



S. Dhammika

# Buddhism *and LGBT Issues*

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## Preface



Before starting it will be necessary to make it clear what is meant by Buddhism in this article. As with other religions, Buddhism has a long history during which it has developed and evolved, branched into divergent schools and sects, and been interpreted in various ways by different philosophers, reformers and saints. And as with other religions it is not always easy to get agreement by Buddhists on every issue. However, Buddhism started with the experience of a particular individual, Siddhattha Gotama, and at a particular time in history, the 5<sup>th</sup>/ 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Without going into the complexities of the issues, this article takes the position that the earliest and therefore the most authentic account of the Buddha and his teachings is contained in the Pali Tipitaka, the huge body of literature now considered canonical by the Theravada school of Buddhism.

While this article deals mainly with homosexuality it will also make some references to related states, gay adoption, transgenderism, etc. There are occasional references to Christianity in this article, sometimes contrasting it with Buddhism. As Christian spokespersons and institutions are major contributors to ongoing debates about LGBT issues, and as Christianity will be the religion most familiar to English speaking readers, it

## **Buddhism and LGBT Issues**

is only appropriate to refer to it rather than Hinduism, Confucianism, Sikhism, Islam, etc.

# Buddhism and Sex



The Buddha taught that there are two goals for the religious life, what might be called a primary goal and secondary goals. The primary and ultimate goal of Buddhism is to attain the peace and freedom of Nirvana. Although this can be done in the present life the Buddha was well aware that many people, probably the majority, will take time to disentangle themselves from worldly pursuits and desires. The Buddhist spiritual life is “a gradual doing, a gradual training, a gradual practice”<sup>1</sup>. While asking all his disciples to keep their eye on the primary goal the Buddha also taught a range of secondary goals suitable for the majority; to be a good, kindly and honest person, a loving spouse or parent, a generous donor, a hospitable host, a responsible citizen, and so on.

For those setting their course for Nirvana in the present life, the Buddha encouraged sexual restraint or even celibacy. For others he taught sexual responsibility as outlined in the third of the Five Precepts. For those intent on this first option he highlighted what he called “the dangers” in sensual indulgences and to the second he acknowledged “the satisfaction”

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<sup>1</sup> Udana 54

in them<sup>2</sup>. Having been a husband for nearly two decades the Buddha was well aware of the positive side of sex and marriage. But as a perceptive psychologist he also saw that sensual indulgence can easily become a preoccupation leading to attachment, selfishness, boredom and carelessness of the lives of others. Having said this it is also true that some of the Buddha's disciples attained some of the highest spiritual states while leading happily married lives, Isidatta being a good example of this<sup>3</sup>.

The Buddha required his monks and nuns to be celibate (*brahmacariya*). When addressing them he often referred to sex as “a village practice” (*gāma dhamma*)<sup>4</sup>, something suitable of bumpkins and the unsophisticated. So serious did he consider the infringement of the rule of celibacy that sexual intercourse (*methuna*) is one of only four offences one will be dismissed from the monastic order for<sup>5</sup>. A monk or nun will be summarily expelled from the monastic order if they engage in sexual intercourse. So that there can be no ambiguity as to exactly what constitutes intercourse it has to be exactly defined – and it is. According to the Vinaya, sexual intercourse is deemed to have occurred if the penis enters any orifice of any being, of any gender,

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<sup>2</sup> *assādañ ca ādīnava*, e.g. M.I,85

<sup>3</sup> *Anguttara Nikaya III,348*

<sup>4</sup> *Anguttara Nikaya I,211*

<sup>5</sup> The others being murder, theft and falsely claiming to have spiritual attainments

living or dead<sup>6</sup>. Other types of sexual behaviour, while serious offences with specific punishments, do not entail expulsion from the Sangha.

However, not all the Buddha's disciples were monks and nuns, indeed the majority were not and never have been. So what did the Buddha say about sex that is relevant to lay people? The basic ethical training for lay people is the Five Precepts, the third of which is "to abstain from sexual misconduct" (*kāmesu micchācārā*). What makes sexual (*kāma*) behaviour (*cāra*) wrong (*micchā*)?

Once, while addressing an audience of Brahmans the Buddha said that having sexual relations with five types of persons, presumably with or without their consent, would be unethical. There five types are (1) females under the guardianship of their parents (*māturakkhitā, piturakkhitā*); this would mean underage children. (2) Those protected by Dhamma (*dhammarakkhitā*) which probably refers to those who have taken a vow of celibacy such as nuns. To have sex with such persons is to abet with them in breaking a solemn promise they have taken. (3) A female already married (*sassāmikā*), that is, to commit adultery. (4) Those undergoing punishment, (*saparidaṇḍā*). An incarcerated person can be physically forced or coerced into doing something they do not wish to do and thus cannot make a

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<sup>6</sup> Vinaya III, 28



genuinely free choice. (5) Those bedecked in garlands (*mālāguṇaparikkhittā*), that is to say, someone already engaged to be married<sup>7</sup>.

In each case here the Buddha refers to female sexual partners. Had he been addressing women he would, of course, have spoken of male equivalents. It will be noticed that having sex with someone of the same gender is not mentioned in this list.

Another type of sexuality discussed elsewhere by the Buddha is masturbation. The Buddha made it an offence entailing confession for monks or nuns to masturbate<sup>8</sup>. This was not because he considered masturbation to be “unclean” or “impure” as some religions assert, or because sexual desire is only legitimate when it can lead to procreation as others maintain, but because it reinforces sensual desire, something monastics are encouraged to lessen and eventually transcend. The Buddha said nothing about masturbation to lay people, probably because like modern psychologists he accepted it as a natural and harmless expression of the sexual drive.

