

1st International Queer Buddhist Conference - IQBC,  
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## Preface

After having realized for more than five years, that not only me, but also my siblings had experience with bullying on different events, I thought, it's time to organize an event for my global queer Buddhist family. Still in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we have experience in being kicked off the jobs, or off families and friends. This happens only because of belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community or being queer.

The pandemic seemed to make an international conference impossible, but supported by a small group of volunteers, we could make the 1<sup>st</sup> IQBC be possible to take place virtually on October 23, 24, 2021.

The conference proceedings only built an excerpt about the variation of the talks, that were given depending on the consent of the contributors.

But luckily the consent was given - with one exception - for the talks to be recorded as videos, which you can watch on <https://iqbc.org> or on <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCqEzlhTM5S-P54ZOMKjJCDg>.

So for the talks I can say, we had beautiful scholars and respected venerables from different countries all over the world, like Prof. Bee Scherer, Bhante Akaliko, Ayya Vimala, and many others, to whom you have the chance to listen and enjoy on the websites mentioned above.

Workshops were not recorded because of the safety of the participants, I only will give a short overview here about the diversity:

We were lucky to have Thuy Trang Nguyen, who streamed a video, called „Jackfruit“ and gave a workshop after the impressive video about her grandmother's life.

A workshop about „Coming out Now and Then“ dealt with the experiences of queer women of different age in Germany.

Brother Bao and the Rainbow Community of Plum Village gave a beautiful sitting meditation, teachings, and singing.

Alan Lessik's interactive workshop dealt with „Recognizing and Transforming Shame: A Buddhist Approach.“ He wrote: „Queer people are very acquainted with the feelings of shame. Unlike guilt which is an admission that one did something bad or wrong, shame is a feeling that we are wrong. Much of our shame develops as children, yet shame emerges from incidents later in life. In Buddhism we learn to sit or meditate realizing our feelings, but strong feelings need guidance and compassion to work through. Buddha provided some useful instructions about recognizing and working with what he called self-affliction.“

Pema Duddul offered a workshop about „Rainbow Yoga: Seeing through Illusion and Recognising the True Face of Reality. He introduced participants „to a modernised and simplified form of Gyulu, or “illusory form” yoga, a Tibetan contemplative practice that cuts through the fabrications of the dualistic mind so that we can see reality clearly. The core message of Illusory Form practice is that the universe and its contents are dream-like illusions. Nothing is truly substantial or solid, everything is luminous space. Nothing exists independently, everything is interconnected and interdependent. Seeing all as a dream-like illusion undermines our misperception of reality and weakens delusion. It also cuts off attachment and aversion. (...) a profoundly transformative practice for LGBTIQ+ people.“

Kodo Nishimura and Konen Büttgen gave a “Journey to Freedom – Jodo Shu Buddhism” with introduction to the history of Jodo Shu, the Japanese school of Pure Land Buddhism and its teachings. They dealt with the question, what it means to be a Jodo Shu monk in Japan and in Europe. And Kodo gave an introduction to his book “This Monk wears Heels”.

Bhante Sumano offered a beautiful metta meditation and James Young gave a workshop about „Queer Dharma Spaces as Refuge: SOGI, Stress, and Liberation.“ James wrote „SOGI (Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity) stress, considered to be part of minority stress, increases a variety

of risk factors from anxiety to cardiovascular disease. This type of stress occurs because of two factors: intrapersonal (within the self) and interpersonally (between self and others). Being considered outside of the normative is cause to potentially experience discrimination, harassment, and marginalization both within family units and society at large. (...) Dharma - the teachings of the Buddha, Sangha - the community of Buddhists, and the Buddha - the enlightenment that the path of practice brings (the Three Jewels of Practice) are even more essential for the SOGI communities.“ Rebecca Connell facilitated a workshop about „Eating Meditation and Queer Body Gratitude: Practices for Anxiety and Depression“. It was a vivid workshop with lyrics and music. CJ Sokugan Dunford and Juliet Goji Bost offered an „ An Intersectional Jōdo Shinshū Conversation on Race, Queerness, and Transness in US Buddhism.“ They wrote „LGBTQIA+ Buddhist experience is unique to every individual, with as many stories as there are people. Each story finds itself at the intersection of a unique set of histories, movements, and circumstances, yet all find community as LGBTQIA+ folx in our Buddhists sanghas and at the 1st International Queer Buddhist Conference. Participants in this workshop will be introduced to the basic Jodo Shinshu teachings, learn about the tradition’s history within the context of other Buddhist traditions in the United States, and reflect on personal subjective biases that shape their experiences.“

The present proceedings of the 1<sup>st</sup> International Queer Buddhist Conference, IQBC, serve as an invitation for the reader to learn more about the LGBTQIA+ or queer community and Buddhism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the difficulties LGBTQIA+ people have to face, especially concerning intersection, whether it is being queer and BIPOC or queer and woman or queer and disabled etc. It became clear through this 1<sup>st</sup> IQBC, that further research is needed, but also further assistance or support of LGBTQIA+ people, who still are made the ones, who don’t belong to the majority, and so can be bullied or in movies or arts are the „exotic other“. This is still true, also small steps have been made towards a society that is longing for equality for everyone. But still much has to be done, and still events like this are needed, especially since 2019, when the pandemic has begun.



## Be Beautiful – Be Yourself: Thich Nhat Hanh’s Engaged Buddhism and the LGBTQIA+ Community

Juliane Amberger

Along with the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh<sup>1</sup> is one of the best-known Buddhist masters in the world. He gained worldwide attention through his involvement in the Second Indochina War (1955-1975), in which he acted as a patron of the peace movement. This movement was born on the principles of *Engaged Buddhism*, a term Nhat Hanh himself created to take Buddhist philosophy out of the monastic context and place it in a global context where it would contribute to solving social, environmental, and economic problems.<sup>2</sup> In the spirit of engaged Buddhism, Nhat Hanh founded his own Buddhist order in 1965 under the name *Order of Interbeing*<sup>3</sup>. The success of Engaged Buddhism was evident both in Nhat Hanh's nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1967 and in his close association with political and spiritual leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr.<sup>4</sup> Due to his political activities<sup>5</sup>, Nhat Hanh was ultimately forced to flee into exile to France, where he founded the Plum Village (French: Village des Pruniers) monastery, which is now one of the most visited Buddhist monasteries in Europe.<sup>6</sup> After spending more than 40 years in exile in France, Nhat Hanh was granted entry back into Vietnam in 2018. Now 95 years old, the Zen master returned to his original monastery in Hue, where he currently resides, after suffering a severe stroke. Thich Nhat Hanh, who is called ‘Thay’<sup>7</sup> by his students, is considered a teacher who brings respect to all people and values everyone equally. He is also famous for having established a big community all over the world that wants to treat all living beings with compassion and equanimity based on the practice of mindfulness. People meet regularly in their Plum Village Sanghas and practice mindfulness together to establish a community that treats everyone with respect and benevolence. Therefore individuals, such as members of the LGBTQIA+ community, who are often discriminated by society feel welcome and understood by Thich Nhat Hanh and like to engage in the programs of the Plum Village Tradition.

This essay aims to show how *Engaged Buddhism* in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh supports the Queer Community as an integral part of the Plum Village Sangha, while also making a statement about the

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1Pronounce: /tɪk 'njɑt 'hɑn/.

'Thich' is the Vietnamese title for 'honorific' and is traditionally given to monks. 'Nhật Hạnh' translates as 'one direction'. Simplified, the name is written 'Thich Nhat Hanh' in Western literature.

2Christopher S; King, Sallie B. (Ed.): *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia* (New York: Albany State University Press, 1996), p. 2.

3Ibid., p. 323.

4McLeod, Melvin: Editor’s Preface. In: Nhat Hanh, Thich; Sherab Chödzin; McLeod, Melvin (Ed.): *You are Here. Discovering the Magic of the Present Moment* (Boston/London: Shambala Publications, 2009), pp. vii-xiii, p. xi. Additionally, you can say that all Buddhism is engaged but the term *Engaged Buddhism* goes back to Thich Nhat Hanh.

5Nhat Hanh considered America to be the root of the war and for these reasons went to America several times to draw attention to his peace movement there as well. Both the North of Vietnam and the South were skeptical of the Zen monk's activities, since from the North's point of view he was apparently sympathetic to American policy, and after the victory over the South of Vietnam it was decided that Nhat Hanh would not be allowed to return to Vietnam.

6Plum Village: *About Plum Village*, [n.d.], < <https://plumvillage.org/about/plum-village/> > , [accessed 21/08/27].

7A formal title for teachers that refers to the Vietnamese word for teacher.

importance of inclusion for queer individuals. Furthermore, the essay wants to show the connection between Buddhism and the Queer community based on the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh.

### Engaged Buddhism

Beginning as a peace movement during the Second Indochina War, Thich Nhat Hanh's *Engaged Buddhism* evolved into an everyday practice in which compassion (skt. karuna) and loving kindness (skt. metta) toward all living beings, are integral parts. The focus is on what Nhat Hanh calls "*the miracle of mindfulness*"<sup>8</sup>. As an exercise, mindfulness is practiced both in sitting and slow walking, as well as in active interactions among people, in housework, or even during athletic gymnastics.

On the one hand, mindfulness helps practitioners to achieve more inner stability, since by concentrating on the here and now, thoughts or feelings that arise are deprived of the possibility of destabilization.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, practitioners gain insight into the dynamics of their own mind, through the non-judgmental, neutral observation of mental processes, which are attentively observed in their arising and passing. Thus, one's own behavioral patterns or thought processes can be observed and recognized in order to subsequently gain the possibility to change or restructure them in everyday life. In this sense, individuals receive an instruction to transform suffering into wellbeing by practicing mindfulness. Nhat Hanh often describes pain like a crying child, which one should hold in the arms and comfort. In this way, one can succeed in transforming pain into compassion for oneself.<sup>10</sup> In the long run, the exercises are about eliminating personal suffering as well as the suffering of others, analogous to Nhat Hanh's famous calligraphy "*Peace in Oneself, Peace in the World*"<sup>11</sup>. In the transformation of one's own suffering into pleasant feelings lies not only the key to more capacity and love for other people but also the path to gratitude and joy about one's own life. Furthermore, practitioners should learn to enhance their awareness of themselves and their environment through the practice of mindfulness. The goal is to become aware of the fact that they are directly connected to all other living beings, a natural law that Nhat Hanh calls *Interbeing*<sup>12</sup>. From this, Thich Nhat Hanh justifies ethical action in terms of peace, compassion, and the protecting the planet as well as all living beings. The practice of *Engaged Buddhism* today focuses primarily on establishing healthy relationships

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<sup>8</sup>Nhat Hanh, Thich: *The Miracle of Mindfulness. A manual on Meditation*, (Boston: Beacon Press 1987), preface.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>10</sup>Nhat Hanh, Thich: *Happiness* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2009), p. 86.

<sup>11</sup>[no surname], Michell: *Peace in Oneself, Peace in The World*, 2014/04/03, < [https://www.stillwatermpc.org/dharma-topics/peace\\_in\\_oneself\\_peace\\_in\\_the\\_world/](https://www.stillwatermpc.org/dharma-topics/peace_in_oneself_peace_in_the_world/) > [accessed: 2021/08/27].

<sup>12</sup>The English word *Interbeing* is said to correspond to a translation of the Vietnamese 'Tiếp Hiện'. Nhat Hanh writes in *Interbeing: Commentaries on the Tiep Hien Precepts* (1987) that 'Tiếp' means 'to be in contact with something' and 'to continue'. 'Hiện' means 'to realize' or 'to dwell in the present moment'. 'Tiếp' refers to being in contact with the reality of the world while continuing on the Buddha's path to enlightenment. 'Hiện' means to realize the Buddha's teachings in the here and now. See: Nhat Hanh, Thich: *Interbeing. Commentaries on the Tiep Hien Precepts* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1987), p. 11.



between people to sustainably eliminate suffering. Nhat Hanh says “*the act of sitting down is a revolution*”<sup>13</sup> referring to sitting meditation as a training into the insight of *Interbeing* through mindfulness practice, which is the foundation for a collective movement of people that actively works to end suffering and destruction in the world.

Philosophically, *Interbeing* goes back to the doctrine of conditional arising (skt. *pratitya-samutpada*). It is considered by Nhat Hanh as the “*foundation of all of Buddhist study and practice*”<sup>14</sup> and describes a chain consisting of 12 elements, which defines the cycle of becoming and passing away (Samsara). In this, all elements build on each other, from which it is said that “*cause and action co-arise (samutpada) and everything is a result of multiple causes and conditions.*”<sup>15</sup> In this sense, pain and suffering also lead to certain conditions that make human interaction difficult and, at the same time, are in turn the cause of other conditions. Aware of this, the goal of eliminating suffering becomes even more important in order to figuratively create a happier and more empathetic society. It is precisely in human interaction that discrimination, exclusion, and violent acts occur again and again in everyday life. People such as BIPOCs, immigrants, and members of the LGBTQIA+ family are especially targeted as they are marginalized in many countries. *Engaged Buddhism*, on the other hand, is inclusive of all people and seeks to treat everyone with mindfulness and respect based on *Interbeing*. Thus, in the Plum Village Tradition, there are several Sanghas that especially address people who identify as either marginalized or are looking for like-minded individuals who share a certain background. Of particular note is the Rainbow family, which addresses LGBTQIA+ individuals and will be explored in more detail in the following.

