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Buddhism and homosexuality

by Kerry Trembath

🚩 Introduction

In browsing through the Net, I have come across a number of articles relating to religion and homosexuality. Almost all of these assume a Judaeo-Christian viewpoint, perhaps with passing references to Islam and an occasional glance over the shoulder at the ancient Greeks and Romans. As I am a practicing Buddhist, I would like to share with you my perspective on how homosexuality is treated in Buddhism. We should start with a very brief outline of Buddhism, particularly in relation to how the Buddha advised us to regulate our behaviour.

What is Buddhism?

This is not an easy question to answer, because Buddhism is comprised of many systems of belief and practice, or what we call traditions. These traditions have developed in different times and different countries, and in some degree of isolation from each other. Each has developed distinctive features which to a casual observer might appear to be major differences. However, these differences are frequently merely cultural overlays, and in other cases they are only differences in emphasis or approach. All traditions in fact are underpinned by a central core of common belief and practice¹.

The teachings of the Buddha

One of the fundamental insights achieved by the Buddha through his experience of enlightenment was his analysis of suffering or unhappiness. This has been passed down to us in the form of a teaching which is traditionally described as the Four Noble Truths:

- The first of these truths is that life is characterised by suffering. Most human endeavour is concerned with trying to avoid suffering and achieve happiness.
- The second identifies the causes of suffering. Directly or indirectly, all the suffering we experience is caused by craving and ignorance. We crave so many things, and our ignorance leads us to believe that these things will make us happy.
- The third states that it is possible to transcend suffering and attain the freedom and contentment of Nirvana. This is the state attained by the Buddha, where all the characteristics we associate with this existence (birth, death, movement in time and space, and the feeling of being a separate self) do not apply.
- The fourth states that the way leading to the end of suffering is eightfold, and involves the cultivation of our speech, action, livelihood, thought, understanding, mindfulness, effort and concentration. These are sometimes summarised in three groups - morality, concentration/meditation and wisdom.

Foreword by Yawning Bread

Kerry and I communicated briefly by email, in the course of which I invited him to share his knowledge. I am pleased to host this article by him.

Buddhist precepts

Let us look more closely at morality, which provides the essential behavioural foundation on which further mental cultivation and spiritual development can take place. Ordinary Buddhists (ie those who are not monks or nuns) try to live in accordance with five precepts, which are in effect promises or undertakings which we make to ourselves. Ordained Buddhists take vows to observe additional precepts, including celibacy. The usual English translation of the five precepts is:

I undertake to observe the precept to abstain from

1. destroying or harming living beings
2. taking things not given
3. sexual misconduct
4. false speech
5. taking anything that causes intoxication or heedlessness.

Observation of these precepts helps in cultivating the positive virtues of

1. compassion
2. generosity and non-attachment
3. contentment
4. truthfulness
5. mental clarity and mindfulness.

These are not commandments, but training rules which Buddhists undertake voluntarily. They are undertaken not because we fear punishment by a deity but for our own benefit and the welfare of all other living beings. Buddhists believe that everything is subject to cause and effect, and all volitional actions have karmic consequences. If we do not behave in accordance with the precepts, we will cause suffering to others and ultimately make ourselves unhappy too.

Homosexuality and sexual misconduct

The third of the five precepts refers to sexual behaviour. In the Theravada tradition of Buddhism, with which I am most familiar, the third precept is perhaps more precisely rendered as "I undertake the rule of training not to go the wrong way for sexual pleasure". What then would constitute "going the wrong way" and would this include homosexual acts? To determine this, we need to consider the criteria which Buddhists are advised to use in making ethical judgements. From the Buddha's discourses, there can be discerned three bases on which we can make judgements about our behaviour:-

- we should consider the consequences of our actions, their effects on ourselves and others
- we should consider how we would feel if others did the same thing to us
- we should consider whether the behaviour is instrumental to our goal of Nirvana.

Using these criteria, Buddhist commentators have usually construed sexual misconduct to include rape, sexual harassment, molestation of

children, and unfaithfulness to one's spouse. Clearly, these manifestations of sexual misconduct can apply equally to homosexual and heterosexual behaviour. The third precept is not a blanket prohibition, nor a simplistic depiction of some behaviours as wrong and other behaviours as right.

In fact, Buddhist ethics have been described as utilitarian, in that they are concerned less with "good" and "evil" and more with whether an action is "skilful", ie conducive to a good end in relation to the criteria mentioned above and whether it is motivated by good intentions (based upon generosity, love and understanding) 2.

The sayings of the Buddha, as recorded in the Pali Canon, do not I believe include any explicit reference to homosexuality or to homosexual acts. This has been taken to mean that the Buddha did not consider that one's sexual orientation was relevant to his message, which was how to escape from suffering and achieve enlightenment. If it was not important enough to mention, homosexuality could not have been considered a barrier to one's moral and spiritual development.