A type of sexual behaviour condemned by the Buddha in the strongest terms, is incest, *agammagamaṇa*, literally “going to what should not be gone to”, or *adhamma raga*, “wrong desire”. During the Buddha’s life there was an incident where a nun became infatuated with her son, a monk, and the two had sex together<sup>9</sup>. When informed of this the Buddha said: “Does not this

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<sup>7</sup> Anguttara Nikaya V, 264

<sup>8</sup> Vinaya III,111

<sup>9</sup> Vinaya III,35

foolish man know that a mother shall not lust after her son or a son after his mother?"<sup>10</sup> Perhaps referring to this incident the Buddha said on another occasion: "Shame and fear of blame, are the two states that protect the world. If they did not, it would be unclear who was one's mother or mother's sister, one's uncle's wife and the world would fall into confusion. The promiscuity seen amongst goats and sheep, chickens and pigs, dogs and jackals would prevail."<sup>11</sup>

In the case of incest the Buddha seems to have disapproved of it because of its negative social consequences. He considered other types of sexual behaviour to be unethical when they involve either dishonesty, the breaking of agreements or coercion to one degree or another. Nowhere in the Sutta Pitaka, the huge collection of the Buddha's discourses, did the Buddha mention homosexuality, although as we shall see, he was aware of its existence.

Beyond these sexual practices the Buddha also criticized the custom, apparently still prevalent in the wilder parts of India, of abducting girls and woman to keep as concubines or wives. He praised the Licchavies for having given up this custom<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Anguttara Nikaya III,67-8

<sup>11</sup> Anguttara Nikaya I,51

<sup>12</sup> Digha Nikaya II, 74

Although the Buddha never recommends married couples to be celibate, some of his more serious lay disciples chose to be<sup>13</sup>. For those who did not, he encouraged them to adhere to the third Precept and to abstain from all sexual activity at least on the full moon and half-moon days of each month. These rules and practices stem from the Buddha's understanding that desire, sexual desire included, is problematic and the less attention given to it the better.

Early Christianity took a similar position and for a similar reason. "I desire to have you to be free from cares. He who is unmarried is concerned for the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord; but he who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Majjhima Nikaya I 490

<sup>14</sup> 1 Corinthians 7,1-35

# Opposition to Homosexuality



Before examining the Buddhist attitude towards homosexuality it might be useful to look at opposition to it and try to understand the roots to this opposition. Most societies through history have given some place to homosexuals, usually a marginal and inferior one, and have tolerated homosexuality to one degree or another. In Europe however, opposition to homosexuality has been vociferous and enduring, at least after the triumph of Christianity.

This hostility to homosexuality can be traced to certain Christian theological concepts. Early Christianity's ambiguity towards sexuality gradually gave way to an acceptance on condition that it could only be for the purpose of procreation. This was justified by God's command to Adam and Eve that they "be fruitful and multiply". Homosexual sex cannot produce progeny and thus is opposed to God's primal purpose, as is masturbation, *coitus interruptus* and bestiality. The other source of Christianity's hostility towards homosexuality is the doctrine of divine retribution, the idea that God punishes human immorality, individually but also collectively<sup>15</sup>. Consequently, homosexuality is not just against God's

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<sup>15</sup> See Divine Retribution: A Forgotten Doctrine, by Andrew Atherstone in Themelios, Vol.34 No. 1

will but also dangerous, even to those who do not practice it. The most well-known but by no means the only biblical example of God's collective punishment for humanity's moral failings is the fate of Sodom<sup>16</sup>. The city and its inhabitants were incinerated because some their men committed sodomy. Modern scholars have suggested that the sin that brought down this terrible punishment was not sodomy or homosexual rape but failure to treat strangers with hospitality<sup>17</sup>. Be this as it may, for 2500 years that is how Jews and Christians have interpreted the story. And since biblical times countless natural and man-made disasters have been attributed to God's wrath. The fall of Rome in 410 CE was seen as God's punishment for the city's rejection of the Gospel and its persecution of Christians. In his legal code of 559 the Christian emperor Justinian linked "famines, earthquakes, and pestilences" to homosexual practices. The Black Death of the 1340s was God's punishment for vice and corruption, and the Mongol invasion was "the hammer of God". The destruction by lightening of the spire of London's St. Paul's in 1561 was taken to be a warning from God that he would punish the city for its moral laxity. The catastrophic Lisbon earthquake of 1755 was widely attributed to God's punishment for the city's supposed decadence. Many thousands of claims such as these made by popes, bishops, priests,

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<sup>16</sup> The story is told or referred to at Genesis 18,16; 19,29 and Jude 7

<sup>17</sup> At Isaiah 1,10ff, Jeremiah 23,14 and Ezra 16,49ff it is not Sodom's sexual sins that are emphasized but lying, pride, hypocrisy, etc.

pastors and theologians could be quotes. This was part of mainstream theology until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Although the belief in divine retribution on a collective scale has faded considerably in the last few centuries it is by no means dead. Directly after Hurricane Katharina wrecked New Orleans the television evangelist Pat Robinson announced that the disaster was God's punishment for America's policy on abortion. Robinson is not a lone crank, several million people regularly watch his television programs. In 2007 the Anglican Bishop of Carlisle in the UK warned that the recent widespread flooding in the UK was a result of sexual immorality, including homosexuality. Predictions of doom and destruction for immorality have long been a feature of Christian sermons.

More sophisticated Christians are reluctant to express their opposition to homosexuality in these terms today as it tends to invite ridicule. The talk now is more about homosexuality being "unnatural", about it "undermining the family", "the breakdown of traditional values", "concern for young people" and "the health risks of the homosexual lifestyle". However, below such rationalizations the ancient ideas about procreation and divine retribution probably still lurk.

