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Buddhism and Sexuality

### Buddhism's Perspective on Sexuality

Buddhism is a major world religion that is practiced all over the world. The practice of Buddhism is non-specific to its opinion on the LGBTQIAP+ community. Buddhism is widely practiced in Japan, and I will focus on Buddhist perspectives there. More specifically, I will focus on monasteries, the military, and the theatre. In Japan, it is unclear as to whether they are accepting and affirming of the LGBTQIAP+ community as views and language have changed with time. Overall, Buddhism's tolerance of the LGBTQIAP+ community varies from that of monotheistic religions such as Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Monotheistic religions are influenced by their evaluation of sexual ethics based on their understanding of the commandments of G\*d as opposed to Buddhism's ideals influenced by local cultures. Buddhism's acceptance of the LGBTQIAP+ community is conditional upon the cultural influence of the geographic region.

One of the most crucial differences between monotheistic religions like Christianity, Judaism, and Islam and Buddhism are the evaluations of sexual ethics. In Christianity, Judaism, and Islam the religions are bound by the commandments of G\*d which are written in the Bible, Torah, or Quran respectfully. In these books are laws on the perceived acceptability of homosexuality. That in mind, many individuals who are accepting and tolerant of homosexuality are guided by love. Whereas, in Buddhism there are no written laws that bound followers. Therefore, those who choose to accept the LGBTQIAP+ community are guided by compassion.

Buddhism is not specific on its views towards sexuality. As described by Ahmad & Rahim, “There is no specific injunction of Buddha in relation to the Buddhist stance on homosexuality, some have argued that it can be determined on the basis of ethical principles laid down in the book of Tipitaka” (Ahmad & Rahim, 2018). The Tipitaka is compiled by the followers and monks of Buddhism rather than the Buddha himself due to the fact that he did not write down any of his teachings. This is similar to Christianity in respect to Jesus not writing down any of his specific teachings therefore leaving his followers to compile them. With that in mind for both religions, there are no explicit rules on homosexuality. Specifically, Christianity emphasizes love in order to find acceptance of all individuals. Similarly, Buddhism focuses on the emphasis of compassion to find acceptance of all individuals within a religion. In Buddhist culture, the followers are expected to follow the eightfold path. Specifically, Buddhists, both lay and monks, are strongly encouraged to follow right speech, action, and livelihood. Again, based on these principles the Buddha did not have a specific opinion in regard to the acceptability of homosexuality.

Buddhism is a religion that is interpreted many ways as can be seen in the following: “Scholars...have presented their own opinions. Among them is Kerry Trembath, the former secretary of the Buddhist Council of New South Wales. Trembath argues that the term ‘sexual misconduct’ is not properly defined by the teachings of Buddha. However, traditionally, he believes that sexual misconduct includes actions like coercive sex, sexual harassment, child molestation and adultery. Although there is no clear injunction on the stance of Buddhism on homosexuality, he is of the opinion that the same rules should be applied to it. As long as there are no elements of coercive sex, sexual harassment, child molestation and adultery, homosexuality is not supposed to be prohibited. Another Buddhist scholar, the Dalai Lama puts

forward his opinion on the issue of LGBT by mainly highlighting its permissibility” (Ahmad & Rahim, 2018). In light of the scholars opinions, there are various perspectives on the acceptance of the LGBTQIAP+ community. The Dalai Lama stating that the LGBTQIAP+ community is permissible amongst the Buddhist community is extraordinary. Hearing acceptance and tolerance come from the mouths of scholars and high powers allows LGBTQIAP+ people to feel considerably safe in their religion.

