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## LGBTQ Buddhism

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## LGBTQ Buddhism

Jae Bates

If you type “what does [insert any religion here] say” into Google, the search bar will auto-fill to the top four or five options. One of the top options will almost always be “what does [insert random religion here] say about homosexuality, gay marriage, or marriage”. Questions regarding same-sex marriage and LGBTQ identities have also become particularly popular for public research and polling organizations. This comes at a time when same-sex marriage, while federally legal, is still being debated and new “religious” freedom bills are being passed in response. Pew Research did a study and found that as of July 2015, Buddhists in the U.S. had no conclusive stance on same-sex marriage. Questions about religion and LGBTQ identities continue to be a contentious intersection. However, the discussion surrounding “what do religions say” are leaving out a crucial piece of the puzzle; they are failing to ask “how” do LGBTQ religious practitioners think of their own identities. Many LGBTQ people across the U.S. have found a home in various sects of Buddhism. This will be analyzed through various personal essays by Buddhist practitioners from *Queer Dharma Volume 2*. Ultimately, LGBTQ practitioners are drawn to Buddhism because of its non-duality, its cultural malleability, and its teachings that relate to impermanence.

First, it is important to understand that Buddhism does have core teachings regarding sexuality; however, these teachings are more specifically about sexual activity versus active celibacy. It is also important to understand the difference between the sexual ethics of lay people and monastic ethics. José Cabezón, a scholar in Tibetan studies, outlines that Buddhism is neutral towards the question of homosexuality, while the cultures and places in which Buddhism

exists are not necessarily neutral. He notes that homosexuality is more often condemned as a form of sexual activity rather than of its nature as homosexual (Cabezón qtd. in Gleig 203).

Gay Buddhist practitioners in the U.S. find the neutrality and non-duality of Buddhism to be liberating, as Mark Marion's essay in *Queer Dharma* (2000) exemplifies. Mark positions himself as a Vipassana Buddhist who attends the Bay Area's Gay Buddhist Fellowship. He discusses how at times he feels like a "bad" Buddhist because he gets lazy, impatient, and is hateful towards bigots. He then explains how this internal shame is ironic because what drew him to Buddhism was the prospect of being able to shed spiritual or religious guilt. Marion explains that in Buddhist teachings there cannot be "bad" or "good" Buddhists; there can only be Buddhists and non-Buddhists. Marion discusses how Christianity is a very dualistic religion at its core and creates dichotomies between good and bad, sinner and saint, or heaven and hell (Marion 33).

Marion's explanation of Buddhism non-dualism versus Christian dualism exemplifies why he feels Buddhism is an attractive religious alternative for LGBTQ people. The dualistic worldview often produces Christian homophobia in regards to the idea of homosexuality being opposite of heterosexuality and therefore evil instead of good. Marion also notes that the dualistic worldview creates an "us" and "them" which results in the harassment of gay people (Marion 34). The non-dualistic nature of Buddhism allows gay people like Marion to see their sexuality not as a "bad" form of sexuality but rather just another form of sexuality. Additionally, Thich Nhat Hanh, one of the most venerated Zen monks in modernity, notes that "the base-foundation of everything is the same" and that gay and lesbian people are different but exist on the same ground as heterosexual people (Nhat Hanh 119). Thich Nhat Hanh further emphasizes the non-duality of Buddhist acceptance for sexual minorities, or any minority for that matter.

This type of egalitarian positioning of homosexuality and heterosexuality is optimal for the self-acceptance and spiritual self-conception of Buddhists.

Furthermore, Buddhism has a long history of cultural malleability and various forms of Western LGBTQ-inclusive Buddhism are a continuation of that history. Buddhism has changed and transformed as it has spread across Asia. Due to its non-essentialist and egalitarian nature, it has been able to fit into the mold of the indigenous culture wherever it spread. For example, Korean Buddhism is particular to the peninsula because Buddhism transformed itself to fit into Korean shamanist practices there to be more acceptable in Korean society. This type of cultural change has been common as Buddhism has spread throughout the world, and even within single nations.

This history of cultural malleability makes Buddhism a perfect religion to “queer” or to make into explicitly LGBTQ-centric spaces. Jim Wilson, a teacher at the San Francisco Gay Buddhist Fellowship, explains how the non-essentialist forming of Buddhism is helpful for LGBTQ communities. Wilson first explains that in Western Buddhism, different identity groups have been able to mold Buddhism to fit the needs and identities of their particular communities. Women’s Buddhist groups and Black Buddhist organizations have both created particular interpretations of Buddhism to best fit their communities (Wilson 53). Wilson expands that Buddhism can be changed to fit cultural needs, but is also “the same” because people are not separate despite differences (56). This ability to be spiritually and religiously equal to other Buddhists but also to be able to focus on cultural particularities, such as homosexuality, informs and liberates LGBTQ Buddhists. This ideal of cultural malleability is important for a positive self-conception of a queer religious identity because it means that LGBTQ people are not doing anything that is in direct conflict with Buddhism, nor do they have to do the work of

“reconciling” queerness with Buddhism because there is nothing within Buddhism that says it cannot also be part of queer culture.

One specific Buddhist teaching that has been molded to inform LGBTQ identities is the teachings on impermanence. Impermanence is the belief that nothing is going to always be the exact way that it is now. Eugene Bush describes a Zen priest’s teachings on “Not Always So.” Bush explains that the teachings of impermanence mean that even if marriage is currently viewed as only between a man and a woman, this will not always be so because nothing is absolute (113). Furthermore, Ann Gleig notes in *Queering Buddhism or Buddhist De-Queering?* that an interviewee feels that impermanence is liberating “because it allows [them] to look at the majority and say this isn’t permanent either” (208). Impermanence constructs the possibility for a future where marriage is accepted as something other than just between a man and a woman, and offers hope for a future that is more affirming of LGBTQ people. Additionally, impermanence can also help shape self-acceptance of changing identity. Gleig interviews a transgender person who states that Buddhist teachings on impermanence help them better understand and feel comfortable during gender transition. This unique teaching on change and impermanence makes Buddhism an ideal religious and spiritual practice for queer and trans people because they are able to take what is happening in their life and see it fit directly into the teachings. To reiterate, LGBTQ practitioners do not have to do any “reconciling” or deep reimagining of the religion; they are able to fit what is happening in their life into the non-essentialist teachings of Buddhism.

While it is undisputable that there are still people in the world who are Buddhist and intolerant of homosexuality, it is important to understand how LGBTQ Buddhists see themselves. LGBTQ people do not have control over the views or hatred of other people but have control over their own self-conception. When discussing particular religious traditions and

their acceptance of LGBTQ people or the lack thereof, the voices of LGBTQ practitioners are important to analyze because they offer insight to what pieces of practice and teachings that LGBTQ people find to be liberating or affirming. The question of Buddhist acceptance for gay marriage can not simply be answered by a Pew Research poll because of its basic neutrality and vast diversity of opinions about sexual ethics in general. In one sense, it is the most Buddhist answer for Pew to say that there is no conclusive stance on same-sex marriage because Buddhism seeks to avoid essentialist and dualistic ideas about “good” or “bad” behaviors. Ultimately, LGBTQ practitioners in the U.S. emphasize Buddhism’s non-duality, cultural malleability, and teachings regarding impermanence and change to be helpful ways to find a positive religious and spiritual identity.

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