Of course, homosexuals are by no means the only evil-doers who can provoke God's wrath. But as they are generally already disliked by the majority and as their numbers are small, they have always been a favoured group to single out, denigrate and blame for actual or potential catastrophes.

Related to what has just been said, is a point that deserves to be considered. In the last few years, it has become common to accuse anyone objecting to homosexuality, same-sex marriage or same-sex partners adopting children, of being a hate monger and their discourse as hate-speech. While it is true that many Christians harbour an intense opposition and even a hatred of homosexuals, there are just as many who genuinely try to adhere to Jesus' exhortation to love everyone, including those considered to be sinners. These more reasonable Christians say, and they are probably being genuine when they do so, that they love homosexuals despite disapproving of their behaviour. Therefore, homosexuals should be careful not to do to others what has so often been done to them; accuse them of things they are not guilty of. To disapprove of someone's behaviour or lifestyle is not necessarily the same as hating them.

Few non-religious people object to homosexuality beyond admitting a personal distaste towards it. However, some sociologists, psychiatrists, social workers and others have expressed unease about same-sex partners adopting children. One argument they put forward is that it could be psychologically harmful to deny a child a mother, as would be the case with two married men, or a father, as would be with two lesbians parents. At present there is no evidence to address this concern one way or another, adoption by same-sex couples being only very recent. But the reality is that many children are brought up by a single parent, or by no parents (orphans), and grow into well-adjusted adults. It is also true that some children grow

up in thoroughly dysfunctional heterosexual families and manage okay too. Having a loving parent or parents and a stable home life is undoubtedly the optimum scenario but this has never been guaranteed by a two-parent heterosexual marriage, as any child-protection agency will attest to. Should same-sex couples be allowed to adopt children some of the resulting families will succeed and others not. Certainly, same-sex families are more likely to succeed if there is more acceptance of homosexuality and legal protection of such families



## Buddhist Ethics



A central doctrine of the Buddha's Dhamma is kamma, the idea that each intentional thought, word and deed has a corresponding effect. Some explanations of kamma give the impression that it is a sort of force in the universe, unconnected to and outside the individual. This is not correct. The Buddha says: "I say that intention (*cetana*) is kamma, for having intended ones thinks, speaks or acts."<sup>18</sup> The mind is such that negative intentional acts have a negative effect and positive acts have a positive one. By positive is meant positive feelings (peace, joy, ease, happiness, contentment, satisfaction, etc) and negative means negative feelings (regret, anxiety, anger, defensiveness, shame, worried brooding, etc). Such notions as if you slap someone's face you will be reborn with an ugly red face, or if you swear you will have halitosis in your next life, are ridiculous although widely believed misunderstandings. Kamma is a psychological phenomenon and its effects are psychological too.

The idea that kammic effects always manifest in the next life is also wrong. Most intentional acts probably have their result immediately, or soon after, or at least in the present life. Another misunderstanding about kamma

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<sup>18</sup> Anguttara Nikaya III, 415

is that it concerns reward and retribution. Karma no more does this than a task “rewards” you with a sense of satisfaction when you have done it well, or a hot pot “punished” by burning your hand when you pick it up of the stove. Karma is simply about psychological causes and their effects.

So what is meant by positive and negative? Positive, good or skillful (*kusala*) is the quality of being ethically helpful, skillful and conducive to enlightenment, while negative, bad or unskillful (*akusala*) is the opposite of this. Together with karmic consequences, Buddhism uses three principles to determine the ethical value of any behaviour. (1) The instrumental principle is the idea that something is skillful if it assists in the attaining of a particular goal and unskillful if it does not. Therefore, anything that is conducive to Buddhism’s primary or secondary goals can be said to be good. (2) The consequential principle is the idea that we can determine the value of an act by the consequences it has. Stealing, for example, leads to inconvenience, anger and increased suspicion in the victim. It reinforces greed and lack of restraint in the thief (if not caught) and may end in punishment (if caught). All this is negative and, therefore, stealing is wrong. (3) The universalization principle is the idea that we can determine the value of something by knowing how we feel about it and then applying that to others. I would like someone to help me when I am in trouble, I can infer that others feel the same, and therefore, when I see someone in trouble I try to help them. In Christianity this concept is called the Golden Rule.

From the Buddhist perspective therefore, it is an unsafe generalization to say that homosexuality *per se* is immoral or wrong. To posit something meaningful about it would require a familiarization with the motives underlining it, the behaviours involved, their effects, and so on, and this would differ from one individual to another.

Many homosexuals are involved in what is sometimes dubbed “gay culture” – a preoccupation with sex, promiscuity, drugs and alcohol, etc. which Buddhism would see as counterproductive to the goals of the Dhamma. Probably far more avoid such behaviours and in all respects other than their same-sex attraction are no different from other ordinary individuals. A significant number are in relationships marked by love, faithfulness and mutual sharing. Buddhism would see such a lifestyle as conducive to Dhamma whether amongst homosexuals or heterosexuals. To paraphrase a comment recently made by a well-known Buddhist teacher – it is not whether you are homosexual but what kind of homosexual you are.

## Diverse Voices



As with other religions there are different opinions within Buddhism about homosexuality. Up to now, the most high-profile Buddhist leader to comment on the issues involved has been the Dalai Lama. At a press conference in 1997 he said: “From a Buddhist point of view it [homosexuality] is generally considered sexual misconduct.”