Around the world and in many cultures, LGBTQIAP+ people tend to congregate in areas highly populated with like people to form a community. For example, in Japanese Buddhism “same-sex relations are to be found in three areas: Buddhist monasteries, the military and the theatre world” (Laurent, 2005, p. 208). If looked at through the lens of the United States, many LGBTQIAP+ youth congregate in theatre guilds at school. Having a place that is accepting of your identity unconditionally allows youth to prosper and feel validated. This may have existed in Buddhism within some monasteries, military, and theatre mentioned above. In some monasteries, for example, “Young ephebes (*chigo*, from 10 to 16 years old) were kept in Buddhist temples for domestic purposes, as well as sexual partners for the monks” (Laurent, 2005, p. 208). From the viewpoint of Buddhism, proper intention is what drives the sexual encounters of the monks. That in mind, if the proper intention is pure in action and thought then it is acceptable in most areas of Buddhist culture. However, not everyone’s intentions are pure in thought and action which can be a result of an individual’s abuse of power. Equally important, some young ephebes undergo military training where same sex relationships were seen as honorable and acceptable. With that in mind, many Buddhist monks take vows similar to Jain vows which include the promise of celibacy or *Brachmacharya*. Coupled with that knowledge, those who take the monastic vow often strive to uphold their promises. Furthermore, if

monks/nuns violated the vow of celibacy there is a possibility of them being expelled from the community. Monks having same sex relationships are not truly celibate due to the fact that sensual/sexual relationships are attached to sensual pleasures which are at the root of the celibacy vow. However, householders/lay Buddhist's may believe that having a relationship with partners of the same sex do not break celibacy. Within many societies sex is defined as intercourse between a cisgender male and a cisgender female, therefore, intimacy that does not include opposite sexes does not count as sex. Additionally, many societies do not recognize oral sex as having had sex with another individual due to the same idea of not having sexual intercourse. Similarly, "Prostitution became associated with the *kabuki* theatre, where a homoerotic atmosphere was not uncommon. Within Japan, The Tokugawa regime (1603-1867) can be considered the golden age of homoeroticism, at least in the military and theatre. Commercial sex was kept in special districts of cities, away from centers. From the latter half of the 18th century, owing to Confucian influence among others, theatre and prostitution were gradually considered to be immoral. *Nanshoku* also appeared to lose its attraction because of suicides, love triangle incidents, and over-infatuation of *shoguns*, which made the government repeatedly discourage homosexuality" (Laurent, 2005, pp. 208-209). The rapid change in perspective related to the acceptance of homosexuality led to the shift of tolerance from the monks and scholars of Buddhism.

Buddhism is practiced by approximately 69.8% of individuals in Japan (Central Intelligence Agency, 2019, graph). Likewise, Japan's representation of the LGBTQIAP+ community has vastly changed over the years. In particular, "The representation of physical same-sex sexual activities signifies different lives in the past, an abstract translation of homoeroticism into emotional intimacy and a bond between men can be synchronized with

patriotism, and especially with Japanese militarism, which demands loyalty to the Emperor and a strong bond among soldiers. After the Meiji period (1868–1912), however, nanshoku was still remembered as a habit of the past but was rarely regarded as a model of masculinity for the general population. As Vincent notes in *Two-timing Modernity*, the nanshoku of the samurai-class marks the past in Japan, while the samurai have become the new model for Japanese militant masculinity” (Kawasaka, 2017, pp. 602-603). The extreme shift of gender roles and specifications truly impacted Japanese society. As seen previously, same sex relationships were practiced among some monks and samurai, however, those ideals are now considered beliefs of the past. In modern Japan there is a distinct shift in ideals surrounding the true masculinity of a man from the time of the Buddha.

Westernization of many countries abroad has the potential to create some tension due to the difference in opinions and ideals on how life should be fulfilled. Unlike the push back in India, Japan is more open to some aspects of the Westernization of their society. Surprisingly,

At the beginning of modernization, the samurai were an object of denial of the past through Westernization. Their nanshoku was remembered as an aspect of their ‘uncivilized’ habits. Nonetheless, its eroticism can be attractive to some people and can offer an alternative Japanese masculine model, distinct from the Westernized one. When Japan achieved sufficient modernization, however, the image of the samurai became not an alternative model but, rather, the masculine model for all men, and for the Japanese in general. With the new ‘invention’ of the samurai, their nanshoku was rarely mentioned among their characteristics and the samurai has come to be regarded as a polite, loyal and stoical man. Now, nanshoku can represent the past, but rarely the samurai’s respectful masculinity. (Kawasaka, 2017, pp.603-604)

