

Can Gay and Lesbian People Train in Buddhism?

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This is a revision and extension of an article which first appeared in the March-April 1978 issue of The Journal of Shasta Abbey, which was devoted to sexuality in religious training. “Responsible training within a relationship of love” was the theme of that issue. At that time we had been requested, both by trainees with homosexual orientations and those with heterosexual orientations, to offer a perspective on Buddhist practice as it might be done by gay and lesbian trainees. About two years before her death in 1996, Rev. Master Jiyu had occasion to discuss this topic further with the author in the course of helping him to write a chapter that had been requested for a book on Buddhism and HIV. While the book was never published, some of the material from that chapter has been included here. Since some of the participants at the November 2001 “Nothing Special, Everything Buddha” retreat for gay and lesbian trainees said that they had found the original of this article to be helpful, it seemed good to revise and extend it, and to include it here together with their offerings, in the hope that it may be of further use.

May We Train Together?

We have received a number of requests from gay and lesbian people asking if it is possible for them to train in Buddhism, whether they are welcome in our temples and meditation groups, and how their training might differ from that of a heterosexually-oriented person. First let me say that Rev. Master

Jiyu-Kennett taught me that a homosexual orientation is not an impediment to enlightenment and that gay and lesbian people are welcome to train with us in Buddhism. How could it be otherwise? Even to pose the question of whether gay and lesbian people can train implies a doubt of two of the basic principles of Sōtō Zen: all beings are at heart Buddha, and there is no one incapable of training in this lifetime. This being so, it follows that everyone can train in Buddhism, if they wish. Furthermore, how could love between any sentient beings be contrary to Buddha Nature, when the essence of Buddha Nature is pure and all-embracing love for every being? Love does not stand against itself. It would only be possible to believe that one form of love stands against another if you assume that there are two (or more) completely separate types of love, and that one of them is bad. Leaving aside the obvious dualism of such a position, meditation and close observation reveal that the world is not like this. Love would seem to be one thing: many faceted, complex, interwoven with many other things, but nonetheless having a common thread running through it. For this reason, we find that human love is not entirely separate from love for the Unborn, or love of Truth. This, by the way, is why things can get all mixed up sometimes, and it is a little-understood but important reason why monastics are celibate in our Order. Celibacy makes it easier for the monk to go fully into spiritual love, while remaining in a world of human interactions. And, of course, both human love and spiritual love manifest in a delightfully bewildering variety of ways. The Buddhist mind understands that “all is One and all is different,” and the difference is not a hindrance to the One. In fact, the difference is the very manifestation and glory

of the One. Thus, it is obvious to me, as it was to my master, that gay and lesbian people can train in Buddhism.

Since that is so, the real question is whether we are all welcome to train together in the temples and meditation groups of our Order. Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett did what she could to make clear that the answer to this is a resounding “Yes!” Once again, how could it be otherwise? If an individual says that someone cannot train beside him or her because of their sexual orientation, that person not only denies the Buddhahood of the other and plunges himself or herself into duality, but also attempts to limit that all-encompassing Love which is the Truth Itself. He or she who thinks that sexual orientation is an obstacle to religious training is hindered by that opinion, not by sexual orientation. And, over the course of the years, we have seen the benefits and wisdom of training together. We have had people of lesbian and gay orientation train with us both as members of the congregation and as members of the monastic community. The progress of their training has been no different from that of heterosexually-oriented trainees; among monks, some are respected Masters, and among householders, some are Lay Ministers of long standing; their presence has enriched us all.

Is Our Training Different?

The progress of training may not differ depending upon sexual orientation, but does the course of training differ? I suspect that the answer to this question may depend upon the individual, but at its broadest level, I think that the answer is no. I do not perceive that the way of training for gay or lesbian people, in general, differs fundamentally from that of heterosexual people. Naturally, the details of what each of us brings to Buddhist training, and some of the context within which that training is

done, may differ, but these are not fundamental things. Furthermore, these tend to be individual factors, and the individual differences among gay or lesbian people seem to be greater than the over-all differences between them and heterosexually-oriented people. There are, however, some issues which tend to come up more often for gay and lesbian trainees than for others, and it may be well to mention a few of these.