The Dalai Lama is a wise and kindly person but he is also a very traditional Tibetan in many ways – and traditional Tibetan culture, like many cultures, has skewed and confused ideas about homosexuality. Tibetan Buddhism derives its ideas about homosexuality from Mahayana *sutras* and *sastras*, the earliest of which dates from approximately 400 year after the Buddha. By this time some strands of Indian Buddhism were being influenced by various popular Indian notions and incorporating them into themselves, sometimes with not very happy results. One such notion was that sexual acts can be judged right or wrong depending on “place, person and orifice”. Thus for example, having sex near a temple or *stupa* is a wrong place, with anyone other than one’s spouse is a wrong person, and anywhere other than the vagina is a wrong orifice. This is a good example of the numbering, sub-dividing, categorizing tendency that became dominant in

the clerical thinking of later Buddhism. And it does not take much sense to see how unfounded it is from the Buddha's point of view.

Exactly how does kamma distinguish one orifice from another? Other problems arise when we realize that many male homosexuals practice intercrural sex and mutual masturbation rather than penetrative sex. And exactly which sexual organ would a lesbian use to penetrate the vagina of her partner? The Dalai Lama is also reported to have said that he had difficulty imagining the mechanics of homosexual sex, saying that nature had arranged male and female organs "in such a manner that is very suitable...Same-sex organs cannot manage well." This statement reveals the Dalai Lama's ignorance and naivety concerning sex, and perhaps even some aspects of the Dhamma as well. Buddhist ethical judgments have nothing to do with two body-parts fitting together "properly" or not. People often clean their ears with a finger despite it not fitting into the ear canal very well. Does this mean they make negative kamma every time they clean their ears digitally? Also, the "it's unnatural" argument is both unsound and irrelevant as far as the Dhamma is concerned. If homosexuality is unnatural then celibacy is more so and all monks are breaking the third Precept by abstaining from sex. As mentioned earlier, the Buddha's criteria of right and wrong is not based on ideas of natural or unnatural, which are usually social constructions, but on the intention behind the act.

After the Dalai Lama's 1997 comments he was criticized by various gay advocacy groups. Together with promoting the Dhamma, the Dalai Lama's

main purpose in touring the West is to win support for the Tibetan freedom struggle, and to this end he is anxious not to alienate anyone. As soon as he realized what he had done he called a meeting with gay and lesbian representatives, during which he expressed the “willingness to consider the possibility that some of the teachings may be specific to a particular cultural and historic context”. Dawa Tsering, spokesperson for the Office of Tibet, released a suitably politically correct and safe statement. “His Holiness opposes violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation. He urges respect, tolerance, compassion and the full recognition of human rights for all.” Despite this, it is likely that the Dalai Lama continues to adhere to traditional Tibetan idea about homosexuality.

One of the most articulate western Buddhist monks, Ajahn Brahmavamso, has spoken several times about homosexuality from the Buddhist perspective. At the Global Buddhist Conference in 2000 he had this to say. “However, the studies of Buddhist meaning of the term sexual misconduct certainly does not include homosexual activities. And it’s fascinating that the Buddha was certainly aware about homosexuality in his time. There were many cases mentioned in old scriptures, especially the Vinaya. When we talk about the third Precept, it literally concerns adultery or illicit sex, especially between a man or a woman who were not married and that concern sexual relations that were considered inappropriate at that time, but it certainly does not include homosexual and lesbian activities. So when we look at the ethical issues of homosexuality, we cannot use the Five

Precepts as they don't apply. The fact that it was not mentioned was an indication that the Buddha did not think that it was that bad, or an activity to be included in the Precepts. And so we have to logically treat homosexual and lesbian relationships to the same category as heterosexual relationship. In other words, the law of kamma, the understanding of goodness and that which brings forth happiness in future lives and happiness in this life... which mean we have to look at homosexuality in the same light as heterosexuality, in other words, if its a loving, caring, non-exploitative relationship, with consenting adults at appropriate age, there seems to be nothing morally wrong with it... In fact, there are many disciples in Perth who have homosexual relationships and they are very happy to know that they are accepted into the Buddhist order, and that they can come and practice Dhamma, and indeed they are jolly good Buddhist who serves the Buddhist community in Western Australia and other places with the diligence and care which is very commendable. And they do learn from the talks and guidance of Buddhism very wonderful ways to live with their partners in a wholesome environment, in a caring relation, which have benefited themselves and others... As far as kamma is concern, it depends on how you are homosexual, not that they are homosexuals..."

Although there are a few dissenters, the majority of western Buddhist teachers and scholars agree that homosexuality as such is not immoral. Critics of this position could point out that western Buddhists are more influenced by modern liberal values than they are by authentic Buddhism,

and that traditional Asian Buddhists have a very different attitude towards homosexuality. But many Asian Buddhist leaders agree with their western colleagues. Venerable K. Sri Dhammananda, the Chief High Priest of Malaysia, had said: "In summary, homosexuality, like heterosexuality arises from ignorance, and is certainly not 'sinful' in a Christian sense. All forms of sex increase lust, craving, and attachment to the body. With wisdom we learn to grow out of these attachments. We do not condemn homosexuality as wrong and sinful, but we do not condone it either, simply because it, like other forms of sex, delays our deliverance from Samsara." In personal communication with Venerable Dhammananda on the question of homosexuality said to me: "I can't see what all the fuss is over. It's all about whether you are good, not the gender of the person you are sleeping with."

In August 2011 the Young Buddhist Association of Malaysia held a seminar called 'Homosexuality: Controversy in the Midst of Morality and Social Values'. The three speakers, leading Malaysian Buddhists; Bhikkhuni Miao Jan, Ang Choo Hong and Yap Hok Heng; asserted that homosexuality is not contrary to Buddhist ethics, clarified various arguments opposing homosexuality, and made appeals for a better understanding of homosexuality. Other senior Asian Buddhist monks and nuns with similar attitudes include the Sri Lankan Bellanvila Sudaththa, the well-known Thai scholar-monk Bhikkhu Mettanando and Bhikkhuni Zhao Hui of Taiwan.