Correspondingly, there was a strong emphasis on the hyper masculinity of men who were samurai. Hyper masculinity is often seen in the United States as well. Specifically, many gay males have the possibility of avoiding stigmatization and discrimination by passing as straight if they are a hyper-masculine gay male. Furthermore, the modernization of “the samurai had provided a new masculine model in modern Japan and their same-sex sexuality, nanshoku, was turned into a sign of the past, a new representation of modern homosexuals appeared. Gregory M. Pflugfelder pointed out that, due to the influence of sexology [imported by “westernized” countries] in the early twentieth century, same-sex desire had become represented as ‘perversion’” (Kawasaka, 2017, 604). In modern Japan, the act of being in a same sex relationship now falls under the category of sexual immorality. Meaning, those who practice Buddhism in Japan and are also part of the LGBTQIAP+ community either need to remain closeted or seek a change geographically. Equally important, LGBTQIAP+ people are marginalized through the use of language in Japan. As a matter of fact, “After modern compulsory heterosexism becomes rooted in Japanese society, the homosexual referred to by ero-guronansensu is often portrayed as an individualized figure, who is essentially different from others: therefore, representing a separatist and minoritizing model. From the standpoint of gender, the nanshoku of the samurai is a symbol of their culture of gender segregation, while gender representations of homosexual men in ero-guronansensu, and the ‘male-dressing lady’ in Yasuda’s arguments, rely on an inversion model, depicting a transition towards the opposite gender” (Kawasaka, 2017, p. 607). In the United States, the fluctuation of gender as described by Yasuda’s could be categorized as an individual who is non-cisgender. Identifying as non-cisgender can range from being transgender, non-binary, and gender fluid, just to name a few. At this current time, Japan is not fully supportive of those who do not fit into the gender binary. The

“Westernization” of Japan has potentially isolated the members of society who identifies as a Buddhist and of the LGBTQIAP+ community.

The language used regarding a community says a lot about how accepted they are in society. Specifically, Japan “has a long literary tradition exalting same-sex love among males (*nanshoku*), especially between older and younger samurai, kabuki actors and their patrons, and Buddhist monks or priest and their youthful acolytes (*chigo*)...adopted a positive attitude towards homosexuality which some believed was against the will of Buddha himself” (Ahmad & Rahim, 2018). Generally speaking, the traditional teachings of Buddhism credited to the Buddha would explain that he did not have a “pro-sex” stance for the monks leading to the ideal of celibacy among the monastery. Furthermore, Ahmad and Rahim explain that Japan does have terms and phrases associated with the LGBTQIAP+ community, however, their connotation is often debated. For example, “Yasuda’s argument, which utilizes both the Japanese native terminology *nanshoku* and the sexological term *doseiai* (equivalent to homosexuality in English) for male same-sex conduct, as a ‘good example of the way that native Japanese terms could be strategically combined with newer sexological ones as new sexual identities and histories were being negotiated” (Kawasaka, 2017, p. 599). Yasuda’s scholarship allows readers to learn that while same sex relationships may not be acceptable in modern day Japan it is not necessarily denied by Buddhism. Language plays an integral role on the perspective that society and media will take on a community of people.

Japan represents aspects of the LGBTQIAP+ community, even if the connotation and meaning behind the Japanese terms for the community are unknown. For instance,

In present Japan, transvestites often appear on television, partly based on the rich tradition of transvestism in the theatre and entertainment spheres. They are not often

directly connected to homosexuality as such. They are called “new half,” in reference to the people called “half” in Japan, that is persons of several ethnic descents (in this case half-woman and half-man). [As a result of homophobia in Japan], few gays actually come out, [as] there is little information and few policies concerning AIDS and its prevention, the bars and other meeting places are very hidden, and many gays still marry in order to hide. The media coverage of homosexual-related events or facts in Japan occurs very rarely, and nearly always in an ironic or “funny” way. In the media, gays often appear ridiculed (effeminate, unfit, etc.) and marginalized. (Laurent, 2005, p.209)