### Rainbow groups in the Plum Village Tradition

There exist several rainbow groups that take place in the context of (online) retreats as so-called 'rainbow families' as well as several Queer Sanghas, which meet both in presence and online.<sup>16</sup> Plum Village is not the only LGBTQIA+ friendly community worldwide, but represents most Queer Sanghas, according to *rainbodhi.org*<sup>17</sup>. The international Queer Sangha organizes guided online meditations on Zoom, to which monastics of the Interbeing Order are also invited. There is even a separate annual retreat for the rainbow

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<sup>13</sup>Tnhaudio: *The Act of Sitting Down is a Revolution*, [2012/12/03], < <https://tnhaudio.org/2012/12/17/the-act-of-sitting-down-is-a-revolution/> > [accessed 2021/08/27].

<sup>14</sup>Nhat Hanh, Thich: *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching: Transforming Suffering into Peace, Joy, and Liberation*, (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2015), p. 221.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>For ex. the British Queer sangha, accessible under: <https://plumvillage.uk/find-a-group/rainbow-sangha/> or for the international Queer sangha see: <https://framalistes.org/sympa/info/plum-village-rainbow> and for the French queer sangha see: <https://meditationlgbtiqparis.jimdosite.com> [accessed 2021/08/27].

<sup>17</sup>Rainbodhi: *Rainbodhi Recourses: Rainbodhi Media and Releases and Resorts*, [n.d.] < <https://rainbodhi.org/resources/> > [accessed 2021/08/27].

family (organized in cooperation with the EIAB<sup>18</sup>), which focuses on tolerance, visibility, and self-love. Moreover, monastics who see themselves as part of the Queer Community also take on a special significance as contact persons for rainbow groups.

The inclusion of marginalized groups was already addressed at the second international conference of the Interbeing Order in 1996. This conference was held under the slogan 'Being Wonderful Together' and united members from all over the world to discuss the organizations, projects and administration of the Plum Village Order. Regarding the goals of the community discussed at that time, the protocol says under the subitem 'Inclusiveness and Special Needs':

Recognizing the interbeing nature of all humanity and the suffering caused by isolation and exclusion, we are aware that there are many silenced and marginalized groups in our society, and that we need to listen deeply to these groups and individuals in their own language and ways of living. We need to become more aware and open to the tensions and misunderstandings between us and to explore ways to address areas that reflect our own suffering.

We agree to be open to suggestions from all racial and ethnic groups regarding inclusiveness; to listen deeply to our lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transsexual members to help eliminate misunderstandings which may exist; and to increase awareness of ways our Sanghas can welcome people with mental and physical disabilities and the chronically ill.<sup>19</sup>

From this point on, the systematic inclusion of the LGBTQIA+ community in the monastic order began. Offerings for queer members in retreats were incorporated into the practice, which became increasingly applicable, such as participation in a separate Pride event in which all participants were allowed to show tolerance flags, similar to public Pride parades. Unlike those Pride parades, the Plum Village Pride aimed less to figure as a demonstration for the rights of the LGBTQIA+ community and more to unite people of all genders and sexual orientations as a family under the rainbow flag.

Furthermore, in conversations with members of the Rainbow group at the 2019 Wake Up Earth Retreat, it emerged that the practice of *Dharma Sharing* in particular, along with the support of the Monastics, is essential to the well-being of all members.

### **Plum Village and the LGBTQIA+ Family: Dharma Sharing as a Practice for Dealing with Discrimination and Trauma**

As indicated several times, people on the rainbow spectrum often suffer from discrimination and trauma. Here, mindfulness practice is meant to help create more self-acceptance. At the same time, it is also about finding an appropriating a way to deal with trauma and discrimination, as well as cultivating compassion for oneself and others.

The related practice used in all Plum Village Sanghas and in all retreats is called *Dharma Sharing* and is one

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<sup>18</sup>EIAB stands for European Institute of applied Buddhism and was founded by Thich Nhat Hanh in 2008 as a practice center for mindfulness practice near the German city Cologne.

<sup>19</sup>Mindfulnessbell: *Being Wonderful Together*; [n.d. 1997] <

<https://www.mindfulnessbell.org/archive/tag/Transgender> > , [accessed 2021/08/27].

of the most important group practices in the Plum Village tradition. In *Dharma Sharing* people get the opportunity to share personal concerns while the others listen mindfully. The goal of *Dharma Sharing* is not only to practice mindfulness in togetherness, but also to benefit from lived community with one another. In this sense, the listeners do not evaluate or judge what is said but simply *listen* to the speakers. The latter additionally implies a duty of confidentiality, according to the rules on the website of the *Mindfulness Practice Community of Toronto*: "*All that arises is confidential. What is said here, stays here.*"<sup>20</sup>

In some *Dharma Sharings*, the topics are already given, for example, based on the questions ‘Why are you participating in this retreat?’ or ‘What do you hope to gain from this retreat?’ In Rainbow Families, on the other hand, the sharing is often related to (sexual) identity and personal issues which arise from that topic. Thus, Rainbow Families offer a safe space to talk about one's own sexual and/or gender identity and to connect with like-minded people. In addition to communal activities and group meditations, the main focus in these Sanghas is mutual empowerment, to give all participants a sense of respect and tolerance, as well as to support them in their search for identity, their coming out, or in their individual self-awareness. The practice of *Dharma Sharing* is accompanied by *Loving Speech* and *Deep Listening*.<sup>21</sup> In *Loving Speech*, the speaker focuses on using words that do not harm anyone and express a benevolent approach to one's own personal issues or given topics of conversation to maintain harmony in the community. Nhat Hanh writes about *Loving Speech*:

We also need to train ourselves to use loving speech. We have lost our capacity to say things calmly. We get irritated too easily. Every time we open our mouths, our speech becomes sour or bitter. We have lost our capacity for speaking with kindness. Without this ability, we cannot succeed in restoring harmony, love, and happiness.<sup>22</sup>

In *Deep Listening*, the listeners concentrate entirely on what is being said, which, as mentioned above, they should not evaluate or judge. At the same time, they should focus on the speaker's words and not get caught up in inner monologues or emerging thoughts. Nhat Hanh writes about *Deep Listening*:

You have to practice breathing mindfully in and out so that compassion always stays with you. You listen without giving advice or passing judgment. You can say to yourself about the other person, “I am listening to him just because I want to relieve his suffering.” This is called compassionate listening. You have to listen in such a way that compassion remains with you the whole time you are listening. That is the art. If halfway through listening, irritation or anger comes up, then you cannot continue to listen. You have to practice in such a way that every time the energy of irritation and anger comes up, you can breathe in and out mindfully and continue to hold compassion within you. It is with compassion that you can listen to another. No matter what the other person says, even if there is a lot of strong information and injustice in his way of seeing things, even if he condemns or blames you, continue to sit very quietly breathing in and out.<sup>23</sup>

In this instruction, another significant aspect of the exercise is revealed: the cultivation of compassion (Skt. *karuna*) and support, which, according to Nhat Hanh, should help alleviate the pain of the speaker. At the

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<sup>20</sup>Mindfulness Practice Community of Toronto: *What are the Guidelines of Dharma Sharing?*, [n.d.] <  
<https://mindfulnesspracticecommunity.org/our-practices/guidelines-for-dharma-sharing/>> , [accessed:  
2021/08/27]

<sup>21</sup>Nhat Hanh, Thich: *Happiness*, p. 84-86.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 85.

same time, the exercise is a way to be mindful of one's own feelings in the event of conflict or negative emotions that may arise while listening. In this way, it should be possible to cultivate genuine compassion for oneself and others.

Through the practice of mindful speaking and mindful listening, participants train to interact peacefully and tolerantly with one another, which furthermore provides Nhat Hanh's prerequisite "*to live simply and happily together*"<sup>24</sup>.

### **Buddhism and the Queer Community**

Focusing on the personal concerns of the Rainbow Community, the question of the connection between Buddhism and sexuality also arises at this point. In *Answers from the Heart: Practical Responses to Life's Burning Questions* (2009), the discourse on the question of toleration of homosexuality in Buddhism is taken up, which Nhat Hanh answers as follows:

The spirit of Buddhism is inclusiveness. Looking deeply into the nature of a cloud, we see the cosmos. A flower is a flower, but if we look deeply into it, we see the cosmos. Everything has a place. The base-the foundation of everything-is the same. When you look at the ocean, you see different kinds of waves, many sizes and shapes, but all the waves have water as their foundation and substance. If you are born gay or lesbian, your ground of being is the same as mine. We are different, but we share the same ground of being. The Protestant theologian Paul Tillich said that God is the ground of being. You should be yourself. If God has created me as a rose, then I should accept myself as a rose. If you are a lesbian, then be a lesbian. Looking deeply into your nature, you will see yourself as you truly are. You will be able to touch the ground of your being and find peace.<sup>25</sup>

Thich Nhat Hanh explicitly advocates human diversity in this quote. When Nhat Hanh answers "[t]he spirit of Buddhism is inclusiveness" he refers to the fact that through *Interbeing* everything directly interacts with the entire cosmos (*partitiya-samutpada*) and thus every single being is attributed a meaning. Considering that everything that exists is a result of "*the same ground of being*" (in this example God), all living beings have the same origin. And although there are "*many sizes and shapes*" in their expression, they are nevertheless connected by the same force. In this almost theological interpretation, Nhat Hanh sees human diversity as something given by God. Following Paul Tillich, he describes God as "*the ground of being*", which can also be described as cosmos in relation to Nhat Hanh's example of the cloud. In conclusion, one's own diversity (in this case sexuality) should be seen as something natural. This response demonstrates not only Nhat Hanh's "*inclusiveness*" in relation to people, but also in terms of religion, drawing on the Christian understanding of God in his interpretation.<sup>26</sup> Nhat Hanh's interpretations demonstrate a successful example of a combination of the Christian belief of God as the primordial force of life and the Buddhist view that

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<sup>24</sup>Nhat Hanh, Thich; Sr. Chan Khong; Nhat Hoanh, Tha: *Interbeing: The 14 Mindfulness Trainings of Engaged Buddhism* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2020), p. 47.

<sup>25</sup>Nhat Hanh, Thich: *Answers from the Heart: Practical Responses to Life's Burning Questions* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2009) p. 119.

<sup>26</sup>Using the Christian understanding of God in order to describe Buddhist inclusiveness can also be seen as a form of *upaya* in a broader sense.

everything that exists is made up of many parts and thus includes the entire cosmos as a “*ground of being*”.

Continuing, Nhat Hanh also comments on the topic of homosexuality and discrimination:

Someone who discriminates against you, because of your race or the color of your skin or your sexual orientation, is ignorant. He doesn't know his own ground of being. He doesn't realize that we all share the same ground of being; that is why he can discriminate against you.

Someone who discriminates against others and causes them to suffer is someone who is not happy with himself. Once you've touched the depth and the nature of your ground of being, you'll be equipped with the kind of understanding that can give rise to compassion and tolerance, and you will be capable of forgiving even those who discriminate against you. Don't believe that relief or justice will come through society alone. True emancipation lies in your capacity to look deeply.<sup>27</sup>

Here, too, Nhat Hanh refers to God as the primordial power of all that exists and the *Interbeing* of all living beings, which, according to *Engaged Buddhism*, justifies benevolence and acceptance towards all living beings. Those who discriminate against others are not aware of the interdependence of all that exists, nor do they understand that the origin of humanity is tied to the existence of the cosmos and that every living being has “*the same ground of being*”. Those who widely live in a dualistic reality that favors the immediate discrimination of other individuals are, with the words of Nhat Hanh, considered to be someone “*who is not happy with himself*”, since being happy, for Nhat Hanh, is associated with the ability to look deeply, whereby insight into the nature of all phenomena can be gained. Accordingly, Nhat Hanh speaks of recognizing the suffering of the aggressor through deep looking and responding in return with compassion and forgiveness. Subsequently, he points out that the end of such discrimination cannot be established by society itself, but is linked to the action of each individual, who must recognize the nature of all phenomena through mindfulness practice, and as a result will deal peacefully and tolerantly with his fellow human beings. Following the Lotus Sutra, Nhat Hanh's interpretation can still be added the Mahayana idea of the inherent Buddhahood of every living being. Accordingly, all individuals share “*the same ground of being*” as they all possess the capacity to become a Buddha. However, this also means that everyone is equally capable of transforming pain into wellbeing and treat their external world with compassion (skt. *karuna*), loving kindness (skt. *metta*) and equanimity (skt. *upeksha*), which further clarifies Nhat Hanh's thesis of Buddhist “*inclusiveness*” from another angle.

In addition to sexual orientation, the Queer Community is primarily concerned with gender orientation. Thich Nhat Hanh also takes a stand on this. In a Q&A session, a young woman asks the question, “*What makes a man a man and a woman a woman?*”<sup>28</sup> to which Nhat Hanh responds:

Be beautiful be yourself. We have to accept what we are. A lotus is beautiful as a lotus. She doesn't have to become a rose in order to be beautiful. To be gay or lesbian is equally beautiful. We should not be caught by words and notions. Everything that we see manifests the wonders of God, of the ultimate reality. And we have to deal with everyone and everything with the deepest kind of respect. People say that I am a man, but I am not sure. Because I behave very often like a mother. My disciples see in me a father, a teacher and a mother at the same time. And I enjoy being a mother. So let us not be caught by words and concepts. In Buddhism we have the

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>28</sup>Plum Village: “What makes us men and women? Thich Nhat Hanh”, *YouTube Video*, 5:53. 2019/04/04 < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G9kHeCUgdm4> > 0:51-0:54, [accessed: 2021/08/27].

word 'suchness' and it means reality as it is and we can not use any concept or word in order to describe. So we should not listen to those people who give us that kind of advice and make us lose our joy and happiness.<sup>29</sup>

Again, it is about accepting oneself as one is, or in terms of gender and sexuality, as one perceives oneself to be. It is important for Nhat Hanh to free oneself from concepts and ideas. In doing so, analogous to the previous quote, he again indirectly alludes to the practice of looking deeply, which can provide insights into the "suchness" or the "ultimate reality" of the world. Thus, practitioners become aware that the concepts of masculinity and femininity are purely social constructs that have nothing to do with someone's nature, yet each person is unique in their own way. Analogous to the Buddhist view that people hold seeds comprising all the phenomena by which the persons have been shaped in their store consciousness, the different roles to which Nhat Hanh refers can also be explained. In this way, all living beings have the potential to be mother, father or teacher and to share what they have learned from these persons. Biological gender does not matter, because beauty lies in the ability to accept and love oneself. This is the message that Plum Village wants to bring to the LGBTQIA+ community, because those who accept and love themselves become immune to the queer-phobia of others.