In October 2013 a group of mostly high profile religious leaders signed a petition urging the British Prime Minister John Cameron to rethink his



plans to legalize same-sex marriage. Of the 53 signatory the only Buddhist was a Mr. John Beard, a member of the Birmingham Buddhist Vihara. Mr. Beard is not a Buddhist scholar, is little-known beyond the organization of which he is a member and does not represent the British Buddhist community or even the Theravadin community, either in an official capacity or in his opinion. No Buddhist leaders, scholars or monks signed the petition.

## What about the *Pandaka*?



Certain writers, unacquainted with the scriptures and relying on secondary sources, have claimed that the Buddha forbade homosexuals from entering the Sangha, the Buddhist monastic fraternity. If this is correct it would imply that the Buddha or at least his early disciples, discriminated against homosexuals. It is therefore worthwhile to look at this claim more closely. One of the rules in the Vinaya Pitaka, the monastic code, says that a type of male called a *paṇḍaka* should not be ordained and if he inadvertently has been he should be disrobed. The etymology of *paṇḍaka* is unclear but it may be derived from *apa* + *aṇḍa* meaning no eggs, or as might be said when referring to an effeminate male, “no balls”.

The incident that prompted this rule gives us some idea of what *paṇḍakas* are or at least how they might behave. Once a monk who was a *paṇḍaka* went to different groups of men asking each of them to “defile” (*dūsatha*) him. All of them refused except the mahouts and grooms in the elephant stables who were happy to oblige, although after they had satisfied themselves they “grumbled and became annoyed and critical”<sup>19</sup>. The final part of this incident is telling. Even today some heterosexual men will

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<sup>19</sup> Vinaya I,85

engage in sex with homosexuals while regarding them with contempt for doing so. Obviously a *paṇḍaka* is a homosexual of some sort or a homosexual who behaves in a particular way.

It is likely that the ancient Indians were unclear about the distinctions between hermaphrodites, cross-dressers, transgendered and intersex people, eunuchs and homosexuals and lumped them all together. It is also likely that they were unaware that many, perhaps most, homosexuals are no difference in deportment, speech and mannerisms from heterosexuals and consequently they thought of homosexuals mainly as effeminate men or masculine woman, a misunderstanding still very prevalent. It is probable therefore, that *paṇḍaka* does not mean homosexuals as such, but effeminate, promiscuous, self-advertising homosexuals. If this is so, the rule concerning *paṇḍakas* becoming monks would not be because of their same-sex attraction but because they might be a disruptive influence within an all-male community. Homosexuals are as capable of maintaining celibacy as heterosexuals and so there is no sound reason why they should be excluded from the monastic order.

## What Causes Homosexuality?



Is there anything in the Buddhist doctrine that could be drawn upon to help explain the phenomena of same-sex attraction? A popular although rather naive answer to this question is that homosexuals were of the opposite gender in their last lives and the inclinations of the opposite gender has carried over into the present life. This explanation becomes unconvincing when we realize that many gays are happy being male, indeed some are distinctly masculine in appearance, outlook and interests, while many lesbians are content being female and are as feminine as heterosexual women.

Another version of the rebirth theory is that homosexuality is an outcome of something negative done in a former life, that it is the result of bad kamma. The problem with this theory is that it is based on a misunderstanding of the Buddha's teaching of kamma (see *Buddhist Ethics*). It also incorrectly assumes that all homosexuals are inevitably unhappy or disadvantaged, which was not even the case before the enlightened reforms of the last few decades and even less so now. Did kamma change its mind about homosexuality, deciding to "punish" homosexuals previously but now changing its mind?

But perhaps it is not answers to the question of what causes homosexuality that is the problem, but the question itself. Just how problematic this question is, becomes apparent when we change it slightly and ask: "What causes heterosexuality?" Most people would answer that heterosexuality does not have "a cause" beyond the natural concomitants that determine sexuality. It is a naturally occurring phenomena, and perhaps homosexuality is the same.

We might add further that the Buddha was not really in the business of giving explanations to every question that can be asked. Buddhism is quite happy to leave such matters to those who specialize in whatever field a question is related to. The Buddha's primary concern was suffering and how it can be overcome. Punitive laws, ignorance, social exclusion, discrimination, etc. are causes of a great deal of misery in the present life and they are things that can be changed or rectified.

# Transgenderism



A person described as transgendered or transsexual usually identifies as, and desires to live and be accepted as, a member of the sex opposite to that indicated by his or her body. Thus some individuals have a strong feeling that they are female despite having male genitals or that they are a man despite having a woman's genitals. Such people often say that they feel they are "in the wrong body". Ancient Indian literature contains numerous myths about people who spontaneously changed sex, usually as a result of having desire or sometimes even just admiration, for someone of the same sex as them self. Several such stories are also found in Buddhist sources. The commentary to the Dhammapada (ca. 5<sup>th</sup> century CE) includes a story about a man named Soreyya who changed into a woman after becoming entranced by a certain monk's beautiful complexion. Later he/she married and bore two children<sup>20</sup>. The Pali Tipitaka mentions several different types of transgendered states and individuals – the man-like woman (*vepurisikā*), sexual indistinctness (*sambhinna*), one having the characteristics of both