Laurent describes the idea of new “half” as an identifier for many people. In this case, Laurent is explaining new “half” people are the United States equivalent of an individual who uses the label of gender queer, gender fluid, bigender, gender nonconforming, or nonbinary to identify themselves. As a matter of fact, individuals who are considered “half” are not seen as “true” Japanese people and are not worthy of respect and honor. Furthermore, one could argue that “new halves”, such as sexual minorities like the LGBTQIAP+ community are not worthy of the respect and honor of Japanese people. As a result of the portrayal of these individuals in Japanese media, many LGBTQIAP+ feel othered. Moreover, coming out as a part of the LGBTQIAP+ community in Japan can lead to shame and dishonor. It is an individual’s duty to not bring shame and dishonor to themselves but also not to bring shame and dishonor to their families. That being said, coming out may cause negative repercussions in respect to their family’s honor, having a greater impact than one individual.

In a study done by the Pew Research Center, approximately 35,000 adults in the United States were asked about their views on the LGBTQIAP+ community based on their religious beliefs. As reflected above, about 88 percent of adults in the survey who identified as Buddhist

were accepting of homosexuality. Similarly, Jewish followers also had a large acceptance rate of 81 percent. However, followers of Islam only had an acceptance rate of approximately 45%. Another key point in the questionnaire was the frequency of meditation and their views on homosexuality. This is an important component because many lay Buddhist's and monks practice meditation on a daily basis. Meditation in the Buddhist religion is not defined as searching for beliefs, feelings, diversion, and hate but rather working on separating oneself from negative hateful feelings. Meditation allows monks to not define oneself by hateful, negative feelings but to find one's way to compassion and love. According to the study, of those who meditate at least once a week 35 percent believe the LGBTQIAP+ community should be accepted. Whereas, of those who meditate at least once a week 51 percent believe the acceptance of the LGBTQIAP+ should be discouraged (Pew Research Center). All in all, religion can play a major role in the acceptance and tolerance of the LGBTQIAP+ community in a given geographic location. In the United States, Buddhist's are fairly accepting of the LGBTQIAP+ community. However, the potential for tolerance and acceptance of the LGBTQIAP+ community within Japanese culture is still unclear as the connotation of some of their actions can be interpreted in many ways.

Around the world, acceptance of the LGBTQIAP+ community may be dependent on culture and geographic region. In Japan specifically, Buddhism may create some acceptance for the LGBTQIAP+ community, however, based on the cultural values of Japan the community is still a under stigmatization. As a result of pushback, marginalization can cause homophobia which may in turn lead to legal issues later on. However, from a legal viewpoint, homosexuals do not exist, but this does not mean an absence of discrimination" (Laurent, 2005, p. 210). It is mind blowing that a society has an extensive legal system but does not recognize an entire

community of individuals. In a society where the LGBTQIAP+ community does exist, legally there are no protections in Japan for discrimination against the population. As one can see, being a part of the LGBTQIAP+ community as a Buddhist in Japan can be extremely difficult. There are not many resources or places to socialize for the LGBTQIAP+ community. Lack of community can make it more difficult for closeted individuals to feel accepted by others. Buddhist in the United States look to the Dalai Lama for guidance on religious beliefs and opinions. The Dalai Lama's statement on the permissibility of the LGBTQIAP+ community encourages Buddhist's in the United States to hold the community to high compassion and acceptance. All in all, there were limitations and challenges to further developing Buddhism's exact perspective on sexuality. With more time, I would look specifically into how Japan's gender roles in society influences the acceptance of the LGBTQIAP+ community. Additionally, I would like to look at Buddhism in many geographic locations and how their cultures influence the acceptance of the LGBTQIAP+ community. Altogether, monotheistic religions follow the commandments of G\*d as opposed to Buddhism whose acceptance of the LGBTQIAP+ community is contingent on the cultural influence of the geographic location and compassion.

## References

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