Brother Bao Tang is one of those monastics who advocate for and mentor the queer groups. Echoing the idea of continuity based on the seeds in the store consciousness, he says in a Q&A session, *"we know that we also have the ultimate dimension where we see ourselves as the continuation of ancestors. Thanks to the LGBT ancestors today [sic!] we have the freedom. [...] So we see that [our ancestors] are still alive."*<sup>30</sup> Based on the fact that the earlier Queer Community consisted of a community of many individuals demonstrating for their rights, Bao Tang sees the most significant value for safety and support in a sangha. Thus, the Plum Village Sangha also serves as a big support for queer individuals and a place where they are allowed to feel safe.

In addition to Br. Bao Tang, Brother Phap Hai also supports the Queer Community. However, he sees in the letter Q not only the word *queer* but also *questioning*, which can be seen as a sexual orientation, too. In his video to the rainbow family, he does not interpret it in this way, but as a willingness to always question someone's own identity in relation to the world, which he justifies as follows: *"The willingness to question all of our assumptions and beliefs and the way we do things. [...] It's fundamental, I believe, for queerness. To be in that space of not taking things for granted. Of being willing to embark and remain for the whole of our lives on a journey of discovery of what this world is, what we are and what our real situation is."*<sup>31</sup>

Phap Hai thus calls on the Queer Community to critically question the way they are treated and to examine their own opinions and attitudes. Whether this is really a fundamental aspect of queerness alone or of all

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 2:21 -5:26.

<sup>30</sup>Vuo Simon: "Plum Village Q&A on LGBTQIA by Br Bao Tang", *YouTube Video*, 11:48, 2021/10/03 < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g0w2LYTwaXM> > 6:39-7:15, [accessed: 2021/08/27].

<sup>31</sup> Plum Village App: „Rainbow Talk | Brother Phap Hai", *Vimeo Video*, 38:40, June 2021, < <https://vimeo.com/568870587> > 21:47-22:20, [accessed 2021/08/27].

individuals is debatable, but an interesting connection can be made between this view and a current movement within the Queer Sangha:

The Rainbow Movement asked in a letter (summer 2021) to be mentioned in the third training of the *Five Mindfulness Trainings*.<sup>32</sup> In this Buddhist guideline, sex is considered in connection with solid relationships and based on love. Furthermore, protection from abuse and control over sexual energy are prescribed. Thereby sexual energy is not to be equated with love, but with greed. At the same time, all individuals should be treated responsibly in relationships. Moreover, it states that committed relationships should be made known to family and friends. At this point, the Queer Sangha criticized that many LGBTQIA+ individuals cannot live their relationships openly because they would be persecuted, discriminated, or tortured. Therefore, the Sangha requested that a kind of anti-discrimination law against sexual and gender identity should be inserted into the third training in the form of the sentence: "*Recognizing the diversity of human experience, I am committed not to discriminate against any forms of gender identity, expression and sexual orientation.*"<sup>33</sup>

Through the Queer Sangha newsletter, a call was made for digital signatures to be shown to the Interbeing Order along with the letter. So far there has been no response or comment from the Order, but in reference to what this essay showed about the *Engaged Buddhism's* statement about gender and sexual identity it is unlikely that someone will oppose this request.

### Conclusio

Both Thich Nhat Hanh and his monastics clearly show that the support and inclusion of LGBTQIA+ individuals are important for the whole Sangha, as it is a prerequisite for a peaceful and tolerant society, which in turn is based on Nhat Hanh's vision of a social revolution through young, happy people. In order to support those who experience discrimination and rejection from their environment, it is imperative to create a community in which these individuals can feel accepted, safe and supported. In this sense, the practice of the Plum Village tradition offers the possibility of healing in a community through mindfulness practice in the spirit of compassion and deep listening. *No Mud, no Lotus*<sup>34</sup>(2014) is a another book by Thich Nhat Hanh, where he refers to insight, wisdom and happiness that can arise through looking deeply at one's suffering and transforming it into wellbeing. In this sense I think:

A lotus can shine in rainbow colors as well as in other colors because every lotus is wonderful and beautiful.

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<sup>32</sup> *The Five Mindfulness Trainings* are Thich Nhat Hanh's version of the *Five Precepts* (skt. *pancasila*) and serve as a core teaching in the Plum Village Tradition.

<sup>33</sup>This sentence cannot be quoted because the letter was part of a newsletter from June 2021.

<sup>34</sup> Nhat Hanh, Thich: *No Mud, No Lotus: The Art of Transforming Suffering* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2014).



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<https://vimeo.com/568870587>



## **Queer(ing) Engaged Buddhism: Chenrezig, Tonglen, and Compassionate Social Justice**

Kody Muncaster

In Buddhism a bodhisattva is one who could be enlightened but delays nirvana out of compassion for all beings and continues to reincarnate so that they can spend each life alleviating the suffering of others. The bodhisattva of Compassion goes by many genders: male, female, neither, and both. Chenrezig has become important to queer Buddhists, who scarcely see ourselves represented in historical and contemporary Buddhist literature. Tonglen, a meditation in which practitioners inhale suffering and exhale compassion, is a practice that is inherently queer due to its association with Chenrezig. The goal of this paper is twofold: (1) to examine Chenrezig as a queer figure and tonglen as a queer practice, and (2) to explore the implications of these two concepts for a queer engaged Buddhism. I explore compassion as a core value of queer politics and discuss its implications for queer(ing) engaged Buddhism.

There is something queer about the affective, corporeal, and spiritual conceptualization of compassion in Buddhism that can be harnessed for a queer engaged Buddhist praxis. A bodhisattva is one who could be enlightened but delays nirvana out of compassion for all beings and continues to reincarnate so that they can spend each life alleviating the suffering of others. The iconic bodhisattva of compassion goes not only by many names: Chenrezig, Avalokitesvara, Kuan Yin, but also by many genders: male, female, both, and neither. Some queer and trans Buddhists have honoured Chenrezig as a trans or gender fluid Bodhisattva. In Tibet and Theravada countries, they are typically represented as male and in China, Korea, and Japan they are often female; though ambiguous representations of them are widespread and thus the bodhisattva is not being hailed as trans solely due to geographical variations in conceptualizations of its gender. While it may appear anachronistic to label Chenrezig as “gender fluid” this English language word may not have existed in Pali but Pali itself has a gender-neutral pronoun and non-binary people are not a Western invention of the 21st century. Regardless, Chenrezig has become important to queer Buddhists, who scarcely see ourselves represented in the Pali Canon, the Mahayana Sutras, or in contemporary Buddhist literature. Chenrezig embodies compassion, a central component to the contemporary engaged Buddhist movement that aims to join Buddhist principals with social justice. Chenrezig is but one of many examples of the Buddhist emphasis on compassion, along with the Tibetan Buddhist practice of tonglen, a meditation in which practitioners inhale suffering and exhale compassion. The goal of this paper is twofold: (1) to examine Chenrezig as a queer figure and tonglen as a queer practice, and (2) to explore the implications of these two concepts for a queer engaged Buddhism. I begin with a brief discussion of Chenrezig and the concept of the bodhisattva. I discuss Chenrezig as a queer and/or trans figure and examine what Chenrezig means for queer and trans Buddhists. I then discuss tonglen as a corporeal and affective practice that is inherently queer. I explore compassion as a core value of queer politics and discuss its implications for queer(ing) engaged Buddhism.

A brief overview of the history of dominant Buddhist traditions will help situate the concepts explored in this article. There are many Buddhist paths, but two competing ideals remain dominant: the arahant and the bodhisattva paths. The arahant path entails following the Buddha’s teachings for the purposes of attaining one’s own enlightenment and transcending the cycle of rebirth. This path is preserved in the Pali Canon and the Nikaya collection, oral traditions that were began to be written down in 29 BCE, approximately 454 years after the death of the Buddha. These texts are honoured primarily in the conservative Theravada branch of Buddhism. The bodhisattva path was inspired by an emulation of the Buddha that gained traction around the 1st century BCE with the rise of Mahayana Buddhism. The aspiring bodhisattva vows that even if they reach a point in their

practice which they could become enlightened, they will remain in the cycle of rebirth until everyone can be freed from cyclic existence, out of compassion for all suffering beings. Bodhisattvas are not necessarily Gods though there are bodhisattvas such as Chenrezig that are worshipped and idealized. Bhikkhu Bodhi explains that this path is typically associated with Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism; however, it has been absorbed into the Theravadin tradition. Bodhi discusses how some Theravadin Buddhists deny the validity of the bodhisattva path, which he calls “Nikaya Purism,” whereas some Mahayana Buddhists look down on the Theravadin arahant path as selfish, a phenomena Bodhi calls “Mahayana elitism.” While my purpose in this paper is to examine solely the notion of bodhisattvahood and not the arahant path, I do not wish to participate in the denigration of any of the Buddhist paths and I draw from literature written by Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana Buddhists. Each of these paths uses various liturgical and spoken languages; I use Pali words to describe works and concepts from Theravada Buddhism, Sanskrit for Mahayana, and Tibetan for Vajrayana. I have chosen to use the Tibetan name Chenrezig to describe the bodhisattva of compassion for consistency with my later discussion of the Tibetan Buddhist meditation, tonglen.

Buddhist aims for social justice argue for a practice that takes the Buddhist teachings beyond the meditation cushion and applies them to social, political, environmental, and economic struggles. Thích Nhất Hạnh popularized “engaged Buddhism” in an attempt to unite existing Buddhist efforts to emphasize the application of Buddhism to such issues. He lists fourteen mindfulness trainings that are essential to engaged Buddhist praxis. Engaged Buddhism does not belong to a particular tradition, nor is it limited to Hanh’s work; its use is widespread in contemporary Buddhist communities globally. I contend that compassion is central to engaged Buddhism and that this path lacks engagement with queer and trans activism that can be bolstered by an examination of Chenrezig as a queer icon to inspire further engagement with queer and trans rights.

Understanding the importance of Chenrezig as the embodiment of the compassion helps contextualize the emergence of engaged Buddhism as a social justice practice. Chenrezig is a bodhisattva who, unlike Gautama Buddha, has not been traced to an historical human. There are many stories of Chenrezig, which are beyond the limits of this paper; however, I will provide a brief sketch of one of these stories to illustrate the depth of Chenrezig’s compassion. There is a popular depiction of Chenrezig with one-thousand arms and eleven heads. The story is that Chenrezig vowed to never rest until all beings were free of suffering; however, despite all efforts, they realized that they had not attained their goal. They worked so tirelessly to comprehend the suffering of all beings that their head split into eleven pieces. Seeing their efforts, the Amitabha Buddha (a Celestial Buddha) granted them eleven heads to hear the cries of everyone in the world. Once they heard these cries, they attempted to reach out to all beings and their arms fell off and broke into pieces. Amitabha then gave them one thousand arms so that they could help as many beings as possible. This is one of many stories and depictions of Chenrezig, each emphasizing the bodhisattva’s boundless compassion, a quality that those who worship them strive for. Having such an emphasis on compassion, it is not surprising that an engaged Buddhist praxis has emerged.

Chenrezig is depicted across many cultures, traditions, and countries as male, female, both, and neither. In the Mahayana Lotus Sutra, the Buddha is asked, “World-Honored One, why does Regarder of the Cries of the World Bodhisattva [Chenrezig] travel around in this world? How does he teach the Dharma for the sake of the living? What sort of power of skillful means does he have?”. The Buddha replies by listing several ways that Chenrezig transforms into whichever form is most helpful for the being in need. In his reply, the Buddha states: “for those who need someone in the body of a boy or girl in order to be saved, he appears as a boy or girl and teaches the Dharma for them”. One of my transgender foster children has Buddhist birth parents; he calls Chenrezig “gender fluid”. While it may appear anachronistic to apply a contemporary English trans-identity to

Chenrezig, the use of this term combats the erasure of trans people so prominent in Buddhist historiography and cosmology. Chenrezig's influence across cultures and countries refuses attempts to locate a geographic, culturally and linguistically appropriate trans-identity.