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<sup>20</sup> Dhammapada Atthakatha I, 324

genders (*ubhatovyañjanaka*), etc<sup>21</sup>. The existence of transgenderism is taken for granted in Buddhist literature with no moral judgments made about it. Various theories have been posited to explain transgenderism – that it is a psychological or hormonal abrogation or that it has genetic or environmental causes. The Buddhist doctrine of rebirth could help explain it. A person may be reborn as, say, a woman in numerous successive lives during which time feminine attitudes, desires, traits and dispositions become strongly imprinted on the mind. This would determine that she be continually reborn into a female body or that her consciousness would shape the new embryo into a female form – whatever factors are responsible for the physical characteristic of gender. Then, for either kammic, genetic or other reasons, she may get reborn into a male body while retaining all the long-established feminine psychological traits. 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. The Buddha said that traits or dispositions (*vāśasā*) 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*)<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> Vinaya III, 129

<sup>22</sup> Udana 28

# Homosexuality in Buddhist Cultures



Homosexuality had existed in and been recognized as a type of sexuality by all Buddhist cultures as it has everywhere else. While it has usually been regarded with a mixture of disapproval, derision or sometimes sympathy, it has rarely been subject to severe social or legal restrictions. The traditional legal codes of neither Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Laos or Cambodia criminalized homosexuality. Same-sex attraction is frequently mentioned in Chinese and Japanese documents but rarely if ever gets a mention in south and south-east Asian history until the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>23</sup>.

The Christian tradition of moral crusading does not fit comfortably with Buddhist attitudes to morality. Buddhism has traditionally taught and recommended its ethical values and then left it up to individuals as to whether abide by them or not, only going beyond this when behaviour harms other individuals. The laws criminalizing homosexuality in Burma and Sri Lanka owe more to British colonial attitudes than they do to traditional legal thinking. The recent campaign, rather ill-thought out and

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<sup>23</sup> See *Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition of China*, Bret Hinsch 1992; and *The Love of the Samurai: A Thousand Years of Japanese Homosexuality*, by Tsuneo Watanabe, 1972. *Same-Sex Love in India*, Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai, 2000



haphazard it must be said, against “gay perverts” in Sri Lanka has its origins in the recent rise of a chauvinistic nationalism which sees homosexuality as “foreign”. It may also have been encouraged to some degree by the recent and understandable concern about widespread sex tourism in the country. Sri Lanka has been predominately Buddhist longer than any other country and has a detailed history going back to the first centuries BCE. And yet until the arrival of the Europeans in the 16<sup>th</sup> century there is only a single reference to homosexuality in the records. In the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE Buddhaghosa wrote commentaries on the Buddhist scriptures in which he explained *pandakas*, although in a confused and stereotyped manner<sup>24</sup>. In the very places where one would expect to find at least a passing reference to homosexuality the records are silent. The *Upāsakajanalankara*, for example, a 14<sup>th</sup> century Sri Lankan text for lay people, includes a long and detailed section on sexual misconduct but makes no mention of homosexuality<sup>25</sup>. Intense same-sex friendships such as that between Prince Manavamma and King Narasiha as recorded in the *Cullavamsa* were recognized and celebrated, but any suggestion of eroticism is absent<sup>26</sup>. Probably the first mention of homosexuality come from a Portuguese observer in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. “The sin of sodomy is so prevalent... that it makes us very afraid to live

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<sup>24</sup> Homosexuality as Seen in Indian Buddhist Texts’, Leonard Zwilling, in Amala Prajna: Aspects of Buddhist Studies, ed. N.H. Samtani and H. S. Prasad, 1989

<sup>25</sup> Upasakajanalankara: A Critical Edition and Study, by H. Saddhatissa, 1965

<sup>26</sup> Cullavamsa LXXIX, 1-60

there. And if one of the principle men of the kingdom is questioned about if they are not ashamed to do such a thing as ugly and dirty, to this they respond that they do everything that they see the king doing, because that is the custom among them.”<sup>27</sup> While this claim may well be true, it should to be treated with caution. Christian missionaries have long had the habit of depicting non-Christian cultures as morally degenerate and licentious in order to justify and win support for their conversion efforts. Perhaps a more objective observer of pre-modern Sri Lanka was the 17<sup>th</sup> century Englishman John Knox who lived in the country for 20 years and spoke fluent Sinhala. Concerning the king of Kandy at that time he wrote: “Most of his Attendants are Boyes, and Young Men, that are well favoured, and of good Parentage. For the supplying himself with these, he gives order to his Dissava’s or Governors of the countreys to pick and choose out Boyes, that are comely and of good Descent, and send them to the Court. These boyes go bare-headed with long hair hanging down their backs. Not that he is guilty of Sodomy, nor did I ever hear the Sin so much as mentioned among them.”<sup>28</sup> Pre-modern Sri Lankans may well not have spoken about homosexuality but it would have been as common there as it is in all other cultures.

Concerning the state of monasticism in contemporary Sri Lanka anthropologist H. L. Seneviratne writes of the “rampancy of homosexual

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<sup>27</sup> Kingship and Conversion in Sixteenth Century Sri Lanka, A. Strathern, 2007, p.122

<sup>28</sup> Robert Knox, An Historical Relation of the Island of Ceylon, 1681, reprint 1958, p. 35.

abuse of the young in monasteries”, alleging that this is “generally taken for granted, with no notice of it being taken by either the monks or the laity”<sup>29</sup>. I can only say that during my own two decade experience as a monk in Sri Lanka I saw little evidence of homosexuality within the Sangha and never did I find it “taken for granted”.

