

## BUDDHISM AND GAY CULTURE

The title of this talk was meant to be a little bit provocative, not the “Buddhism” part, but the “Gay Culture” part. From a Buddhist standpoint, the sexual landscape of this day and age seems very strange. Just about everybody in our culture is extremely concerned about sex, and not necessarily in a healthy way. This gives rise to several sub-groups that we can think of as “sexual cultures,” all having to do with how certain groups of people think that sex should be viewed and how it should be conducted.

In no particular order, our various sexual cultures think that sex is:

- Great.
- Depraved and sinful.
- An expression of love.
- An expression of passion.
- Only for making babies.
- The end result of a successful date.
- Something to be bought and sold.
- Not something we should talk about.
- Something we should *always* talk about.
- The downfall of society as we know it.
- God’s gift to humanity.
- God’s curse *on* humanity.
- A path to enlightenment
- A path to hell.
- Only to be practiced between women and men.
- To be practiced between consenting adults of any gender.

Is it any wonder that this culture is so neurotic when it comes to sex? We have these many different sexual cultures all bumping into each other, members of most of them claiming that only *its* view is the right view of sex. And so, because some sexual cultures are so angry that a particular kind of sex goes against *their* view of sex, there exists “gay culture,” which for purposes of our discussion includes female homosexuals, male homosexuals, transgendered people and bisexual people.

To me as a practicing Buddhist, it seems a little bit sad that we have to think of a particular group of people as having their own sexual culture. Some people I know in the LGBT community tell me that because of social pressure, which often takes the form of outright nastiness, prejudice and hatred against them, they've had to band together for purposes of mutual support, thus creating a "culture." These people tell me that the only agenda they have is to live a happy life; instead, they get marginalized, stereotyped, hated on and so forth, and this makes it very difficult for them to live a happy life, particularly when so many of the people who act so hatefully toward them are using religion to try to beat them into submission. My purpose in presenting this talk is to explain how the Buddhist tradition views homosexuality so that people of all genders, sexual preferences, religions and so on know exactly where we are on this topic.

Over 2500 years ago in northern India, a man woke up to Universal Truth. We call this awakened being the Buddha, and when he woke up one of the first things he said was, "How marvelous! All beings are endowed with wisdom and virtue!" So from the very first the Buddha said that all living beings are fundamentally complete, that anyone can become awakened to Universal Truth. There were no strings attached...all beings could wake up.

The Buddha taught that the cause of all our problems is that we desire, we crave, and this feeds the basic illusion that we're somehow a completely discrete, separate being, when in fact we are all part of an interconnected whole. We have great attachments to what we mistakenly see as "externals," and it's the pursuit of these so-called externals that prolongs our suffering. The Buddha's path is designed to free us from desire and attachment so that we actualize our true nature and so stop the cycle of suffering that has plagued us for innumerable lifetimes. We call that Nirvana.

The Buddha founded a community that we know as the Sangha, a community of those who left their homes to follow the Buddha's way. This term is still used in Buddhism to denote any community of Buddhist practitioners. The original Sangha was divided into a woman's Sangha and a men's Sangha, and because the sexual drive in human beings is so strong, the members of both Sanghas were expected to be celibate. This was so the sexual urge would not interfere with the quest for enlightenment.

The original Sangha had rules of conduct which developed over time, including the rule about celibacy. Among the proscribed behaviors was homosexuality, but it was included simply because homosexuality was a kind of sexual behavior, not because it was inherently wrong.

There was a rule that said that a particular person known as a *pandaka* could not be ordained. Pandakas were homosexual males; however the problem with pandakas was not their sexual orientation but rather their flamboyance. Pandakas were people who were flamboyant about their sexuality to the point that they would engage in very heavy flirting. This kind of behavior was not conducive to the serene practice of getting beyond one's desires, so they were barred from becoming members of the Sangha.

As far as the prevailing Indian culture of the Buddha's time was concerned, he was a bit of a radical. He actually said that women could become enlightened without having to wait around to be reborn as a man, which was the prevailing wisdom of the day. In a text we know as the Kalama Sutra, he said that tradition, scriptural authority, divine revelation and one's own point of view were not sufficient to determine what is right and what is wrong. That *really* went against the prevailing wisdom of the day!