Given the on-going controversies around identity labels both in Buddhism and queer theory, it is worth pausing to examine the Buddhist conceptualization of non-Self. It is typical for the concept of non-Self to dominate and confuse discussions of queerness in Buddhism. I do not wish to dwell on this point; however, I will briefly comment that the crux of non-Self is to recognize the illusory nature of all things. This is an experiential tool for training the mind in, among other concepts, non-attachment, rather than a denial of the material existence of beings and the cultural intelligibility of those beings' identities; though it may be mis-appropriated for the purposes of denying the existence and invalidating the experiences of marginalized groups. Building on Katie Kent's call for scholars to maintain queerness as an expectation when reading, Jose Munoz argues that queerness is ephemeral, leaving few traces that are sufficient to qualify as evidence of its existence to the cishetero public; our existence is always historically debated due to shifts in cultural and linguistic developments, though the existence of heterosexuality is never up for debate despite the fact that the term "heterosexual" was preceded by "homosexual" in the English language. I use the term "gender fluid" to make legible that part of Chenrezig's story that is illegible to cishetero eyes; eyes that dispossess us of any hold we have on the existence of people or Bodhisattvas like us. I proceed with my foster son's choice of "gender fluid" over terms such as "non-binary" because it adequately captures the Lotus Sutra's depiction of Chenrezig as changing genders according to the needs of the person they are helping.

Cathryn Bailey examines Chenrezig as a symbol of feminist pragmatism on questions of gender essentialism and the meaning of the bodhisattva of compassion for trans people and feminists as both a trans icon. She explains that while some claim that Chenrezig began as a male figure in India in the beginning of the Common Era and then was subsequently depicted as female by the 12th century in China and Japan, it is not accurate to assert that this is due to regional gendered associations with compassion. She explains that Chenrezig's assertions that Chenrezig was depicted as female due to the association of compassion with the feminine are complicated by the fact that compassion has historically been a masculinized quality in China. She asserts Chenrezig is still sometimes depicted as male and as androgynous; thus it is not accurate to claim that Chenrezig "used to be" male and is now female. She explains that Chenrezig embodies a pragmatic approach to feminist and trans questions of gender essentialism, enabling us to examine gender through the lens of non-Self, neither fixed, nor irrelevant. She explores contemporary writing about Chenrezig in the trans movement and argues that Chenrezig's gender fluidity and compassion are what makes her particularly suited to act as a trans icon during a time of great suffering for trans people.

Queers may be particularly attuned to the overwhelming suffering that occurs in this world; perhaps part of living as queer is the work of compassion for the pain of those like us. It is helpful to examine the current landscape of queer suffering in any consideration of the importance of a queer engaged Buddhism. For example, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick begins *Tendencies* by stating "I think everyone who does gay and lesbian studies is haunted by the suicides of adolescents," noting how we are possessed to write by the ghosts of our queer and trans ancestors who have died by, in this case, suicide. There are many more forms of queer suffering, such as government inaction on AIDS, the holocaust, transphobic violence, and experiences of familial homophobia and transphobia. During many of these struggles, there were ongoing attempts at coalitional activism, predating the advent of intersectionality as a feminist analytic. It is beyond the purposes of this paper to attempt to enumerate the innumerable social issues that make queer life feel unlivable during these challenging times. My intent is to highlight the possibilities inherent in queerness for a form of common humanity, which Buddhist psychologist Kristin Neff defines as the perception of

an individual experience as a part of a shared experience by a broader population. It is this sense of common humanity, of shared suffering, that has led to myriad forms of queer activism that engaged Buddhism can learn from.

The magnitude of queer suffering is so great in these times that a theorization of queer necropolitics has been conceptualized to describe power over the death of certain queers. Achilles Mbembé coined necropolitics as an examination of “death-worlds, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead”. Jasbir Puar conceptualized queer necropolitics to understand how certain, more privileged queer people are “folded into life” while other inhabiting multiple marginalized identities are exposed to greater rates of premature death. Despite the emergence of this field, there is little attention paid to the question: what does queer necropolitics feel like? There is a well of suffering to be excavated during a time period in which certain groups of an already marginalized population are subjected to conditions that confer premature death. Ann Cvetkovich’s work on queer trauma as ubiquitous is germane here, she argues that living in these times is traumatizing for queer people, conceptualizing queer trauma beyond the pathologization of post-traumatic stress disorder to highlight the often-daily experiences of trauma that queers face. Though not explicitly linked to necropolitics, Cvetkovich’s discussion of queer trauma comes close to describing the suffering of living in a world in which certain queers face premature death. Cvetkovich argues that this has led to the formation of queer trauma cultures, communities of caring, mourning, and activism—communities of compassion and socially engaged politics. I join Heather Love in arguing that we need a study of queer affect that embraces difficult feelings, but I contend that we must extend this investigation into queer suffering to also examine the surprisingly under-researched theme of queer compassion. Indeed, just as the Buddha renounced worldly life for a spiritual path after witnessing the suffering of old age, sickness, and death, being so heavily exposed to suffering, queers have historically engaged in compassionate activism such as that of the AIDS crisis. Queer suffering in necropolitical times does not only feel painful; it has also led to the affective and political arousal of queer bodhicitta, the compassionate awakening of a heart-mind aspiration to alleviate the suffering of all beings, which is the foundation of tonglen practice.

Tonglen meditation, also known as “sending and taking” and “exchanging self for others” is a Tibetan practice that is both queer in its counterintuitive instruction and has implications for queer engaged Buddhism. Tonglen is the seventh instruction in the fifty-nine Tibetan lojong slogans, mind training practices used to enhance one’s compassion. The slogan states “sending and taking should be practiced alternately. These two should ride the breath.” During Tonglen practice, the meditator arouses bodhicitta (the awakened heart-mind, a concept used to denote the wish to free all beings from suffering) and breathes in a dark smoke that is the suffering of themselves, someone else, or all beings, and breathes out a bright light that represents compassion and the wish that these beings be free from that suffering. The practice is often reported as intensely difficult and because of this is sometimes abandoned by those new to the meditation. After seeing many students having difficulty with Tonglen, Lama Palden Drolma developed a more digestible version which she calls “love on every breath” where, instead of absorbing the suffering into oneself, a practitioner imagines themselves as Chenrezig and then begins tonglen as the bodhisattva of compassion. She also includes a version in the appendix of her book for “activists and those of other traditions,” in which they call on either a different divine being, a spiritual teacher, or a formless presence.

Tonglen’s queer instruction is counter to more common New Age and yogic meditations that ask the practitioner to inhale positivity and exhale negativity. The practice demands a critique of Western, individualistic notions of self-care that fail to examine care of one’s community. Indeed, the eleventh of the thirty-seven practices of a bodhisattva by Tokme Zongpo states: All suffering, without exception, arises from the desire for one’s own happiness.

Perfect buddhas are born from benefiting others.

Therefore, to perfectly exchange one's own happiness

For others' suffering is the practice of a bodhisattva.

This verse denotes the Buddhist concept of non-duality, that there is no separation between the self and other. If the other is suffering, we too are suffering. In the bodhisattva path, we cannot fathom liberation until all are freed from suffering. In the intersectional activist sense, oppressions are mutually reinforcing, thus, queer liberation struggles will not succeed without addressing other forms of marginalization. Stories of Chenrezig's boundless compassion serves as a reminder of the immeasurable care for others that tonglen practitioners are attempting to achieve. Trans Buddhist author Finn Enke argues that rather than attempting to uncover if Chenrezig is "really" male or female, it is more productive to consider Chenrezig as the embodiment of non-duality.

The eleventh verse of the thirty-seven practices of a bodhisattva can also be used to expand queer writing on (un)happiness. Sara Ahmed's work on unhappy queers problematizes the heteronormative imperative for individuals to spend life seeking happiness in narrowly defined forms. Ahmed examines gendered happiness scripts—instructions as to what people of each binary gender must do to achieve happiness—including one script that attempts to orient us toward heterosexuality. Ahmed's happiness scripts are straightening devices that are used to align with heterosexuality and threaten unhappiness for those who strays from the heteronormative imperative. Ahmed (2010) explains, "queers can be affectively alien by placing their hopes for happiness in the wrong objects, as well as being made unhappy by conventional routes of happiness, an unhappiness which might be an effect of how your happiness makes others unhappy". Unhappiness itself is political and given that the second of the Buddhist three marks of existence is the existence of suffering, it behooves a queer Buddhist politic to turn toward, rather than efface that oppression which makes queers unhappy. Moreover, the eleventh verse explains that all suffering comes from our desire for our own happiness and that we must exchange our happiness for the suffering of others in order to become a Buddha. Putting Ahmed's work in conversation with this verse, we might ask: is it possible or desirable for queers to maintain happiness when other queer people are suffering? In a Dharma talk hosted virtually by Rainbodhi, Lama Rod Owens argued that the bodhisattva is an expression of queerness. He explained that the bodhisattva concept is queer because it must be fluid in order to disrupt the roots of violence and that bodhisattvas are sassy in their use of camp in activism. He also discussed choosing happiness in the face of struggle. This may appear to contradict my earlier statements on happiness, but only if happiness is seen through Western, individual eyes. Owens explained that part of the bodhisattva path is living our authentic queer lives (if we are safe to do so) because it is liberating for other queers to see us choosing to exist.

Tying all three of these works together has important implications for queer politics and engaged Buddhism. Queers fail to follow gendered happiness scripts; we are made happy by the wrong things and this makes others unhappy. Straightening devices are used to attempt to make us unhappy due to our misplaced happiness. Remaining made happy by the wrong clothes or the wrong gendered partner is about more than the desire for our own happiness; it is about the desire for all beings to be able to be happy and liberated from the suffering of gendered happiness scripts. We remain unhappy with the things that should make us happy, such as marriage equality which does little to materially benefit most queers, exchanging happiness for the suffering of other queers who join us in a sense of common unhappiness.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the overwhelming queer suffering in these necropolitical times, queers have engaged in tireless activism to ameliorate the systemic conditions of homophobia and transphobia. This queer resilience is resonant with verse eighteen of the thirty-seven practices of a bodhisattva:

Even when I am made destitute, people constantly berate me,  
And grave illness and evil spirits strike me,  
To take on still the suffering and misdeeds of all beings for myself  
Without losing heart is the practice of a bodhisattva.

The verse may appear to be calling the practitioner to practice tonglen even through the most trying circumstances; however, meditation aside, queers have long been following the instructions of verse eighteen. When grave illness struck during the height of the AIDS pandemic, queers were devastated by the mass deaths of those around them. Not losing heart, queers formed trauma cultures of activist resilience through groups such as ACT UP that engaged in tireless direct-action efforts to demand government action on AIDS. Looking to this history enriches an engaged Buddhist understanding of verse eighteen beyond tonglen, extending its call to activism, even when one is made destitute, out of compassion for suffering beings.

Stories of Chenrezig and the practice and philosophy behind tonglen meditation have much to offer queer activism. Sedgwick explains that the pedagogy of Buddhism lies in both its emphasis on experiential learning and its delineation between knowledge proper and the affective and corporeal realization of various truths. Through the tragedies of these queer necropolitical times, queers have gone to great, compassionate lengths to support one another and to advocate for other oppressed groups through coalitional efforts. The Buddhist pedagogical value of examining Chenrezig and tonglen meditation is that compassion itself is not simply an emotion, it is an affective, corporeal practice that must be honed and exercised over a lifetime. Stories of Chenrezig and the practice of tonglen enable an understanding of compassion as limitless, boundless, and inherently queer not only due to Chenrezig's gender fluidity but also because of its counterintuitive (at least to the Western imaginary) call to completely exchange self for others, foregoing the individualistic tendencies that seem like a luxury to those who have a shared sense of oppression. Similarly, engaged Buddhism has a lot to learn from queer activism. The dearth of an engaged Buddhist literature of queer and trans experiences unfortunately robs engaged Buddhists of benefitting from queer knowledge on intersectional oppression, coalitional compassionate engagement, fluidity, and non-duality. AIDS activism, the formulation of families of choice, trans resistance, lesbian feminism, among many other historical and contemporary queer developments, are rife with Buddhist values, even if the activists had no knowledge of Buddhist thought. It is imperative that engaged Buddhists look to queer history to enhance their application of Buddhism to social justice.

My intention with this paper is not to argue that queers must worship Chenrezig or practice Tonglen in order to effectively facilitate social justice, though I admit my disposition toward both the bodhisattva and the practice. Rather, I wish to expand current historical and contemporary scholarship on gender, sexuality, and religion beyond the confines of two belabored questions that remain dominant in this field: a) is the religion in question "accepting" of queer and trans people and b) was the human, deity, bodhisattva, or god under study queer or is it anachronistic to dare to use such language? It is compassion as praxis that undergirds my argument. My intention is to spark a broader conversation on the affective politics of what Owens calls, the queer bodhisattva, to unearth how compassion can be and has always been a part of queer social justice, religious or otherwise. The sheer depth of Buddhist thought on the concept of compassion should not be ignored in considerations of expanding existing approaches to queer activism, which have always been steeped in compassionate praxis. Queer engaged Buddhism builds on the foundations of existing engaged Buddhist writings to specifically examine their applicability to queer and trans struggles. Indeed, a list of queer engaged Buddhist trainings or queer bodhisattva practices, necessarily steeped in compassion and intersectionality, could no doubt be enumerated, though such future works should never aim to be comprehensive and must always remain fluid.



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## **Australian LGBTQIA+ Buddhists**

Stephen Kerry

The purpose of this paper is to present some preliminary findings of an ongoing research project into the lives of Australian LGBTQIA+ Buddhists. The project consists of an online survey (completed in 2020) and in-depth interviews (occurring now). Of the 82 people who participated in the online survey, more than half indicated they were reluctant to reveal their LGBTQIA+ identities to their Buddhist communities. Some participants reveal that they have been told by peers, family members, and members of their Buddhist sangha's that their LGBTQIA+ identities are not in keeping with the Buddha's teachings. To date, sixteen people have been interviewed and all have had positive experiences when it comes to their identities as LGBTQIA+ people within Buddhist communities. Yet, a few have expressed concerns that 'coming out' as LGBTQIA+ people may risk their access to rituals (e.g. ordination) within their Buddhist communities.