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<sup>29</sup> The Work of Kings, 1999

# Marriage in Buddhism



Marriage (*āvāhaviḥva*) is the formal and legal joining of a man and a woman which usually takes place in a ceremony called a wedding. For Buddhism marriage is a secular institution, an arrangement between two people or two families and Buddhism does not insist upon monogamy, polygamy, polyandry or any other form of marriage. There were several forms of marriage in ancient India, the most common being those arranged by the parents or guardians, those where the couple chose each other with the parent's approval, and elopement. The ancient law books called this second form Svayaṃvara and the third Gāndharva. It was thought good for the bride and groom to be the same age (*tulyavaya*), ideally 16, although the *Kāma Sūtra* recommends that the bride be three years younger than the groom. The Buddha saw faithfulness (*anubbata* or *assava*) as an essential component to marriage<sup>30</sup>, he mentioned adultery (*aticariya*) as against the third Precept and he said nothing about divorce. The Buddha also thought it inappropriate for old men to marry women much younger than themselves<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> Digha Nikaya III,190

<sup>31</sup> Sutta Nipata 110

Traditionally, Buddhists have practised the form of marriage which prevail in the society in which they live. Although the Buddha did not advocate any particular form of marriage, it is clear that he favoured monogamy. His father Suddhodana had two wives and as a prince he could have had several wives also, but he chose to have only one. In a discourse on marriage, the Buddha only discusses monogamy, again implying that he accepted this as the best form of marriage<sup>32</sup>. He said that if a woman lacks merit she might have to contend with a co-wife (*sapattī*<sup>33</sup>, and the scriptures discuss the disadvantages of polygamy for women. "Being a co-wife is painful,"<sup>34</sup> "A woman's worst misery is to quarrel with her co-wives."<sup>35</sup> Such problems are confirmed by the *Kāma Sūtra* which describes the tensions and manoeuvrings between several wives in the same household. There seems little doubt that it was for these reasons that the Jātaka councils: "Do not have a wife in common with other"<sup>36</sup>.

Having been both a husband and briefly a father, the Buddha was able to speak of marriage and parenthood from personal experience. A husband, he said, should honour and respect his wife, never disparage her, be faithful to her, give her authority and provide for her financially. A wife should do

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<sup>32</sup> Anguttara Nikaya IV, 91

<sup>33</sup> Samyutta Nikaya IV, 249

<sup>34</sup> Therigatha 216

<sup>35</sup> Ja.IV,316

<sup>36</sup> Ja.VI,286

her work properly, manage the servants, be faithful to her husband, protect the family income and be skilled and diligent<sup>37</sup>. He said that a couple who are following the Dhamma will “speak loving words to each other” (*aññamañña piyaṃvādā*)<sup>38</sup> and that “to cherish one’s children and spouse is the greatest blessing” (*puttadārassa saṅgaho ... etaṃ maṅgalam uttamaṃ*)<sup>39</sup>. He said that “a good wife is the supreme soulmate” (*bharyā va paramā sakhā*)<sup>40</sup> and the Jātaka comments that a husband and wife should live “with joyful minds, of one heart and in harmony” (*pamodamānā ekacittā samaggavāsaṃ*)<sup>41</sup>. The Buddha criticized the Brahmans for buying their wives rather than “coming together in harmony and out of mutual affection” (*sampiyena pi saṃvāsaṃ samaggaṭṭhāya sampavattenti*)<sup>42</sup>, implying that he thought this a far better motive for marriage. “In this world, union without love is suffering” says the Jātaka (*lokismiṃ hi appiyasampayogo va dukkha*)<sup>43</sup>.

According to the Buddha’s understanding, if a husband and wife love each other deeply and have similar kamma, they may be able to renew their relationship in the next life<sup>44</sup>. He also said that the strong affinity two people

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<sup>37</sup> Digha Nikaya III, 190

<sup>38</sup> Anguttara Nikaya II, 59

<sup>39</sup> Sutta Nikaya 262

<sup>40</sup> Samyutta Nikaya I, 37

<sup>41</sup> Jataka II, 122

<sup>42</sup> Anguttara Nikaya II, 222

<sup>43</sup> Jataka II, 205

<sup>44</sup> Anguttara Nikaya II, 161

feel towards each other might be explained by them having had a strong love in a previous life. “By living together in the past and by affection in the present, love is born as surely as a lotus is born in water.<sup>45</sup>” This idea is elaborated in the *Mahavastu*: “When love enters the mind and the heart is joyful, the intelligent man can say certainty ‘This woman has lived with me before’.<sup>46</sup>”

The ideal Buddhist couple would be Nakulapita and Nakulamata who were devoted disciples of the Buddha and who had been happily married for many years. Once Nakulapita told the Buddha in the presence of his wife: ‘Lord, ever since Nakulamata was brought to my home when I was a mere boy and she a mere girl, I have never been unfaithful to her, not even in thought, let alone in body.<sup>47</sup>’ On another occasion, Nakulamata devotedly nursed her husband through a long illness, encouraging and reassuring him all the while. When the Buddha came to know of this, he said to Nakulapita: “You have benefitted, good sir, you have greatly benefitted, in having Nakulamata full of compassion for you, full of love, as your mentor and teacher.” (*anukampikā, atthakāmā, ovādikā, anusasikā*)<sup>48</sup>. From the Buddhist perspective, these qualities would be the recipe for an enduring and

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<sup>45</sup> Jataka II, 235

<sup>46</sup> Mahavastu III,185

<sup>47</sup> Anguttara Nikaya II, 61

<sup>48</sup> Anguttara Nikaya III, 295-8

enriching relationship – faithfulness, mutual love and compassion and being each others’ spiritual mentor and teacher.