The Buddha said that there were three factors that should be taken into account when it comes to making moral judgments:

1. Is the way we act toward others the way we would wish others to act toward us?
2. Do our deeds cause suffering or do our deeds prevent suffering and lead to happiness?
3. Do our deeds cause us to get closer to our personal goal of transcending suffering and attaining Nirvana?

These three factors were the basis of what Buddhist call the Three Pure Precepts, which are the basis of all Buddhist vows:

1. To cease to do that which causes suffering.
2. To do only good.
3. To cultivate our personal virtue.

The original Buddhist rules of conduct, which are known as the Vinaya, listed a number of sexual activities that were prohibited to nuns and monks:

- Adultery.
- Promiscuity.
- Sexual assault.
- Child molestation.
- Sex with anyone who is considered not to be of age.
- Having sex with someone who is helpless or in captivity.
- Sexual harassment.
- Bestiality.
- Masturbation.

As far as laypeople were concerned, the Buddhist view on sex was that it is permitted:

1. Where there's mutual consent.
2. When it causes no harm.
3. When it does not involve breaking one's commitment to another.
4. When it is engaged in with affection and respect and for mutual satisfaction.

You'll notice that there are some things that we find in other traditions and cultures that are missing in the Buddhist view:

- There's no distinction made between homosexual and heterosexual sex.
- There's no requirement that heterosexual relations are strictly for the purpose of procreation.
- There was no mention of homosexuality in any of the Buddha's discourses during his 45-year teaching career.

There are several interesting stories and legends in early Buddhist literature having to do with homosexuals. One such is the story of Soreyya, a homosexual man who is said to have attained Arhatship, a state of enlightenment that allows one to realize Nirvana. This was the highest attainment to which one could aspire in the early Sangha. The Buddha's cousin Ananda, who was his personal attendant, is said to have been a homosexual man for hundreds of existences. He eventually became an Arhat too.

The legend of Vakkali points out that homosexual males can become enlightened not by renouncing their sexuality, but by renouncing their desire, just as anyone else can. Vakkali was a man who was attracted to the Buddha's teachings because he was attracted to the Buddha's

physical form. The Buddha was an extremely handsome man who had skin that was so coppery in tone that it appeared to some to be golden. As the story goes, after Vakkali joined the Sangha he spent most of his time following the Buddha around just so he could gaze upon his physical body, instead of doing those things that other monks did. One day, as Vakkali was ogling the Buddha, the Buddha asked him why he was so enthralled with what he called “this stinking, rotten body,” referring to its impermanence. He told Vakkali that seeing the Dharma, or the truth of existence, is seeing the Buddha, and vice-versa, then commanded Vakkali to leave. Vakkali was so broken up by this order that he tried to kill himself, but the Buddha intervened, taught him more about the nature of the Dharma, and Vakkali immediately became liberated.

It’s useful at this point to delve a little bit into the Buddhist teaching of karma to further understand Buddhism’s view of homosexuality. Karma means “cause and effect.” All things we can perceive (and many we cannot) arise from a variety of causes based on the conditions which are present. When we talk about karma in the personal sense, those things which happen to us as individuals, we say that what causes us to create karma in this and other lifetimes is volitional action.

A volitional action is an action that comes from having a sense that one is a discrete self, in simpler terms, a deed which we mean to do. So it is *intention* based on a mistaken sense of a discrete self which leads to volitional actions, which in turn create karma. In Buddhism we say that we create karma through our words, deeds and thoughts. In the case of things which happen to us, we say that the karma we have created before the event itself has met the proper condition for its flowering, and so we experience the effects of that karma. This is the Buddhist explanation of why bad things happen to good people, why good things happen to bad people, why good things happen to good people and why bad things happen to bad people.