Keywords Buddhism, LGBTQIA+, Australia

### **Introduction**

Weng and Halafoff (2020) suggest the dearth of representation of Buddhism and Buddhists in Australian media "may mean that they are perhaps not seen as being as well-established in Australian society as yet" (p. 343). Tweed (2008) suggests "the prevailing image of Buddhist practice has been the solitary meditator, eyes half closed, sitting in the lotus position", he goes on to add that "this image does not accurately reflect the religious life of most Buddhists around the world or across the centuries" (p. 91). As a result, little is known about Buddhism in mainstream Australian culture (Halafoff, Fitzpatrick, & Lam, 2012). In the author's lived experience as a Zen Buddhist, it is quite common for many people to have little to no understanding of Buddhism. This extends to the relationship between Buddhism and sex, gender, and sexuality and the perception that Buddhism is more accepting of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, and asexual (LGBTQIA+) people (Coleman, 2001; Whitney, 2000). The reality, however, is more diverse. This paper reports for the first time the results of an ongoing project where Australian LGBTQIA+ Buddhists are being asked to reflect on their lives as LGBTQIA+ Buddhists.

### **Literature**

According to Cabezón (1992, p. vii) writing at the end of the twentieth century, there was little in the way of scholarship pertaining to the intersection of sex, gender, sexuality, and Buddhism. Coleman (2001) claims what "is now emerging in the industrialized nations of the West" is a new Buddhism, one that is "fundamentally different from anything that has gone before" (p. 3). Coleman (2001) goes on to say that when Buddhism came to the west, and came up against a different cultural milieu, based on equality and egalitarianism, "most teachers simply ignored the more sexist elements of the [Eastern] tradition" (p. 144). Speaking specifically of the status of women, Coleman (2001) further argues that this "does not mean that women have actually achieved full equality in the new Buddhism" (p. 145). When it comes to the lives of 'gay and lesbian' Buddhists, Coleman (2001) states "there is not much in the way of quantitative data", conceding himself that he didn't ask his participants about their sexual orientation (p. 162).

This is despite the fact that he states: “Buddhism has had a particularly strong appeal among gays and lesbians searching for a spiritual path” (p. 162). What is also missing in the literature is an understanding of the ‘appeal’ of Buddhism to all under the LGBTQIA+ rainbow. In the early 2000s, there were attempts to queer Buddhism. Corless (2004) argues that “it is not only the Buddha Nature of queers that is queer, but the Buddha Nature in itself is queer” (p. 240). Here, Corless (2004) is evoking the destabilising work that queer does from within the context of queer theory, which emerged out of the deconstructionist projects of postmodernism and third wave feminism in the early 1990s. Queer becomes a verb, a ‘queering’ (Hall, 2003, p. 14; Kirsch, 2000, p. 33) and queer is a ‘gender fuck’ (Whittle, 2005, p. xx). However, according to Yip and Smith (2010) attempts to queer Buddhism “have opened up spaces mainly for white and middle-class gay men who want to get involved in Buddhism” (p. 137). They go on to say: “others like lesbians, bisexual women, trans and intersex people have found it more difficult to take up these spaces and have been less visible as a result” (p. 137). More troubling, in their research, Yip and Smith (2010), found that LGBTQIA+ Buddhists, through “their understanding of Buddhist teachings of a lack of a fixed, essential self led them to de-emphasise their [LGBTQIA] identities” (p. 115). Moreover, these teachings of the ‘no-self’ “led them to place more stress on their identities as ‘human beings’” (p. 116). This is troubling, because it can be argued that Buddhism further silences and hides LGBTQIA+ people, ironically one of the early criticisms of queer theory (Jagose, 1996).

Yet, there is some evidence that suggests that some LGBTQIA+ people engage with Buddhism to help them understand themselves as LGBTQIA+ people. For example, in the author’s (Kerry,

2008, 2009) own research into the lives of intersex Australians two participants identified as Buddhists and they used Buddhism to help them reconcile their diverse sex characteristics. Pat stated that “it is Buddhism’s eastern influence of ordering the world in ‘multiplicities, rather than binary systems’ which enabled Pat to apply these views to the self and ‘see that I represent the world as it is, and not the rigid system the West has constructed, which after all is a manmade illusion’” (Kerry, 2009, p. 282). Manders and Marston’s (2019) edited an anthology of trans and sex/gender diverse narratives titled *Transcending: Trans Buddhist Voices* and in the preface, by Catriona Reed, she writes: “Like so many others, I have misunderstood and misused teaching about suffering and about ‘non-self’ to disavow my existence” (p. xxv). On the one hand it is possible that LGBTQIA+ Buddhists use Buddhism to help them understand their LGBTQIA+ identities, but, on the other hand, Buddhism can disavow one’s existence. In the current project, LGBTQIA+ Buddhist Australians discuss the interrelationship between their LGBTQIA+ identities and Buddhism.

## **Methodology**

The research began in February 2020 when the author invited members of the LGBTQIA+ Buddhist community to join them in forming an advisory group. In addition to the author, the advisory group consisted of Bhante Akālika Bhikkhu (a gay ordained Buddhist monk in the Theravada forest tradition who runs a Sydney-based LGBTQIA+ Buddhist group known as Rainbodhi) and Michelle McNamara (a Melbourne-based transgender woman in the Triratna tradition who published a chapter in *Transcending: Trans Buddhist Voices*, mentioned above). The advisory group met online and discussed the first stage of the project: online survey. Our conversations and subsequent emails resulted in a total of 68 questions categorised within five broad themes: demographic information, Buddhist identity, Buddhist practice, health, and

Buddhism and LGBTQIA+ People. The online survey was hosted by Survey Monkey and remained open between April and October 2020, during which 82 participants completed the survey. Following the success of the online survey the author developed stage two of the project: in-depth interviews. In early 2021, it became clear that these interviews will be limited to over-the-phone interviews due to travel restrictions in place because of COVID-19. Between February and July 2021 (at the time of writing) the author had interviewed sixteen people, however, the window for this stage remains open until 2022.

### Online Survey Results

In the seven months the online survey was open, it attracted 111 responses. Twenty of these were ineligible to participate as the online survey was limited to Australian citizens or permanent residents. A further eight respondents were discarded as they didn't complete enough of the questions to be analysed. As a result, a total of 82 participants' responses were analysed, however, as the online survey progressed there was a slight drop-out rate, from 82 to 81 in both the Buddhist Identity and Buddhist Practice sections, 73 in Health section, and 69 in Buddhism and LGBTQIA+ People section.

### Demographic Information

Most participants identify their gender as either woman (35, 43%) or man (38, 46%), several use multiple terms such as P62 (pansexual woman/transwoman)<sup>1</sup>

(Table 1). A few people use

the terms 'trans\*' (6)<sup>2</sup>

, 'non-binary' (5), and 'genderqueer' (4). Some participants identify as 'gay' (31, 38%), while fewer identify as lesbian (19, 23%), bisexual (14, 17%), and either pansexual or polyamorous (13, 16%). Fewer still are those who identify as straight (8), queer (3), and asexual (3). An equal number of participants (36, 44%) say they are single and in some

<sup>1</sup> Henceforth, when an individual participant is referred to their alpha-numerical designation will be used followed

by their sexual orientation and gender identity.

<sup>2</sup> Participant numbers of 10 or below will not be calculated as a percentage.

form of relationship (Table 2). Relationship forms include a relationship with one person (12, 15%), de facto (12, 15%), or married

<sup>3</sup>

(11, 13%). One-third of participants (28, 34%) live with partner(s), fewer live alone (20, 24%) and with pets (19, 23%). Eight participants live with family of origin, seven live with children, and six live with either chosen family or unrelated friends. Five participants live in a monastic community.

Gender Men 38, 46% Women 35, 43% Trans\* 6 Non-binary 5 Genderqueer 4

Sexuality Gay 31, 38% Lesbian 19, 23% Bisexual 14, 17% Pansexual/Polyamorous 13, 16%

Straight 8 Queer 3 Asexual 3

Table 1 Gender and Sexuality (n = 82)

Single 36, 44%

Relationship 36, 44%

One person 12, 15% De facto 12, 15% Married 11, 13%

Living Partner(s) 28, 34% Alone 20, 24% Pets 19, 23%

Arrangement Family of origin 8 Children 7 Chosen family 6 Monastic 5

Table 2 Relationships (n = 82)

The age range of participants is skewed toward the over 35s. Thirteen participants (16%) are under the age of 35, almost half (39, 48%) are aged between 35 and 55, and 30 (37%) are aged 55 or over. The ethnicity of participants is skewed also, participants are predominantly white/Caucasian/European (59, 73%) (Table 4). Other ethnicities include South-East Asian (10), East Asian (4), South Asian (4), Hispanic/Latinx (3), and one mixed-race Indigenous Australian. More than half (45, 55%) state they were born in Australia, 12 (15%) were born in the United Kingdom or Europe, 12 (15%) were born in Asia, five in North America, and four in Africa/Middle East. Most participants (60, 73%) speak only English at home, 14 (17%) speak an Asian language (e.g. Mandarin, Vietnamese), six speak a European language (e.g. French, Spanish), one person speaks Afrikaans.

3 Australia passed marriage equality legislation in 2017, three years before the survey.

Under 35 13, 16%

35 - 54 39, 48%

55 and over 30, 37%

Table 3 Age (n = 82)

Ethnicity White/Caucasian/European 59, 73% South-East Asian 10 South Asian 4

Hispanic/Latinx 3 Mixed-race Indigenous Australian 1

Birth Country Australia 45, 55% UK/Europe 12 15% Asia 12, 15%

North America 5 Africa/Middle East 4

Language English only 60, 73% Asian 14, 17% European 6 Afrikaans 1

Table 4 Ethnicity, Country of Birth, Language at home (n = 82)

The state or territory of residence is another skewed result, with almost half of participants (38, 46%) living in New South Wales (Table 5). Thirteen (16%) live in Queensland, 12 (15%) in Victoria, eight in Western Australia, two in the Australian Capital Territory and three each in South Australia, Tasmania, and the Northern Territory. As is expected, almost three-quarters (56, 68%) of participants live in a capital city, 10 live in a remote area (with fewer than 10,000 people), eight live in a non-capital city (with more than 100,00 people) and seven live in a regional town (of between 10,000 and 100,000 people).

State/Territory NSW 38, 46% Qld 13, 16% Vic 12, 15% WA 8

SA 3 Tas 3 NT 3 ACT 2

Location Capital City 56, 68% Remote 10 Non-capital 8 Regional 7

Table 5 Australian Residence (n = 82)

Most participants (67, 82%) possess a university education and, of these, more than half (43,

65%) have a postgraduate qualification (e.g. graduate certificate, masters, PhD) (Table 6). Of all participants, 12 (15%) have a TAFE/College qualification (e.g. certificate, diploma), two have completed Senior Secondary (years 11-12) and one has completed Junior Secondary (years 7-10). Slightly more participants are employed (45, 55%) than are out of the work force (37, 45%). Most of the participants who are employed work full-time (31, 69%), eight are casual or freelance, and six work part-time. Of those out of the work force 17 (21%) are retired, nine are unemployed, three are monastics, and two are on a disability pension.

Education University 67, 82% postgraduate qualification 43, 65%  
TAFE/College 12, 15% Senior 2 Junior 1

Employment Employed Full-time 31, 69% Casual 8 Part-time 6  
Out of Workforce Retired 17, 21% Unemployed 9 Monastic 3 Disability 2  
Table 6 Education and Employment (n = 82)

#### Buddhist Identity

Participants were asked to recall their response to the 'religion' question in the 2016 Australian Census (Table 7). Most participants (60, 74%) stated Buddhism as their 'religion', 15 (19%) indicate they have 'no religion', and three people do not remember. Other religions participants list are Catholicism, Judaism, and shamanic/New Age. Participants were also invited to reflect on their response if they were asked the same question at the time of completing the online survey. The majority (70, 86%) state that their response would be the same. Of the 12 (15%) who would now give a different answer, six would state Buddhism. P71 (gay man) adds pagan to his Buddhist identity, P61 (pansexual transwoman/non-binary) would change their response from 'no religion' to "compassionism", and P24 (straight woman) clarifies that "I'm a Buddhist as moral choice but not religious choice". When asked what religion participants were raised, half (45, 55%) indicate some form of Christianity. Of those, 25 (56%) were raised as Catholics, 13 (29%) Church of England, and six were raised Uniting Church/Presbyterian/Methodist. Other religions mentioned include Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Quaker. A few participants indicate they were raised in mixed religion households.