1) A gay or lesbian trainee may have to deal with the consequences of the subtle conditioning which our culture often imparts that there is something basically evil, sick, or deformed in his or her essential being, or that such a person is “an abomination before the Lord.” One remedy to this conditioning is to have faith that “the Lord” (the Unborn, the Cosmic Buddha, That Which Is, the Absolute, or whatever term we may use for the Ultimate of our religion) is a lot bigger in love and all-acceptance than are some of those who claim to speak on “His” behalf. A second remedy is to meditate and train oneself ceaselessly and thus find out for oneself the reality, purity, and beauty of the Buddha Nature within. In the Place where this is seen, there simply is no question of being somehow separated from the Absolute by reason of sexual orientation (or anything else).

It may also help to know that the traditional Buddhist explanation for the existence of homosexuality is not illness or evil but the natural effects of past karma. When a karmic stream has been passed down through many rebirths as one gender, and in this lifetime appears as the other gender, it is believed that there are habitual inclinations carried over which sometimes cause the current individual to be sexually more attracted to members of his or her own gender. The same inclinations can be present when the person is for some reason unusually

sensitive to, or aware of, his or her previous rebirths, and when the immediately previous rebirth was as a member of the other gender. And there are other karmic causes, as well. In any case, sexual orientation is seen in Buddhism not as a willful “sin against man and God” but as a natural working of the universal laws of karma. It is something to be accepted just as one accepts blue eyes or an inexplicable affinity for living near the seashore. Another important implication of this karmic explanation is that homosexuality is not a disease which can be caught like measles by heterosexually-oriented children or adults. Thus the concern in some quarters about the danger of gay or lesbian people being school teachers, scout masters, and the like is, at best, misguided. Whether or not karma is always involved I do not know, but these karmic explanations are consistent with how karma works, and they are not incompatible with current genetic, neurobehavioral, and psychological theories about the origins of homosexual attraction.

2) Another frequent concern among trainees of gay or lesbian orientation is the question of whether it may be necessary, or somehow expected, that their orientation will change over the course of religious practice. In some religions there is such an expectation: homosexual individuals are welcomed, but with the expectation that they will “reform”. Is it necessary for someone to give up his or her homosexuality in order to know the Unborn? Well, it is necessary for every trainee to give up everything. So, maybe a person’s present sexual orientation will change, and maybe it won’t; maybe they will have to become celibate, and maybe they definitely should not be; maybe they will end up becoming a monk, and maybe the best and highest path for them in this lifetime is that of the house-

holder, and so on. As long as anyone says to the Buddhas and Ancestors, “I want to be one with the Truth absolutely, ...but not if I have to give up _____ (you fill in the blank),” that person will never know his or her True Nature. So yes, perhaps in the course of training it will occur that a gay or lesbian person will find that their sexual orientation shifts in some way. From what I have observed, that is not usually the way things go: many things about a person change over the course of training, but their basic sexual orientation doesn’t often seem to be one of them. Of course, the opposite can occur as well (also rather rarely): someone who is now heterosexually-oriented may in the course of training discover and need to come to terms with a component of homosexual orientation within themselves. This, too, is not a problem. As our training continues to deepen there will be all manner of changes, and that is fine. Do not worry about these things. Just be willing at all times to do whatever is asked of you by the Unborn Buddha Nature, and know that it is good.

3) What about sexual acts between persons of the same gender, rather than simply sexual orientation? Some people wonder if there might be something about sexual or affectionate behavior between individuals of the same gender that makes those acts have significantly different karmic consequences from similar acts done in a heterosexual context. I had an occasion to discuss this question with Rev. Master Jiyu a couple of years before her death. Her view was that there was no reason to believe that a given behavior would have a significantly different karmic consequence simply because it occurred between same-gender sexual partners. In other words, what seems to matter is whether a specific sexual action does harm or benefits

beings, not whether the partners involved are of the same gender or not. Now, it should be said that this position is not shared by all Buddhists, and there are well-respected Buddhist teachers both ancient and modern who clearly regard gay or lesbian sexual activity as inherently immoral [4,5]. Interestingly enough, there also have been a few Buddhist traditions through the ages which have openly advocated and/or practiced same-gender sexual activity [7,3], but references to these are harder to find.

What is more important to me than these positions “con” or “pro” is the fact that most of the classic Buddhist writings with which I am familiar are either neutral or simply silent on the matter. With regard to household training, there is almost no mention of the topic of homosexuality in the classic canonical literature of either the Mahayana or the Theravada. This cannot be because Lord Buddha was unaware of the subject, for He made reference to it (sometimes in rather explicit detail) when discussing celibacy for monks. In that context, He seems to have treated it with a degree of neutrality which would be remarkable among religious leaders today. He simply listed various sexual activities between people of the same gender among the many other forms of sexual behavior which are not appropriate for celibate monks. They are given no particular importance one way or the other: just they are examples of what is not celibacy [1,2, 6]. I am not alone, by the way, in interpreting the Buddhist canon this way; one scholar who researched the area extensively came to a similar conclusion [7]. That Shakyamuni Buddha and the classic Buddhist literature seem to have regarded homosexuality as a “non-issue” strikes me as being highly significant. It seems to confirm the meditative conclusion of Rev. Master Jiyu that not only is sexual orientation not an ethical issue, but

also same-gender sexual activity is no more (and no less) likely to generate karmic consequence than equivalent heterosexual activity.