Karma is also part of the equation when it comes to preferences. Over a span of lifetimes we develop extremely complex patterns of thought which manifest themselves in each succeeding lifetime. We call this habituated thought. If we have a particular sexual attraction to women or men, it is in large part because we have had these attractions before. Considering the nature of karma, rebirth and the interconnectedness of life it is safe to say that we’ve all been women and men. So it is logical from the standpoint of karma that our physical attraction to one gender or the other, which is ultimately a function of the mind, has been conditioned by our actions in many previous lifetimes.

Here's something which may sound a bit controversial: Buddhism would say that homosexuality is one's natural condition *and* has something to do with conscious choice. The combination of conscious choices, the ingrained desires that these choices help to create, and traumatic events that contributed to our sexual preferences in many previous lives have now resulted in the birth of a person who possesses the aggregate of those preferences. And since that aggregate of sexual desire tends to favor one gender more often than not, this person too will tend to favor one gender. However, the prevailing Buddhist view is that an individual arrives in this lifetime with much of that preference already intact regardless of what gender form that individual may take. We may decide that we like women or men, but our underlying preferences, which are the result of our accumulated karma, are what point us in that direction. Buddhist thought does not say that our sexual preference is either good or bad, simply that it is directly related to cause and effect. The bottom line is that from the Buddhist perspective, it's not who you've been in previous existences but who you are now that is most important.

At this point I think it's helpful to look briefly at how Buddhism developed over time and how the Buddhist view of sexuality developed along with it. After several hundred years of close examination of the Buddha's teachings, there arose a kind of Buddhism that became known as the "Mahayana" or "Greater Vehicle." One of the main characteristics of the Mahayana was that it put laypeople on a par with monastics as far as the attainment of enlightenment was concerned: *everyone* could become enlightened, you didn't necessarily have to leave home and become a monk.

Some of the Mahayana teachings which had a bearing on Buddhist sexual attitudes included:

- The teaching of Emptiness, that all phenomena are interconnected; nothing exists as a totally discrete entity, apart from anything else.
- The teaching of Buddha-Nature, that the essential nature of all sentient beings is that of a fully enlightened Buddha.
- That sex is not necessarily a hindrance to enlightenment since enlightenment is found in ordinary behavior.
- That compassion and wisdom together comprise enlightened behavior.

As in the earlier days of the Buddhist tradition, none of these teachings made any mention of homosexuality or heterosexuality as being better or worse than the other. The teaching of Buddha-Nature meant that regardless of sexual preference all sentient beings deserve our respect, for their essential nature is Buddhahood itself. The teachings of Emptiness,

compassion and wisdom meant that all beings have their own uniqueness and yet are part of a universally interconnected whole, so we recognize those who are different from us as being part of our own self as well and treat them accordingly, assisting them along the path to enlightenment.

For Mahayana Buddhists, just as with the early Buddhists (with the exception of some celibate communities), the underlying attitude about sex was concerned with not doing that which causes harm. Not engaging in sexual misconduct meant treating sex with respect and compassion, regardless of whether that sex was homosexual or heterosexual. It meant that in sexual relations one should be compassionate but not passionate in the sense of surrendering to base desires, since desire is a hindrance to enlightenment. People were asked to remember that there's no difference between sex and Buddha-Nature itself if that sex is mutually fulfilling and not egoistic.

Respect and tolerance have been the Buddhist ideal when it comes to peoples' sexual preferences, and they remain the ideal today. But of course, there have been numerous instances where Buddhists have demonstrated intolerance toward people who have a same-sex orientation. The thing to remember about the Buddhist tradition is that throughout its history it has taken on many of the characteristics of the cultures through which it has passed, and in more than a few of those cultures there has been an attitude of intolerance toward homosexuality present, just as there is be in the modern west.

One of the reasons for this kind of homophobia in predominantly Buddhist countries such as contemporary Thailand has to do with misogyny and the overwhelming desire for descendents in much of Asian culture. Misogyny, as you know, often manifests itself as a nearly pathological fear of anything which even hints at having feminine traits. To many people homosexual males seem overly feminine, and so they are hated or feared or both. In many Asian cultures the continuation of one's bloodline is of paramount importance, so sexual unions which cannot produce children may be seen as perverted since they don't produce children.