It seems that throughout history most ordinary Buddhists have been monogamous, although monarchs were sometimes polygamous, and polyandry was common in Tibet until just recently. In the highlands of Sri Lanka during the medieval period polyandry was practised, and it still is in parts of the western Indian Himalayas. Today, monogamy is the only legally accepted form of marriage in all Buddhist countries, although the former king of Bhutan had two wives. There is no specific Buddhist wedding ceremony; different countries have their own customs which monks do not perform or participate in. However, just before or after the wedding the bride and groom often go to a monastery to receive a blessing from a monk. It should be kept in mind that the early Christian attitude to sex and marriage was similar to that of early Buddhism’s – giving them a place, but only a secondary place, after celibacy and the life of unmarried holiness. Jesus was unmarried and said nothing about marriage other than to forbid divorce (Matthew 19,6; Luke 16,18) except on the grounds of adultery; and to maintain that marriages do not take place in heaven (Matthew 22,30. Mark 12,25; Luke 20,25). His views on the family were also closer to the Buddha’s, although much more radical, than they are to those of some modern Christians. “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even their own life, such a person cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14,26). “Everyone who has left houses



or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life” (Matthew 19,29). “For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother’ ...a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household” (Matthew 10:34-6). St. Paul saw marriage as a concession to the weak-willed. “Now to the unmarried and to widows I say this; it is good for them to stay unmarried, as am I. But if they cannot control themselves they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with lust” (1Corinthians 7:8-9). Such attitudes were the norm during Christianity’s first centuries. Commenting on St. Paul advice not to touch a woman (1 Cor. 7:1), St. Jerome (347-420) said: “It is good, he says, for a man not to touch a woman. If it is good not to touch a woman, then it is bad to touch one; for there is no opposite to goodness but badness. But if it be bad and the evil is pardoned, the reason for the concession is to prevent worse evil.” Early Christianity was suspicious of all expressions of sexuality and like early Buddhism, considered virginity to be the preferred state. The particular condemnation of homosexuality was probably partly because of its association with classical culture, something the early Christians despised.

# Buddhism and Same-Sex Marriage



So much for the Buddhist concept of conventional marriage. But what would be a Buddhist position on same-sex marriage? It is perhaps important to point out that the idea of state sanctioned, legally recognized same-sex marriage is a very recent one, and perhaps an even more radical social innovation than the woman's liberation movement starting in the 1960s, and that Buddhism everywhere in Asia is generally conservative. I know of no Asian Buddhist leaders, scholars or thinkers who have commented on this same-sex marriage as yet, but I imagine they would find it a perplexing concept. However, if we accept that same-sex attraction and behaviour should be judged the same as their heterosexual equivalents, it would seem that Buddhism should have no ethical or philosophical objections to same-sex marriage. Having said this, traditional Buddhist cultures are changing at far slower rates than Western societies are and same-sex marriage is unlikely to be advocated or receive support for many decades.

For Buddhism and Buddhists in the west and in developed Asian states and regions such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore, Japan, etc. the situation is different. Several arguments can be put forward for the desirability of legalizing same-sex unions, whether with the same

status as heterosexual marriage or with something similar to it. The most cogent of these arguments is that loving partnerships are good for the individuals involved and for society in general, and when given social acceptance and legal recognition are more likely to endure.

Until recently homosexuality was illegal in most Western countries and was almost always only referred to within a criminal context. Consequently, not only did the general public associate homosexuals with criminality, homosexuals thought of themselves as criminals too. Even when they did not live in fear of the law, they could be subject to ridicule, contempt and, perhaps just as soul destroying, pity, if their fellows knew of or suspected their inclinations. Such things shaped the homosexual character and outlook – secretive, anxious, never letting the guard down, delft at pretence and hypocrisy and often self-loathing. Even the comfort of religion was denied to them by the churches' stand on "the unspeakable vice" and the doctrine that it was punished by eternal damnation. It is hardly surprising that homosexuals had such a high rate of suicide, alcohol and drug abuse and depression. Psychiatrists and criminologists took this as evidence that homosexuality was a sickness, failing to see that they were a part of the very mechanisms that were creating such problems.

Fortunately, things are changing for the better. The decriminalization of homosexuality, the gay pride movement, the "coming out" of many popular and even esteemed public figures, and the positive depiction of homosexuals in the media, etc. are now changing the perception of

homosexuals and their perception of themselves. The stigma of perversion, malignancy and sleaze is starting to fade.

As a result, the psychological well-being of homosexuals has improved markedly, although there is still a long way to go. It can only benefit a society when all groups within it are happy and healthy, when they find emotional fulfilment and develop their own unique abilities and contribute them to their society.

The next positive step that could be taken is to legalize same-sex marriage, or civil partnerships, and allow same-sex couples to adopt children. Research has shown that people in long-term loving relationships benefit physically and psychologically. It has also been shown that having children helps bind couples together. A tragic number of homosexuals indulge in and fall prey to shallow promiscuous lifestyles. Marriages or partnerships that were recognized by the state and affirmed by society would offer a healthier alternative.<sup>49</sup>

Most of the things said by the Buddha and in the Buddhist scriptures about conventional marriage would be applicable to same-sex marriages (see above *Buddhism and Marriage*). A same-sex couple should “speak loving words to each other”, live together “with joyful minds, of one heart and in harmony”, come together “in harmony and out of mutual affection”, and

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<sup>49</sup> For more on this issue see *Why Buddhists Should Support Marriage Equality*, by Bhikkhu Sujato <http://sujato.wordpress.com/2012/03/21/1430/>

consider that “to cherish one’s children and spouse is the greatest blessing”. As with heterosexual, couples same-sex partners who love each other and bond closely may be able to renew their relationship in the next life, if they have similar kamma. The Buddha told his disciple Nakulapita: “You have benefitted, good sir, you have greatly benefitted, in having your wife Nakulamātā full of compassion for you, full of love, as your mentor and teacher.” There is every reason to assume that homosexuals in close loving relationships should be similarly blessed.