On the other hand, the Buddha's teachings in no way exhort us to a life of hedonistic pursuit of pleasure, sexual or otherwise. While the Buddha did not deny the existence of enjoyment in this world, he pointed out that all worldly pleasure is bound up with suffering, and enslavement to our cravings will keep us spinning in a vortex of disappointment and satiation. The Buddhist's objective is not to eliminate sensual pleasures but to see them as they are through the systematic practice of mindfulness.

One feature of Buddhism which may interest gays and lesbians is that the teachings place no particular value on procreation. Marriage and the raising of children are seen as positive but are by no means compulsory. On the contrary, celibacy is in most traditions considered to be a requirement for those seeking higher levels of development as Buddhists. Monks and nuns take vows of strict celibacy, and even pious lay people undertake to be celibate at certain times in order to pursue their mental and spiritual development. This means that from the religious perspective there is no stigma which is necessarily attached to being unmarried and childless, although there may of course be social and cultural pressures which override this.

Buddhist depictions of same sex relationships

Buddhist texts contain many examples of deeply affectionate relationships between members of the same sex. One of the most popular of all Buddhist texts, the Jatakas, comprises a large collection of stories of the lives of the Buddha before his final life on this earth. The Jatakas repeatedly extol love and devotion between men, although this is never of an overtly sexual nature. In these stories the bodhisattva, or Buddha-to-be, is often shown as having a close male companion or attendant. Other texts describing the life of the historical Buddha relate the lifetime friendship of the Buddha and Ananda, who was his constant companion and personal attendant. Some writers have seen homoerotic elements in these texts 3. It is sufficient to say that loving relationships between unmarried men are treated very positively in Buddhist scriptures.

Unfortunately, it cannot be said that homosexuals in countries where Buddhists are in the majority are any more free from prejudice and discrimination than they are in other countries. Everywhere it has

taken root, Buddhism has absorbed aspects of the dominant culture, and this has sometimes been to its detriment. Neither is it true to say that people who espouse Buddhism are themselves any more free from prejudiced views than those of other persuasions. However it is clear that there is nothing in the Buddha's teachings to justify condemnation of homosexuality or homosexual acts. It seems to me that many gays and lesbians, particularly in Western countries, are drawn to Buddhism because of its tolerance and its reluctance to draw rigid moral lines, although of course I have no hard evidence for this.

Conclusion

From my readings of the Buddhist texts, and from the answers of the Buddhist monks I have questioned on this issue, I have concluded that, for lay Buddhists, any sexual act would not be breaking the third precept

- where there is mutual consent,
- where there is no harm done to anyone,
- where the breaking of a commitment to another person is not involved,
- and where our intention is to express affection with respect, and give pleasure to each other.

This would apply irrespective of the gender or sexual orientation of the parties involved. The same principles would be used to evaluate all relationships and sexual behaviour, whether heterosexual or homosexual.

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Postscript: Buddhism and God

I feel I must take issue with the assertion that belief in and reverence for deities is necessarily a defining characteristic of religions.

Buddhism clearly meets most definitions of a religion, yet it is possible to practice as a Buddhist with no belief in a God or superhuman being(s)⁴. Buddhism does not deny the existence of gods or of other worlds, and indeed the devotional practices of many Buddhist traditions involve the veneration and invocation of special beings such as Avalokitesvara (known as Kwan Yin to many Chinese, or Kannon to the Japanese). However, at its core Buddhism is a non-theistic religion and, unlike other world religions, Buddhism is not a doctrine of revelation. The Buddha did not claim to be the bearer of a message from on high. He made it clear that what he taught he had discovered for himself through his own efforts.

The Buddha himself is revered not as a deity or supernatural being but as a very special kind of human being. He was a human who achieved the ultimate in development of his human potential. The Buddha taught that this achievement is within the reach of every human being, and he spent his life teaching a practical methodology which, if followed with purity of mind and great diligence, would enable others to reach the same objective. In other words, he taught a method rather than a doctrine. When questioned about the validity of his teachings, the Buddha did not refer to the higher authority of a deity. He explained that his teachings were based on his own direct personal experience, and he invited all who were interested to test for

themselves whether the method he taught was effective. ■

References

1. There are many excellent introductions to Buddhism on the Web. Two good sources which emanate from my own country, Australia, are: The Buddhist Council of New South Wales, an Introduction to Buddhism by Graeme Lyall at <http://www.zip.com.au/~lyallg/buddh.html> and BuddhaNet, operated by the Venerable Pannavaro at <http://www2.hawkesbury.uws.edu.au/BuddhaNet/>
2. A L De Silva, Homosexuality and Theravada Buddhism, not currently in print, but can be found at <http://www2.hawkesbury.uws.edu.au/BuddhaNet/>
3. Leonard Zwilling, Homosexuality As Seen in Indian Buddhist Texts, in Buddhism, Sexuality and Gender, edited by Jose Ignacio Cabezon, State University of New York Press, New York, 1992.
4. William Herbrechtsmeier, Buddhism and the Definition of Religion: One More Time, Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 1993, 32 (1), 1-18.

Footnotes

1. You can email the author Kerry Trembath at **ktre4673 [at] bigpond.net.au**

Addenda

None

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