In some areas of Asia, karma is being dismissed as a contributing cause of one's sexual preferences. This phenomenon is seen not as a challenge to the Buddhist teachings about karma, but as the advancement of an anti-homosexual agenda by the undermining of these teachings. Just a couple of years ago, a very eminent Thai Buddhist monk called for the



expulsion of homosexual monks, saying that those who have such “sexual deviations” should not even be allowed to become monks in the first place. Fortunately there were a number of other Thai monks who challenged that view (you see, our tradition can get hijacked too!).

In one of the more famous incidents, the Dalai Lama, who's the head of the Tibetan government in exile and probably the world's most well-known Buddhist, wrote in one of his many books that “homosexuality, whether it is between men or between women, is not improper in itself. What is improper is the use of organs already defined as inappropriate for sexual contact,” referring to oral, anal and manual sex. After representatives of the LGBT community demanded a meeting with him, the Dalai Lama did admit that some of these views might have more to do with cultural factors than with Buddhism. His representatives have repeatedly said that the Dalai Lama is against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation, and that he supports tolerance, compassion and human rights.

I was surfing the internet recently and I stumbled upon a Google entry that said, “Zen and the Origins of Homosexuality.” When I clicked onto the page I was greeted with the pronouncement that, “No matter what your psychologist or psychiatrist tells you, homosexuality can be cured!” It gets better: “Don't go into orbit! Homosexuality is not a disease. What I mean by ‘cured’ is, your homosexuality will be removed automatically and without your actually doing anything to change your sexuality except buying and reading *Zen and the Origins of Homosexuality* and following the easy, simple instructions. I guarantee it! How can I guarantee it? *Because I invented the method and used it on myself!*” The ensuing explanation sounded like a mish-mash of dream analysis, Scientology, Kaballah and anything else this fellow had lying around his library. So now people are even hijacking Zen, which is rooted in a tradition which encourages tolerance and respect for all beings, homosexuals and heterosexuals alike.

As I said at the beginning, the title of this lecture, “Buddhism and Gay Culture” (which the Plain Dealer saw fit not to include in its announcement), is a little bit provocative. I hope it was the kind of provocative that provokes us to think. It's a shame that many people who have same-sex preferences have even had to develop a so-called “gay culture” because of rampant prejudice, hatred and ignorance. This sort of unkindness is seen by the Buddhist tradition as being very deluded, the kind of behavior that is rooted in what we call the Three Poisons of craving, anger and ignorance...the kind of behavior that causes eons worth of needless suffering for its victims and for its perpetrators....the kind of behavior that takes faith



traditions that are based on kindness and love and turns them into weapons that are used to beat anyone who does not comply into submission. Forget “God culture,” “Gay culture” or any of the so-called subcultures that we keep creating. It’s time to emphasize *human* culture.

I’ll never forget seeing the picture of the fellow from the Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas who was standing out near the I-X center during the recent memorial service for the local Marines who were killed in Iraq. The sign he held said, “God Hates Fags.” What a shame, I thought; this person doesn’t even know that he’s suffering. This man is living in extreme ignorance and hatred, and he even believes that his own deity, his own divine being that he reveres and worships, is so hateful that he kills soldiers whose country upholds the rights of gay people. But as a Buddhist I cannot hate this man. All I can do is to see what causes this kind of behavior, to have compassion for this man as a suffering being, and to do what I can to negate the suffering that his actions are creating for himself and for others.

One of the main reasons for this lecture is to reach out to the community of Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transgendered persons and to let them know that the Buddhist tradition harbors them no ill will in any way...that we see each living being as being an enlightened Buddha-in-the making and that we respect them as such...and to let them know that they are welcome to study the teachings and practices of the Buddhist tradition here, regardless of what faith they might follow, to help them live a peaceful, productive and enlightened life.

In closing, I would ask you all to place your palms together and listen to a Buddhist prayer that we call The Four Immeasurables. As we listen to this short prayer, let us extend these wishes to all sentient beings, regardless of how they may feel about us or how we may feel about them.

May all beings have true happiness.

May all beings be freed from suffering and its causes.

May all beings be one with the Highest Perfect Joy.

May all beings dwell in equanimity, freed from discrimination and attachment.