female); he called them “men-like women” (*vepurisikā*), “those with the characteristics of both [genders]” (*ubhatovyañjanaka*), and sometimes spoke of what he called “sexual indistinctness” (*sambhianī*). He made a rule that such people were not to be ordained as monks or nuns, probably not because he considered them to be immoral or perverted, but simply because there was no positions within the Sangha which they could fit into. In fact, it is remarkably that the Buddha made no moral judgments about those whose gender was mixed.

Today, the condition the Buddha recognized is called transgenderism. It should be understood that transgenderism is not homosexuality - the first is having the strong feeling that one’s gender is the opposite of what one’s body indicates, whereas the second is being sexually attracted to those of one’s own gender. The first is about identity whereas the second is about sexual attraction. There are several stories in Buddhist literature about people changing their gender. The most well-known of these, from the Dhammapada commentary, tells of the man Soreyya who was transformed into a woman after being entranced by a young monk’s physical

beauty. Of course, this scenario is not possible, but the story indicated an awareness of transgender desire. However, today medical science has made it possible for transgendered people to change their gender.

One of the first people to have done this was Laura Dillon. She was born into an aristocratic English family in 1915 – her brother was Sir Robert Dillon, the eighth Baronet of Lismullen. Educated at the best girls' schools and Cambridge University and used to privilege, by the time she was 15 she started to feel she had been born into the wrong body, a female body. She started to cut her hair short and wear more masculine-looking clothes, which was thought of as eccentric but something she would grow out of. She never did. When she was 24 she sought treatment for excessive menstrual bleeding and her doctor gave her the male hormone testosterone thinking it would cure this condition. He also recommended that she consult a psychiatrist who eventually put her in contact with the pioneering plastic surgeon Dr. Harold Gillies.

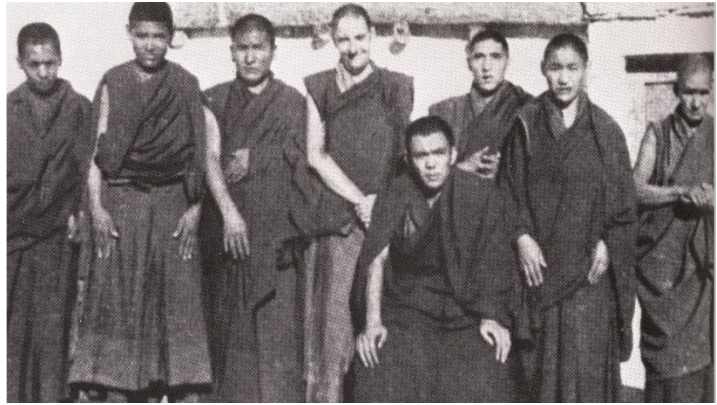


Michael Dillon when he worked as a ship's doctor.

Over a three year period the doctor performed 13 operations on her which included removing her breasts, constructing male genitals and in effect transforming her into a man. Because of contacts in the records office she (now he), managed to have his name changed to Michael and he officially became Michael Dillon. He then embarked on medical studies and became a doctor, worked in the marine industry for some years, and published a book on transgenderism without revealing that he himself was transgendered. The book attracted a great deal of attention from both doctors and psychologists as well as from the general public. This eventually led to Dillon being

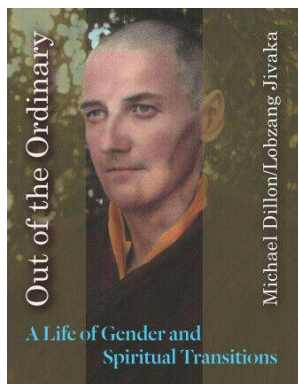
identified as transgender and him being hounded by the press wanting a bizarre and lurid story. So negative was the pressure that he decided to quietly disappear to India.

Long having an interest in Buddhism, he made his way to the Himalayas where he lived in a monastery for some years and later at the Mahabodhi Society in Sarnath learning Dhamma and meditation. Later he settled in the Rezong Monastery in Ladakh



Dillon as Jivaka, fourth from the left, with other monks

where he ordained as a monk taking the name Jivaka, after the Buddha's doctor of that name. For the first time in his life he felt comfortable and accepted, writing several books on Buddhism including a study of the Vinaya, and after a serious illness passed away in Darjeeling in 1962. He also wrote an autobiography called *Out of the Ordinary* which Fordham University Press published in 2017, its delay in its seeing the light of day due mainly because his brother who tried to stop its publication.



Michel Dillon's recently published autobiography

During Dillon's youth as a female she was often mocked and teased because of her distinct boyishness and after becoming a male he was hounded by the press, thought of as a freak and rejected by his family and former friends. Today, some transgender people suffer insult and even physical violence. The problem does not lie with them but with people's ignorance and misunderstanding. Buddhists at least should have more understanding of transgender people because their

condition may well be explained by Buddhism – specifically by the doctrine of rebirth.

A person may be reborn as, say, a male in successive lives during which time masculine attitudes, desires, traits and dispositions become strongly imprinted on their mind. This would determine that he be continually reborn into a male body or that his consciousness would shape the new embryo into a male form – whatever factors are responsible for the physical characteristic of gender. Then, for either kammic, genetic or other reasons, he may get reborn into a female body while retaining all the long-established masculine psychological traits. Of course, this same process could be responsible for a male feeling that he is really female. If this or something like it, is the cause of transgenderism, it would mean that this condition is a natural one rather than a moral perversion as most theistic religions maintain. In the *Udāna*, the Buddha said that traits or dispositions (*vāsasā*) developed through a succession of lives (*abbokiṇṇanī*) may well express themselves in the present life and that they need not be “an inner moral fault” (*dosatara*). Thus, informed Buddhists should be accepting and understanding if or when they encounter a transgendered person.