Census 2016 Buddhist 60, 74% No religion 15, 19% Don't remember 3

Religion now Same 70, 86% Change 12, 15% Buddhism 6

Religion as child Christianity 45, 55% Catholic 25, 56% C of E 13, 29% Uniting 6

Table 7 Buddhist Identity (n = 81)

4 All participants were asked to state their pronouns and they are used when referred to that person.

Half (40, 49%) of participants self-describe themselves as 'religious', whereas 23 (28%) say they do not and 18 (22%) are unsure (Table 8). Thirty (37%) participants elaborated on their response with a written comment, many stating, as does P69 (gay man), "I don't see Buddhism as a religion". Participants were also asked about the importance of Buddhism in their lives, Buddhist identity, and their preferences for terms such as 'practitioner of Buddhism'. However, the response rate to these three questions is comparatively low (23, 58, and 23 respectively). Of the 23 who responded to the importance of Buddhism in their lives question 11 (48%) say it is 'somewhat important' and 10 say it is 'very important'. Most participants (19, 83%) who responded to this question say that the phrase 'practitioner of Buddhism' is important to them. P20 (gay man) adds "although I don't identify as a Buddhist, I practice Buddhist meditation every day and find Buddhist philosophy to significantly resonate with me". He also raised the issue of clarity with this question, he adds "don't relate to the narrowness of questions". Of the

58 who responded to the question regarding the importance of Buddhist identity, 35 (60%) say that it is 'very important', 14 (24%) say it is 'somewhat important', and nine participants say it is 'not too important' or 'not at all important'. P62 (pansexual woman/transwoman) adds "the Buddha is in my heart, and that's the way I will live until I die". Of the 60 people who responded to the question, 22 (37%) participants have been practicing Buddhism for more than 20 years, 12 (20%) have been practicing Buddhism between 11 and 20 years, nine between 6 and 10 years and nine also were raised as Buddhists as children, and six have been practicing fewer than 5 years. While half of the participants follow the Theravada tradition (37, 46%), there are almost equal number who follow Tibetan/Himalayan/Vajrayana (22, 27%), Mahayana (21, 26%), Vipassana/Insight (20, 25%), and Zen/Chan (18, 22%) (Table 9).

Religious (n = 81) Yes 40, 49% No 23, 28% Unsure 18, 22%

Buddhist Identity (n = 58) Very important 35, 60% Somewhat important 14, 24%

Practicing (n = 60) >20y 22, 37% 11-20y 12, 20% Since childhood 9

6-10y 6 < 5y 6

Table 8 Importance of Buddhist Identity (n variable)

Theravada 37, 46%

Tibetan/Himalayan/Vajrayana 22, 27%

Mahayana 21, 26%

Vipassana/Insight 20, 25%

Zen/Chan 18, 22%

Table 9 Buddhist Traditions (n = 81)

#### Buddhist Practice: Groups, Retreats, and Home

Most participants (65, 80%) currently attend or engage with a Buddhist group, centre or temple (GCT) (Table 10). Participants were invited to add which of these GCT they attend, however, their names will not be published. However, the author's analysis of these responses reveals that at least one Buddhist GCT from each of Australia's states and mainland territories is listed, in some cases more than one person from the same GCT participated in the survey. Those participants who didn't attend or engage with a Buddhist GCT were invited to say why and 14 of the 16 responded. Three say there is no opportunity where they live, for example, P2 (bisexual/pansexual/polyamorous woman) adds there is a "lack of opportunity in a regional town". Two participants don't feel welcome in their local Buddhist GCT, for example, P68 (straight/polyamorous transwoman) adds "I still felt ostracised for identifying as trans publicly in that domain". Two others don't need a public space to practice Buddhism, for example P1 (lesbian woman) adds "I don't follow it as a religion, but more as a life philosophy". Most (66, 89%) of the 74 participants who responded to the question about whether they have an at-home Buddhist practice said yes. The most practiced are sitting meditation (62, 94%), listening to talks/watching videos (57, 86%), and reading Buddhist books (56, 85%) (Table 10). Almost as many (60, 77%) participants have attended a Buddhist retreat (Table 10). As with the question regarding GCT participants were invited to add which of these retreats they have attended, but their names will not be published. However, the author can reveal that participants attend many Buddhist retreats in many traditions across Australia and internationally. Those participants

who haven't attended a Buddhist retreat were invited to say why and 17 of the 18 responded, seven were 'not interested', two people cite financial reasons, and three cite family



commitments.

Yes No

Buddhist Group (n = 81) 65, 80% 16, 20%

At home Practice (n = 74) 66, 89% 8

Buddhist Retreat (n = 81) 60, 77% 21, 26%

Table 10 Buddhist Groups, at home practice, and Retreats (n variable)

Participants were asked to think of up to three retreats and reflect on how inclusive they are regarding LGBTQIA+ people. A total of 142 retreats were rated by participants (Table 11).

Similar numbers of participants rated Buddhist retreats as 'neutral' (57, 40%) and 'very inclusive' (53, 37%) of LGBTQIA+ people, fewer rated Buddhist retreats as 'somewhat inclusive' (24, 17%), eight as 'not inclusive' and a participant rated one Buddhist retreat as 'actively excluding'. Several participants add comments regarding the perception that issues of sex, gender, and sexual don't emerge in the retreat setting. For example, P76 (gay man) says "the question of sexual/gender identity never arises". However, others spoke of the gender segregation at Buddhist retreats. For example, P31 (gay/polyamorous man) "they only had two separate shared bedrooms (male vs female), which to me, was rather limiting". Similarly, P6 (gay/queer man) adds "they segregated sexes and put me in a dorm room with other guys and it was really hard".

Neutral 57, 40%

Very inclusive 53, 37%

Somewhat inclusive 24, 17%

Not inclusive 8

Actively excluding 1

Table 11 Buddhist Retreats' LGBTQIA+ Inclusivity (n = 142)

Health

Participants were asked to self-rate their own physical and mental health. Of the 73 responses to these questions, 21 (29%) rate their physical health as 'very good', 20 (27%) 'good', 15 (21%) as 'excellent', 13 (18%) as 'fair', and four as 'poor' (Table 12). Similarly, 23 (32%) rate their mental health as 'good', 19 (26%) as 'very good', 15 (21%) each rate their mental health as 'excellent' and 'fair' and one rates it as 'poor' (Table 12). The participants were invited to undertake the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) test. Of the 73 responses, 56 (77%) 'are likely to be well', seven each are 'likely to have a mild mental disorder' and are 'likely to have moderate mental disorder', and six are 'likely to have a severe mental disorder' (Table 13).

Physical Health Mental Health

Excellent 15, 21% 15, 21%

Very good 21, 29% 19, 26%

Good 20, 27% 23, 32%

Fair 13, 18% 15, 21%

Poor 4 1

Table 12 Physical and Mental Health (n = 73)

Likely to have a severe mental disorder 6

Likely to have moderate mental disorder 7

Likely to have a mild mental disorder' 7

Likely to be well 56, 77%

Table 13 K10 (n = 73)

In 2017, Australia passed marriage equality laws following a lengthy public debate. This public debate had a negative impact on LGBTQIA+ Australians (National LGBTI Health Alliance & Australia Institute, 2017; Verrelli, White, Harvey, & Pulciani, 2019). Thus, participants were asked: “What impact did the public debates surrounding marriage equality (aka gay marriage) have on your mental health?” Participants were provided a sliding scale to indicate this impact, zero being negative impact, 50 being neutral, and 100 being positive impact. The average score for 73 participants who responded to this question is 37, that is, a negative impact (Table 14).

At the time of the online survey, Australia’s Federal Liberal/National<sup>5</sup> Coalition Government was planning on making changes to the law to allow religious organisations greater freedoms when it comes to discrimination (especially against LGBTQIA+ people). Thus, a similar scale was provided for participants to indicate what impact this debate is having on them. The average score for 73 participants who responded to this question is 33, that is, a negative impact (Table 14).

| Negative Impact        | Neutral Impact | Positive Impact | Average |    |
|------------------------|----------------|-----------------|---------|----|
| Marriage Equality      | 35             | 26              | 12      | 37 |
| Federal Religious Bill | 39             | 31              | 3       | 33 |

Table 14 Impact of Current Issues (n = 73)

In response to the COVID-19 emergency, participants were asked: “What impact has the COVID-19 pandemic had on your responses today?” Almost half (30, 41%) indicated that it had no impact on their answers, 24 (33%) say it had ‘some impact’, 15 (21%) ‘a significant impact’, and four were ‘unsure’ (Table 15). Participants were also invited to elaborate on their answers and 24 did. Several spoke directly of the impact of COVID-19, some were very distressed by the ‘lockdown’, for example, P1 (lesbian woman) adds “we have been in stage four lockdown for about 6 or 8 weeks. I don’t even know how long anymore! [...] the tight restraints have been getting harder to stay in and stay hopeful for the future”. For some, there is acceptance, for example P22 (straight/asexual woman) adds “In the first few weeks of the pandemic my answers would have reflected slight uncertainty, nervousness and depression. Now at week 10? This is no longer the case and I’m accepting of what is happening in the world”.

5

In Australian politics the Liberal Party is a socially and economically conservative party, on par with the Republican Party in the USA.

|                      |         |
|----------------------|---------|
| A significant impact | 15, 21% |
| Some impact          | 24, 33% |
| No impact            | 30, 41% |
| Unsure               | 4       |

Table 15 Impact of COVID-19 (n = 73)

#### Buddhism and LGBTQIA+ People

Sixty-nine participants describe what it was that drew them to Buddhism. Responses include a range of reasons, largely to do with spirituality, compassion, love, a desire to improve oneself. A few participants spoke specifically about the intersection of sex, gender, sexuality and Buddhism. For example, P17 (straight/pansexual woman) writes “gender neutral mostly” and

P30 (gay man) writes “neutrality towards gays”. Others write of the attraction of Buddhism when coming from a Christian background, for example, P71 (gay man) writes “being a gay Catholic and feeling rejected. Wanted to walk my spiritual talk” and, similarly, P76 (gay man) writes “when I lost my Christian faith at age 19 I looked for another expression of faith and found a satisfying and reasonable expression of it in the Buddha Dharma”. Participants reflected on Buddhism’s attitude toward LGBTQIA+ people and on a slide scale they indicate whether it is negative (0), neutral (50), or positive (100). On average they rate this attitude as neutral (57) (Table 16). Using a similar scale, participants described the relationship between being an LGBTQIA+ person and being Buddhist, on average this is viewed as positive (68) (Table 16). When asked to reflect on whether their Buddhist GCT was supportive during the marriage equality and religious discrimination bill debates, half (33, 48%) say they were supportive, 20 (60%) of whom say ‘very supportive’ and 13 (19%) say ‘somewhat supportive’ (Table 17). A further 30 (44%) say their Buddhist GCT’s support was ‘neutral’. In support of this, P56 (gay man) adds “there was no conversation for or against. More like it does not concern us one way or another”. Also, P7 (gay/bisexual man) adds “it never arose. However, the group certainly followed the religious discrimination bill carefully and contributed to the debate”. Six participants say their Buddhist GCT are ‘not supportive’.

Negative Neutral Positive Average

Buddhism’s attitude 18 22 29 57

Relationship 8 20 41 68

Table 16 Buddhism’s attitude and relationship with LGBTQIA+ (n = 69)

Very supportive 20, 29%

Somewhat supportive 13, 19%

Neutral 30, 44%

Not supportive 6

Table 17 Support During Marriage Equality Debate (n = 69)

A little over half (41, 59%) say that they are ‘out’ within their Buddhism GCT, 15 (22%) are ‘unsure’, and 13 (19%) say they are not. For some, the issue of being ‘out’ is complicated by their identity and lived experiences as an LGBTQIA+ person. For example, P23 (bisexual woman) adds “it’s hard to be ‘out’ as a bisexual person when you’re married to someone of the opposite sex I try not to be ‘in the closet’, that is, I don’t act straight, if anyone assumes I am 100% heterosexual I correct that assumption I do that for young people who need to know they’re not alone”. Similarly, P11 (asexual transwoman) adds “I am currently still presenting male and am out only to a handful of friends”. The importance of being ‘out’ to their Buddhist identity and practice is rated by a little under half (28, 41%) as ‘very important’, 19 rate it as (28%) ‘not too important’, 11 (16%), ‘not at all important’, nine see it as ‘somewhat important’, and two are ‘unsure’ (Table 18). Just over half (38, 55%) state they have felt reluctant to disclose their LGBTQIA+ identity within Buddhist GCT, 21 (55%) of these felt reluctant ‘sometimes’, nine ‘often’, and eight ‘all the time’ (Table 19). Over half (41, 60%) of participants felt that LGBTQIA+ issues and people were silenced or ignored by their Buddhist GCT, of these, 23 (56%) felt it ‘sometimes’, 14 (34%) ‘often’, and four ‘all of the time’ (Table 20). Eleven (16%) participants have been told that their LGBTQIA+ identity is not in keeping with the Buddha’s teachings. Many of these elaborate on their experiences, for example P6 (gay/queer man) adds “told by some people that it’s wrong sex conduct” and P50 (lesbian

woman) adds “in the early nineties I was not allowed to join a Tibetan sangha because of my sexuality”. Others stated who have said this to them, such as monastics, Buddhist texts,

Buddhist teachers, family members, and lay members of the sangha.

Very important 28, 41%

Somewhat important 9

Not too important 19, 28%

Not at all important 11, 16%

Unsure 2

Table 18 Importance of being 'out' (n = 69)

All the time 8

Often 9

Sometimes 21, 30%

Rarely 17, 25%

Never 12, 17%

Table 19 Reluctance to reveal LGBTQIA+ Identity (n = 69)

All the time 4

Often 14, 20%

Sometimes 23, 33%

Rarely 7

Never 5

Table 20 LGBTQIA+ issues and people silenced and ignored (n = 69)

When asked if participants had witnessed discrimination within Buddhist GCT, half (37, 54%) state 'sexism', 25 (36%) 'homophobia', and 18 (26%) each for 'misgendering' and 'racism' (Table 21). Conversely, 26 (38%) say they have not witnessed any. Participants were given the opportunity to add other forms of discrimination, and one of these was 'class', for example, P1 (lesbian woman) adds "the biggest one that I have been aware of /experienced is classism, and that is obvious in the cost of retreats and annual membership fees. If you are a member you receive a discount on the retreats - if you can't afford membership fees you pay full price for your retreat". P23 (bisexual woman) similarly says "I think all western Buddhist groups have unconscious bias on race and class because we are so white and middle class".

