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## BUDDHISM IN EUROPEAN SOCIETY



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# **THE BUDDHIST PIONEERS OF SAME-SEX MARRIAGE IN THE WEST: A LITTLE-KNOWN HISTORY OF COMPASSION IN ACTION**

**By Dr Michael Vermeulen**

At the dawn of the 21st century, several countries legalised same-sex marriage. This evolution towards marriage equality is often pictured by opponents as something recent, Western and anti-religious. But few people know that Buddhists played an important role in this social struggle for equality<sup>1</sup>.

Throughout its long history, Buddhism never claimed marriage as an exclusive or 'sacred' Buddhist religious institution, nor did it reject marriage in favour of celibacy. It has always shown flexibility to adjust marriage to local needs and accepted polygamy, polyandry (in Tibet) and

same-sex marriage with adoption rights (in China). It did so again when the gay community in the West asked for marriage equality in the second half of the 20th century.

### **Buddhist same-sex marriage in the West**

The Netherlands were the first country in the world to legalise same-sex marriage, followed by Belgium in 2003, Spain and Canada in 2005 and South Africa in 2006. In South Africa the Supreme Court mentioned explicitly that refusing marriage equality would install a new form of Apartheid.

Buddhism did not wait for this: the first European Buddhist same-sex marriage took place near Paris in 1995 (see picture). In a survey among the members of the EBU and some other Buddhist

communities in 2013, respondents from all traditions said they had no objections to a legal same-sex marriage. Some reported they were not used to do religious weddings, but would be happy to do a blessing as for straight couples. All those who did perform religious weddings said they would be happy to do so for gays and lesbians too, but very few had received a request from within their community.

The hostility towards the gay community in the West was often religiously motivated. Most Christians responded negative to the request by the gay community for respect and recognition, let alone marriage equality. This fuelled the conviction - by Christians and queers alike - that there is an opposition between gay and god. When gays were looking for a spiritual environment they were bluntly rejected: "The

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed history, see my article: 'The rise of Rainbow Dharma: Buddhism on sexual diversity and same-sex marriage' [ <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Religion/ArticlesCompilationForbAndSexuality.pdf> ] Here you can find the full references for all quotes in this article.



answer most often given was that there was none. The dominant Christian ... declared gays to be grievous sinners. To discover that one was gay, apparently, meant that one could not have a spiritual life. One could only have sex." [Corless (2000) pp. 270-271]

The response by the Buddhist community was from the start very different. In the early 70s Rev. Koshin Ogui was assigned to the Buddhist Church of San Francisco, a temple of the Pure Land Shin tradition. When a gay Buddhist couple from his community asked to be married, he accepted immediately and with no objections [Wilson (2012)]. This was almost half a century before the legalisation of same-sex marriage in the US in 2015. There was also no secrecy, not towards

the local community and not towards higher clergy. The same ceremony (with the adjustment of personal pronouns) and the same venue were used as for straight couples. In the following years all main Buddhist traditions in North America started performing Buddhist same-sex marriages, most of them in Zen, Shin and SGI-USA.

The Christian picture looks very different. While some individual ministers also tried to accommodate the gay wish for marriage equality, this was often done in secrecy and - for doctrinal reasons - under a different name such as 'holy union' or 'blessing'. Once the higher hierarchy got aware of these practices, most churches banned the practice and started campaigning against legal marriage equality too, often with

severe hate speech. American Buddhists on the other hand were actively campaigning for the legalisation of same-sex marriage in their states, especially in Hawaii and California.

In 2012 both national Buddhist organisations of Australia (one for the lay and one for the clergy) asked their government to legalise same-sex marriage.

### **Buddhist same-sex marriage in the East**

Worldwide there is also a gradual acceptance noticeable within traditional Buddhist countries. In 2004 king Norodom Sihanuk of Cambodia expressed the wish that his country would legalise same-sex marriage. In Japan the Zen Shunkoin Temple in Kyoto started performing Buddhist



*The male same-sex 'alliance ceremony' of Fabrice Midal (in white) and Bruno Tyszler (24 Jun 1995) near Paris, performed by Julia Sagebien, with the approval of Vajradhatu/Shambhala's spiritual leader Chögyam Trungpa. The same ritual was used as for other weddings. 'Alliance ceremony' was used instead of 'marriage' for legal, not doctrinal reasons. France would only legalise same-sex partnerships in 1999 and same-sex marriage in 2013. (photo with permission from Fabrice Midal)*



same-sex wedding ceremonies in 2010. In 2013 Thailand debated new legislation in parliament (which is on hold due to political tensions). In 2014 HH the Dalai Lama expressed public support for secular same-sex marriage, and in 2017 the Constitutional Court of Taiwan ruled that not allowing same-sex marriage was a violation of people's right to marry and of people's right to equality.

But Buddhism's acceptance of sexual diversity and support for same-sex marriage in Asia is not recent. When the first Jesuit missionaries arrived in China and Japan in the 16th century, they were shocked by the acceptance of homosexuality by Buddhism. They would use it as one of their main arguments to prove that the cultures of the Far East were in decline and inferior to the West, and more specifically, that Buddhism was a decadent religion, inferior to Christianity. From their side, the Buddhists were shocked by the hate-speech of the Jesuits when it came to something the Buddhists considered to be a fact of life.

China had a centuries old tradition of same-sex marriages [Hinsch (1990)]. During the Yuan and Ming dynasties (1271-1644), the men in the province of Fujian were famous throughout the empire for their long-term relationships with other men. These were often formalized by legal marriage ceremonies that were almost identical to opposite-sex rituals. Similar records can be found about lesbian relations. For women

who wanted to escape the very patriarchal Confucian society, the only real way out was to become a Buddhist nun. During the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) an alternative movement arose in the silk province Guangdong, commonly known as The Golden Orchid sisterhoods [Topley (1975)]. These were societies of women working in the silk industry, who combined forces to stay physically and financially independent from men. They rejected being subordinate to a husband in marriage or to male clergy as a nun.