Of course, the sexual relationship between people of the same gender has one fundamental difference from that between a man and a woman: there is no possibility of producing a child. In *How to Grow a Lotus Blossom* Rev. Master Jiyu writes, “The only use of sex is the procreation of children.” How does this fit with the above conclusion? Does it mean that Rev. Master Jiyu taught that gay and lesbian couples may never express their love for each other physically without breaking the Precept of refraining from sexual indulgence? I think not. Remember that the Ten Precepts are rules of thumb that lead to the spirit of the Three Pure Precepts of ceasing from harm, doing only good, and doing good for others. Rev. Master told me that she wasn’t thinking about gay or lesbian sex when she wrote this sentence in her book. Primarily she wrote it because, when a man and a woman engage in intercourse but wish to avoid having children, there are likely to be karmic difficulties. First, in some circumstances there is the real danger of conception taking place and resulting in an unwanted child. Thus, the couple may be gambling with doing grave harm to a third person, and the callousness inherent in taking this risk may harden them both. Therefore, since the act neither fully ceases from harm nor is it wholly good, it is difficult to offer it up as the consummation of selfless love. Next, there is the fact that many methods of birth control seem to result in some degree of physical damage to the person employing them; thus their use is not ceasing from harm to oneself. These factors are obviously not present in a homosexual relationship.

Note that neither I nor my master were advocating that people should have gay or lesbian relationships; it is not a question of one type of relationship being better or worse than the other. In fact, there are a number of ways in which a heterosexual couple who do not wish children may express their love in physical intimacy while being mindful of the Precepts, and gay or lesbian people who engage in practices which do damage to themselves or others are obviously causing harm. Neither am I saying that homosexual relationships are free from karma. All volitional actions which have any positive or negative consequences for any being are said to produce some measure of karma, and it is difficult to think of a sexual action which doesn't fit that definition. Furthermore, it is useful to be aware that frequent orgasms may tend to deplete the physical and mental energy needed for intensive religious training and also that sexuality based upon selfishness and/or emotionalism is one of the most common impediments to spiritual understanding. These factors obviously apply equally to homosexual and heterosexual relationships; do not indulge in sexuality means just that. The line from the wedding ceremony, "with my body I thee worship," also applies to both. Regardless of who the two people are, a truly benevolent relationship is founded on selfless love, dedicated to the service of all beings, and unfolded as a continuous offering to the Unborn.

4) Some gay and lesbian people find that a preoccupation with their orientation becomes an obstacle to religious training. A person can spend so much mental energy on the real or imagined implications of their sexual orientation that it seems to take over their life. Such a preoccupation may be a consequence of living in a society which defines a person in terms of his or

her sexual orientation: because you engage in sexual relations with a member of your own gender, you are told that you are a homosexual, a gay, a lesbian, as if this label somehow captures some essential aspect of your inner being. The most frequent responses to this seem to be either a sense of shame or its opposite, a sort of hard-edged militant pride. It strikes me that either of these reactions can lead to a preoccupation with one's sexual orientation, a limiting of one's associates to those of a similar orientation, and a focusing of one's attentions on sexual desire and its supposed pervasive effects on the rest of one' s life. But a delightful thing about Buddhist training in our Order has been that sexual orientation is simply not regarded as all that important. We are not "heterosexuals" and "homosexuals" who happen to be training in religion; we are just trainees, together. We are trainees who happen to be male or female, short or tall, old or young, attracted to members of our own gender or to members of the other (or neither or both), of various nationalities, and who differ in a great many other ways besides—none of which matter when we stand before the Unborn, and none of which can separate us from the love we have for each other. This love completely transcends all issues of sexual orientation. In a congregation or training community of our lineage and tradition, a person's sexual orientation is irrelevant to most aspects of what we do, and so it can be inwardly, whether we are among those who respect this perspective or whether we dwell among bigots. Above all, know without doubt that there is nothing, absolutely nothing, which can separate you from the Truth, least of all your love for another human being.

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