Sexism 37, 54%

Homophobia 25, 36%

Misgendering 18, 26%

None 26, 38%

Table 21 Witnessed Discrimination (n = 69)

In-Depth Interview Results

As noted above, the second stage of this project is still ongoing, therefore analysis of in-depth interviews is limited to cursory findings observed by the author. What appears to be a common experience among the sixteen interviewees thus far, is coming to Buddhism to explore a deeper understanding of life. This was a motivation for those who came to Buddhism early or later in life, and also those who were born into a Buddhist family. Those who fit this latter category wanted to explore Buddhism further than was done within the family or community context. These explorations of life, through Buddhism, rarely had anything to do with one's LGBTQIA+ identity or lived experiences. Interviewees emphasised that the motivation was exploring one's humanity, more so than one's gender and/or sexuality. The author asked interviewees about the concept of 'no-self', notably drawing attention to views expressed in the online survey that, for some, there is a tension between the 'no-self' and being LGBTQIA+. Most (if not all) agreed that, for them, there is no tension between the concept of the 'no-self' and being LGBTQIA+. Although the former is a key principle in Buddhism, one must live one's life as

an LGBTQIA+ person, just as much as one lives other identities, e.g. parent, child, worker etc., but more so because one still encounters prejudice and discrimination as an LGBTQIA+ person. Another early finding is that interviewees have an overall positive experience of being an LGBTQIA+ person and a Buddhist. Most are 'out' in some manner to their sangha and have never experienced any prejudice or discrimination. When asked about the precept on sex, most (if not all) agreed that this precept isn't about sexual orientation, that is, it is not a prohibition of same-sex or queer sexualities, but sexual practices that may be harmful to oneself or others. There are, however, two exceptions to these overall positive experiences. The first are those

who are members of sex-/gender-segregated Buddhist traditions and those who had undergone or were in the process of undergoing some formalised ritual (e.g. ordination) within their respective Buddhist tradition. In either of these two cases, interviewees didn't necessarily see them as barriers as much as they saw them as opportunities to open a dialogue with their sangha and also themselves. Having said that, some interviewees did indicate that they were reluctant to divulge and/or elaborate on their LGBTQIA+ identities and lived experiences in the context of a formal ritual for fear of being denied access to it.

### Discussion

The author utilised the demographic information gathered by two health and wellbeing surveys Private Lives (Pitts, Smith, Mitchell, & Patel, 2006) and Private Lives 2 (Leonard et al., 2012)

6 to determine if this current cohort of LGBTQIA+ Australians is representative. Although these surveys sometimes utilised different parameters (Private Lives (Pitts et al., 2006) split their results into categories of men and women, also they only provided a percentage and not the raw data) some overall conclusions can be made. Notably, this cohort of LGBTQIA+ Australians are less likely to be born in Australia and more likely to live in NSW, to be older, and University educated. This latter finding is also in-keeping with broader research regarding Buddhists. Fifty-one percent of Coleman's participants (2001) had advanced degrees, leading him to suggest "it appears that Buddhism continues to have its strongest appeal to the highly educated and culturally sophisticated" (p. 193). Regarding other key demographic information (i.e. gender, sexuality, ethnicity, relationship status, and living arrangement) this cohort of LGBTQIA+ Australians is equal to Australia's LGBTQIA+ population generally. When comparing the results of the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) test, this cohort fair better on average (15.4) than the Private Lives 2 (Leonard et al., 2012, p. 35) cohort (19.59)

6 At time of writing, the results of Private Lives 3 had not been published.

and not dissimilar to the national average (14.5) (Slade, Grave & Burgess, 2011 cited in Leonard et al., 2012, p. 35). Of the 73 participants who completed the K10 test, 56 (77%) 'are likely to be well'. However, what is striking, 13 participants have a "moderate" or "severe" mental disorder yet all but one self-describe their mental health as either "fair" or "very good". A few elaborate on their poor mental health as a function of their experiences as an LGBTQIA+ person. For example, P9 (gay man) is HIV positive and they are a child abuse survivor with PTSD, anxiety, and depression. He states he "had to deal with much loss and grief". P11 (asexual transwoman) speaks about how being trans impacted their mental health: "I had to resign from my job due to gender dysphoria. Basically, it was a choice between staying and eventually killing myself, or resign and ... not kill myself". Many participants elaborated on the impact of COVID-19 and the 'lockdown' on their mental health and some participants

speak of how their Buddhism helps. P78 (lesbian/bisexual/pansexual woman) says “I am so grateful to have a Buddhist practice during COVID19. I’ve been very stressed and distressed”. Similarly, the adjustments some Buddhist GCT make during the pandemic have been well received. P4 (lesbian woman) says “I am very grateful that the various Buddhist Centre’s have established live streaming so accessing teaching is easy. This is helping with my mental health”. Research suggests there is a link between religion and good health (Williams & Sternthal,

2007), while this project didn’t set out to explore that relationship, the emergence of COVID-19 at the same time as this survey provided a good opportunity for participants to reflect on

how their Buddhism helps them through a very stressful time.

Some participants were born and raised Buddhist, for example, P14 (pansexual/polyamorous non-binary) says “I grew up Buddhist and have always found Buddha’s teachings a great way to live life”. However, most are so-called ‘convert Buddhists’. In Coleman’s survey of Western Buddhists, he asked participants to state their level of agreement to three statements: “I became

interested in Buddhism because of a desire for spiritual fulfillment; I became interested in Buddhism in order to help me deal with my personal problems; and I became interested in Buddhism because I was attracted by the people I met who were involved with it” (Coleman, 2001, p. 198). He reports that over half ‘strongly agreed’ with the first statement and 22% with the second. These responses are not dissimilar to those of the current cohort; however, this survey didn’t pose the question in the manner of a closed question. Participants were asked: “In a few words, describe what drew you to Buddhism/Buddhist practice” and 69 responded. In very broad terms, the author has identified three main themes regarding what drew LGBTQIA+ Australians to Buddhism: existentialism, a practical guide to living, and knowing oneself. Arguably, the former two correspond to Coleman’s first two statements, however, no participant provided a response like Coleman’s third statement.

The first theme, ‘existentialism’, draws its label from P78 (lesbian/bisexual/pansexual woman) who says that what drew her to Buddhism was “total despair and fear and existential angst”. Others too sought out Buddhism because they wanted to “understand existence and pain” (P44, gay man). This category emphasised a “search for truth” (P75, monastic/celebrate woman) and as P59 (lesbian woman) says: “The teachings (four noble truths, eight-fold path) all pointed towards an accurate description of the human condition which resonated very strongly with me as I was searching for the truth”. Other words participants used were “logic” (P56, gay man

and P67, lesbian woman) and “common sense”, “sense”, or “sensible” (P13, non-heteronormative man/me; P58, genderqueer/free gender lesbian; P67, lesbian woman). Ror

example, P1 (lesbian woman) says, the teachings of the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh were “comforting, encouraging, and they just made sense to me” (emphasis added). Some reflected on the “absence of a deity” (P58, genderqueer/free gender lesbian) and “atheistic world view” (P33, gay man). P39 (pansexual woman) says Buddhism was “free of limiting structures” and

P72 (gay man) says he was drawn to the “non authoritarian attitude” and elaborates by adding “the Buddha points the way and we have to see for ourselves”. P1 (lesbian woman) holds a similar view about the appeal of being invited to explore Buddhism rather than just following.

She says: “you are encouraged to try the teachings out for yourself to see if they ring true for you, rather than just accepting it as right because it is what the Buddha taught”. The second theme the author identifies as to why LGBTQIA+ Australians are drawn to Buddhism is ‘a practical guide to living’. This corresponds to Coleman’s second statement: “I became interested in Buddhism in order to help me deal with my personal problems” (Coleman, 2001, p. 198). Some common words include “practical” (P5, bisexual woman), “practicality” P61 (pansexual transwoman/non-binary), and “skilfulness” (P40, gay man). Most common was using Buddhism to help “calm” (P14, pansexual/polyamorous non-binary), “quiet” (P27, pansexual woman), and “clarity of” (P34, bisexual/polyamorous man) the mind. Others speak of “mental health reasons” (P7, gay/bisexual man), “combat stressors” (P20, gay man) and “helped me deal with my depression and self-control” (P61 pansexual transwoman/non-binary). A similar point to ‘self-control’ was raised by another participant, P55 (lesbian woman), who adds: “Gaining mastery over my thoughts and emotions”. Some sought “compassion” (P35, lesbian woman and P31, gay/polyamorous man). More explicitly, P3 (lesbian transwoman) adds: “After leaving a drug and alcohol detox and rehab (successfully) I needed some direction, and Buddhism offered what I was looking for”. The third and final theme the author identifies among the responses is ‘knowing oneself’. This was expressed in terms of “discovery” (P23, bisexual woman; P55, lesbian woman; and P48, gay man), “knowing my self better” (P20, gay man), “inner drive following my feelings” (P79, bisexual woman), and “feeling like something was missing in my life” (P4, lesbian woman). P39 (pansexual woman) added coming to Buddhism “It felt like home: embracing, kind, reflective, open, honest”. Despite the diversity of responses, only two participants reflected on how they were drawn to Buddhism for a reason

relating to being a LGBTQIA+ person. For example, P17 (straight/pansexual woman) writes “gender neutral mostly” and P30 (gay man) writes “neutrality towards gays”. Coleman (2001) cautions that asking people why they are drawn to Buddhism because the reasons they give “are usually ex post facto affairs that have more to do with justifying our behavior than understanding it” (p. 207). Nonetheless, he goes on to claim “there is something useful to be gained from asking people about their motivations as long as we maintain a healthy scepticism about what their responses really mean” (p. 207). To conclude therefore that being drawn to Buddhism has little to do with being an LGBTQIA+ person is premature, despite the fact that elsewhere in the survey, participants did explicitly challenge the importance of their LGBTQIA+ identity within their Buddhism and vice versa.

Some participants are rather antagonistic when it comes to discussing the intersection of LGBTQIA+ identity and Buddhism. P12 (gay/pansexual/polyamorous man/non-binary) is somewhat confrontational when it comes to the survey and its questions. They say: “So far this survey has not even begun to touch on the issues that matter to me in my Buddhist community. I hope the next questions can go beyond ‘marriage’ and being ‘out’”. P12’s comment goes a long way to suggest that, for them at least, there are other pressing concerns, it is unfortunate that these are not expressed. There are also some who display what is sometimes referred to as “internalised homophobia” (Weinberg, 1975). P33 (gay man) says:

I think that gay people should realise that the whole world does not revolve around them. We have as much right to live our lives as ‘straight’ people do [...] So similarly, should gay people not ‘bang-on’ about their ‘special’ lives (or they may risk being called extremist).

More concerning is P73 (straight man)<sup>7</sup> who says:

If [LGBTQIA+ people] adopt kids, I feel they are not considering the kid's feeling in the future. Also, if they display public affection, I do not think it is appropriate. I have seen many demonstrations and shows by LGBTQIA people - some with inappropriate outfits, is this reasonable? Is it fair for kids who are innocent? Are you recruiting or are you helping their own friends? If they are recruiting for more people to BECOME LGBTQIA, I do not think it is appropriate.

Arguably, these views are quite extreme, yet others did suggest that their LGBTQIA+ identity is not relevant to their Buddhism and they speak of not having a "need" to either be 'out' or to discuss their LGBTQIA+ identity. P21 (bisexual man) says quite succinctly: "I am not 'out' as I don't feel the need to be neither 'in' or 'out'". P52 (straight woman) says her "sexuality is never raised". P59 (lesbian woman) recently came out and says "some [Buddhist friends] don't but I don't feel any need to discuss with many as I realise there would be total acceptance". Some participants reflect on how their current "straight" relationships complicate their 'out' status. P23 (bisexual woman) is married to a man and "tr[ies] not to be 'in the closet', that is, I don't act straight, if anyone assumes I am 100% heterosexual I correct that assumption". P39 (pansexual woman) is also "currently in a heterosexual marriage", she adds, "many community members recall when I was in same sex relationships I don't think about it. It doesn't feel any different to anyone else whose had a partner, broken up and moved on". P79 (bisexual woman) is single and this means that "not all my Sangha would be aware. But don't feel any need to hide it". P57 (asexual woman) describes herself as "being a (straight-leaning) asexual" and as a result she does "not feel the need to be 'out'".

<sup>7</sup> Participants who, at least superficially, may not appear to be part of the LGBTQIA+ community were not disqualified from participating nor were their answers excluded. At least one "straight woman" participant indicated elsewhere in the survey she is "intersex"; therefore one cannot assume a participant is not part of the LGBTQIA+ community because their identity is either cis and/or het.

It is revealing that just over half (38, 55%) felt reluctant to disclose their LGBTQIA+ identity within Buddhist communities. P76 (gay man) says he "certainly [doesn't] always trust the (Buddhist) context" to come out. P62 (pansexual woman/transwoman) emphasises that their Buddhist Monastery "is a 'male' institution" and as a result it possesses "a typical structure that permits homophobia and transphobia within its structure". They go on to add: "The judgements and phobias do not disappear because of ordination, they only do because he or she sees the need to change". According to P56 (gay man) "sex is viewed as a distraction to the overarching objective of the religion, and not to be pursued or indulged in, regardless of orientation". P74 (lesbian woman) is "cautious" when disclosing her LGBTQIA+ identity, but this is in the context of the Buddhist practice:

My teacher's advice on everything is to check our motivation. So, if my motivation in coming out is to help another person who is or may be LGBTQIA then I do so. If it will 'freak someone out' [...] then I feel it is more important to keep my communication with them on a level that will help them do Buddhist practice.