The Golden Orchid sisterhoods were organised in Buddhist vegetarian halls and secular spinster halls and considered themselves the continuation of the Ten Sisters society which was created by a Buddhist nun centuries earlier. Both movements referred to the Bodhisattva Guan-Yin as their spiritual paragon. Guan-Yin (In Tibet known as the male Avalokiteshvara, in Japan as the female Kannon), is best known in Buddhism as the Bodhisattva of Compassion. She/he sees all the suffering of the world, even in the darkest loneliest corner. Less known is that Guan-Yin somehow became the Buddhist patron saint of sexual diversity. In China there was a popular legend that Guan-Yin was once a princess who refused heterosexual marriage, turning her into the heroine of women opposing patriarchal dominance as well as of people engaged in same-sex relationships. Members of the Golden Orchid sisterhoods swore an oath to Guan-Yin that

they would never marry a man. Some even engaged to commit suicide if they would be forced into a heterosexual marriage.

Many Golden Orchid members lived together in close friendships, others were sexual relationships. Some couples went for - legally recognised - same-sex marriage ceremonies. They also had the right to adopt abandoned or orphaned girls as their legal daughters and heirs. The Golden Orchid sisterhoods would be banned by the Communist Party after the CCP rose to power in 1949.

### **Sex and sexual diversity in Early Buddhism**

The Buddha was at the head of his community of lay and monastic followers for more than four decades. During this long period, he was asked for advice on a very wide variety of issues on sex and sexuality that would impress many present day sexologists. As a result, there are literally

dozens of references in the Buddhist canons to all sorts of sexual relationships and practices, mainly hetero- and homosexual activities but also to pedophilia, bestiality, necrophilia, etc. Given the wide variety of items addressed, the Buddha was obviously not ignorant or naive on human sexual passions and activities in the broadest sense.

It is important to note that almost all his counsels on sexuality are discussed in the Vinaya (the monastic code). In other words, the



most common context is that of a monk or a nun struggling to lead a celibate life. There is no negative attitude towards sex or sexual diversity as such, but towards a lack of discipline to control lust: "It is notable that these prohibitions against homosexuality in the Vinaya are not given any special (homophobic) metaphysical, philosophical, or doctrinal support. They are merely expressions of uncontrolled desire on the part of persons who have vowed to control their desires." [Corless (1998) p. 255]. The focus of the Vinaya is on the tensions between sexuality and celibacy, not on heterosexuality versus homosexuality. As mentioned, the Buddha was well aware of sexual diversity in general and same-sex behaviour in particular. If this had been an issue for him, he had plenty of opportunities to condemn it, or to say that Buddhists should live a heterosexual (or a celibate) life only. He did not.

The Buddha also shows pragmatism in his counsel. In what is probably the oldest documented story on the interface of religious and LGBT- rights, the Buddha was approached by what we nowadays would call a trans-female monk and a trans-male nun [Vin III. 35<sup>2</sup>]. They were not happy as members of their all male and

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2 The story speaks of a rather magical sudden change of characteristics. Bear in mind that 2500 years ago people did not have the refined vocabulary on sexual diversity as we have these days. In a culture that made no difference between anatomical and social gender, it seems more meaningful to consider this a way to express their 'coming out'.

all female monastic communities (monks and nuns lived mostly separately) and asked for help. The Buddha simply ruled that the trans-female monk should join the nuns and the trans-male nun should join the monks.

In such stories, we see the Buddha as a man willing to listen, willing to identify areas of suffering, willing to look for solutions. A man who didn't see sexual diversity as a threat and who was willing to step out of the traditional patterns he was raised with. It is also important to realise what the Buddha did not do: he didn't react shocked or upset, never used homo-negative language and never said that sex or sexual diversity make someone unfit for the Buddhist Spiritual Path. On the contrary; in the Vasettha Sutta [M.98] the Buddha is very clear in his response to the traditional views of the Brahmins:


*"With humans, no difference of birth makes a distinctive mark in them; nor in the hair nor in the head, ... nor in the buttocks or the breast, nor in the genitals or ways of mating, ... nor in their color or in voice ... In human bodies in themselves, nothing distinctive can be found. Distinctions among human beings are purely verbal designation<sup>3</sup>."*

The pragmatic attitude of the Buddha could inspire us to ask ourselves: how can we listen? Are we willing to see the suffering around us? How can we look for

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3 M. 98. in: *The Middle Length Discourse of the Buddha*, translation by Bikkhu Bodhi and Bhikkhu Nanamoli, Wisdom Publications, 1995

solutions? Do we feel threatened by differences and the unknown? Are we able to think out of the box of the traditions and patterns we grew up with? Are we able to see that the pigeonholes and labels we use to distinguish people are 'purely verbal designation'?

Part of this process requires that we are open to different opinions and life-styles. It also requires that we are prepared to critically examine our own traditions and look at what is authentic and what is not. But above all, it requires that we trust the Buddha-nature in ourselves and in others; trust our basic willingness and ability to do good. And this 'little goodness of daily life' can flourish if we cultivate metta and karuna - boundless friendliness and compassionate action - to be the main characteristics of our decisions, (re) actions and relationships. 



*“ With humans, no difference of birth makes a distinctive mark in them; nor in the hair nor in the head, ... nor in the buttocks or the breast, nor in the genitals or ways of mating, ... nor in their color or in voice ... In human bodies in themselves, nothing distinctive can be found. Distinctions among human beings are purely verbal designation. ”*