For others, being out in the context of their Buddhist practice is more definitive. P48 (gay man) “It would go against my Buddhist beliefs to lie to others about myself”. Despite P48’s confidence, there is reason that some are reluctant to come out within their Buddhist communities. Eleven (16%) participants have been told that their LGBTQIA+ identity is not in keeping with the Buddha’s teachings. P6 (gay/queer man) adds he was “told by some people that it’s wrong sex conduct” and P50 (lesbian woman) adds “in the early nineties I was not allowed to join a Tibetan sangha because of my sexuality”. Reluctance to disclose one’s LGBTQIA+ identity is also justified when considering that over half (41, 60%) of participants felt that LGBTQIA+ issues and people were silenced or ignored by Buddhist communities. While these responses are far from conclusive, there is some indication that LGBTQIA+ people

are not yet completely accepted within their Buddhist communities and subsequently they do not yet feel comfortable being ‘out’ as LGBTQIA+ Buddhists.

### Conclusion

This online survey is just the first phase of a broader project designed to explore the intersection of sex, gender, sexuality, and Buddhism within the lives of Australian LGBTQIA+ Buddhists. It is too soon to say definitively what exactly the relationship between Buddhism and being an LGBTQIA+ person is. These responses reveal that the reasons LGBTQIA+ people are drawn to Buddhism fall into three broad categories of existentialism, a practical guide to living, and knowing oneself. Rarely are issues relating to sex, gender, and sexuality or being an LGBTQIA+ person mentioned. There appears to be the view within Buddhism that neither sex, gender, and sexuality nor being an LGBTQIA+ person are important. Having said that, more than half are reluctant to, at least sometimes, reveal their LGBTQIA+ identities. There is also evidence which suggests that LGBTQIA+ issues and people are silenced and ignored, LGBTQIA+ Buddhists have been told their identities are not in keeping with Buddhist teachings, and some have witnessed sexism, homophobia, and misgendering within Buddhist GCT. While the author is cautious not to make any final statements at this time, what is clear, Buddhism isn’t necessarily as accepting as may be widely perceived, either by mainstream society or by LGBTQIA+ Buddhist themselves.

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## Through the Yellow Gate

### Ordination of Gender-Nonconforming People in the Buddhist Vinaya

Ven. Vimala

April 2, 2021

I dedicate this work to my parents, who have raised me to see people as people, regardless of race, nationality, sex, gender or sexuality.

#### 1. Introduction

Transgender and intersex people, and at times other LGBTIQ+ people, have been excluded from ordination as a Buddhist monastic in the *Theravāda* tradition. This exclusion is the result of what I will show is an erroneous reading of several Pali terms—*paṇḍaka* and *ubhatob yañ janaka*—in the monastic disciplinary code (*Vinaya Piṭaka*) of the *Theravāda* tradition. Rendering the terms *paṇḍaka* and *ubhatob yañ janaka* into English, previous lexicographers of the Pali language have used vocabulary rooted in the (Christian) understanding of the early 20th Century, like ‘eunuch’ and ‘hermaphrodite’.<sup>1</sup> It has previously been noted that it is problematic to transpose modern terms in the understanding and translation of other (religious) movements.<sup>2</sup> In dealing with the concepts of *paṇḍaka* and *ubhatob yañ janaka* the terms ‘eunuch’ and ‘hermaphrodite’, but also terms like ‘transgender’ and ‘intersex’ are inappropriate as they wrongly suggest that the lived understanding of the relationship between sex, gender and sexuality in Ancient India was the same as it is for us in the West today. The fact that certain groups of people are unable to obtain monastic ordination based on terms that are so little understood creates a barrier for all LGBTIQ+ people who come to Buddhism seeking refuge from suffering.

When studying the Buddhist scriptures, especially where there are groups of people who are marginalized, it is important to understand where and under which circumstances these concepts and interpretations have originated.<sup>3</sup>

In the beginning of the Buddhist Order (*Saṅgha*) there were no rules for the conduct of monastics. The *Vinaya* was laid down later and grew as more rules were established. These were implemented only when monks started to misbehave and guidelines became necessary.<sup>4</sup> The *Vinaya* as we have it today was formed over a long period of time and has been highly redacted over the centuries, regulating many and diverse aspects of monastic life. It is not an original Buddhist text that was passed down unchanged since the time of the Buddha. The oldest parts of the *Vinaya* consist of the rules (*pāṭimokkha*) and procedures (*kammavācā*), possibly together with some other sections. The different *Vinayas* in existence today are the products of the various schools of Buddhism that emerged much later.<sup>5</sup> The Second Council is of preeminent importance in the development of the *Vinayas* as this is the only major event in Buddhist history that revolves entirely

<sup>1</sup>The Pali Text Society’s Pali-English Dictionary and Cone’s Concise Pali-English Dictionary. For dictionary entries I refer to Appendix C.

<sup>2</sup>Maes [2016a] page 2, Dudas [2002] page 45, Artinger [2020] pages 1–4.

<sup>3</sup>Brenna Artinger [2020] pages 3–4 points to the use of Michael Foucault’s methodology of ‘genealogy’:

“Thus, this methodology is primarily concerned with the ways in which ideas are crafted through the shaping of cultural and political influence, and one’s ability to trace such lineages of formation. Through this process, one is able to see not only how or why ideas are created, but also how specific terms are negotiated through paradigms of power to bear certain connotations and interpretations.”

<sup>4</sup>See Bhikkhu Sujato [2009] pages 8–10 for further details on the context of the *Vinaya*.

<sup>5</sup>After the Buddha passed away we see a gradual emergence of schools in the Aśokan and post-Aśokan periods. See Bhikkhu Sujato [2012] for a detailed study on the emergence of the Buddhist schools.

around a Vinaya dispute. Bhikkhu Sujato<sup>1</sup> suggests that the bulk of the Vinaya texts were added well after the Buddha's death, in contrast to the Suttas (discourses): ... the Vinayas were, it seems, composed following the Second Council; and in particular the Khandhakas, with their massive narrative arc, were put together in order to authenticate the acts of the Second Council. This is important for our current topic because the rules regarding the exclusion from ordination of the paṇḍaka and ubhatob yañ janaka are found in the Khandhakas and the words do not appear in the early Suttas, nor in the oldest parts of the Vinaya. The question remains as to why these rules were added. The Buddhist community also evolved in constant negotiation with its wider religious environment and needs to be understood as a dialogue with its various 'religious others'. Claire Maes<sup>2</sup> has clearly demonstrated that this process was central to the formation of the Vinaya as an ongoing dynamic to create a distinctive Buddhist identity. The Second Buddhist Council became an important event in the history of Buddhism to determine its identity vis-à-vis other religious Orders after the Buddha passed away.

Many scholars have pointed out the many similarities between the principal practices, precepts and structures of Buddhists, Jains and Brahman communities and they seem to have had a detailed knowledge of each other's practices and organization.<sup>3</sup> The interaction and debates with these 'religious others' led the Buddhist Saṅgha to implement specific rules in order to be in conformity with certain well-established monastic customs on the one hand and to (re)define their identity as a clearly separate Order on the other. In this paper I will argue that the concepts paṇḍaka and ubhatob yañ janaka have entered the Buddhist Vinaya after the Buddha passed away in the context of a much wider religious discussion that took place regarding the position of women within religious life that has also reduced the opportunities for women to ordain as Buddhist monastics.<sup>4</sup> I will also show that these terms have their roots in Vedic mythology and provide a fresh insight into the ancient Asian paradigms for gender identities. Here we find the living proof of evolving ideas on sex, sexuality and gender that are very different from our Western concepts. And here we find that these terms are intimately bound up with the deeply ambivalent attitude towards women and women's sexuality in ancient India. In this paper I will first trace the emergence of these—and other gender-specific—terms in Vedic, Brahmanic and Jain scriptures and their changes over the centuries. I will

<sup>1</sup>Sujato [2009] pages 141–142 and 215–216.

<sup>2</sup>Maes [2016a] and Maes [2016b].

<sup>3</sup>Maes [2016b] page 9 footnotes 26–28.

<sup>4</sup>The legality of the ordination of women (Bhikkhunīs) in the Theravāda and Tibetan lineages of Buddhism has been a hotly debated topic for many years. Thanks to the efforts and research of many monastics and academics, the first full Theravāda ordination was held in Perth in October 2009. Although still not widely recognized in several traditional Theravāda countries, recognition is growing and the number of Bhikkhunīs is slowly increasing. See a.o. Bhikkhu Sujato [2009] and Bhikkhu Anālayo [2013] for research in this field.

then discuss the occurrences of these terms in the Pali and Chinese Vinayas and compare these with the understanding of the contemporary ‘religious others’ to come to a deeper understanding of what the terms *paṇḍaka* and *ubhatob yañ janaka* really meant at the time these passages were written and the reasons why these are said to be barred from ordination. Finally I will show that neither these terms, nor any other regulations in the Vinaya, can be used as a justification to exclude candidates from ordination based on their sex, sexuality or gender.

## 2. Vedic, Brahmanic and Jain Scriptures

Various authors have already noticed the similarities of Vinaya terminology between the Buddhist and Jain Orders.<sup>1</sup>

In the Buddhist Suttas we find many examples of discussions between the two groups and after the Buddha passed away, when the community found itself without a leader to make decisions, such discussions would certainly have had an impact on the Buddhist Vinaya. Both groups would have also used vocabulary that was already in existence at that time. It is therefore important to first have a look at what sex and gender meant in the larger context of the society in pre-Buddhist India and how this understanding developed within the Jain Order.

### 2.1. Emergence of the Third Sex/Gender

Both the Buddhist and Vedic texts have origin stories that describe the emergence of sex and gender (and thus human beings) as a result of desire.<sup>2</sup> Before this emergence of sex and gender, beings were androgynous, hermaphroditic or without any kind of sexual characteristics.

In the Vedic myths and legends, we frequently find the recurrent theme of a man turning into a woman or androgyne or of being both a mother and a father.<sup>3</sup> Robert Goldman<sup>4</sup> and others point out that the function of these myths and legends is to confront deep anxieties and fears associated with the complex and problematic issues involving sex, gender, sexuality, power, hierarchy and subordination. We see literary representations of these anxieties in all patriarchal societies, expressing the deeply ambivalent attitude towards women and women’s sexuality. On the one hand, women are depicted as pure and nurturing as long as they are controlled within the constraints of kinship, but outside such a regulated environment they are seen as dangerous and destructive to men. Through

<sup>1</sup>Maes [2016b] page 9 footnotes 26–28, also Sujato [2009] and Zwilling and Sweet [1996].

<sup>2</sup>Zwilling and Sweet [2000] page 101 and Artinger [2020] pages 7–15.

<sup>3</sup>F.i. Mahābhārata Anuśāsanaparvan (MBh) 13.12 and Rāmāyaṇam (Rām) 7.78–79. See also Goldman [1993] pages 379–380 and Conner et al. [1998] page 68.

<sup>4</sup>Robert Goldman [1993] gives an excellent account of the myths that formed the notions of sex and gender in ancient India and the psychological purpose of these myths. I will refer to some of these stories throughout this paper.

such projective devices of men onto women, male-dominated cultures have been able to establish a hegemonic ideology of gender.<sup>1</sup> We see that ‘transgenderism’ is a recurring theme in these myths and legends, derived from these anxieties and attitudes towards sex and gender in a society where the ‘male’ sex and sexuality is seen as superior. We can trace the emergence of the concept of a third sex/gender back to the late Vedic period (800–600 BCE).<sup>2</sup> The term *napuṃsaka* was originally an umbrella term used to denote men who were impotent, who had a female gender-expression or who dressed in traditional women’s clothing.<sup>3</sup> Literally the term means ‘not a male’ i.e. men who did not conform to gender-role expectations.

It is accepted by many scholars that the hijras of India are the contemporary representatives of these *napuṃsakas* and they even refer to themselves as ‘not a male’ or ‘neither male nor female’.<sup>4</sup>

Although the hijras have been subject to influences from the Muslim period from the 12th to the 16th Century as well as from Christian and more modern Western ideas, by studying them we get a glimpse of what the lives of the *napuṃsakas* must have been like in Vedic times.

The hijras are a representation of the god Śiva in their androgynous form of *Ardhanārīśwara* from Vedic mythology (See Figure 2). They enact the religious myths and make them come alive in the rituals, songs and dances they perform. They are viewed as vehicles of the divine power of the Mother Goddess, which transforms their impotence into the power of creation. According to sources from the beginning of the 20th Century, potential candidates for initiation as a hijra (which includes emasculation) had to be born impotent.<sup>5</sup> Their emasculated body is not the only characteristic of a hijra, but also their physiology and their sexual capacities, feelings, preferences and behaviors.

Although dressing like a woman is part of a hijra, they are also quite different from a transgender person; they are the religious embodiment of the deities.<sup>6</sup>

Next to hijras there are a number of other religious sects in India where males im-

<sup>1</sup>See Sujato [2011] for an extensive work on the role of the male/female relationship portrayed in mythology in Buddhism and more specifically with regards to women’s ordination.

<sup>2</sup>Throughout this paper I have tried to maintain a distinction between ‘sex’—the anatomy of an individual’s reproductive system—and ‘gender’—either social roles or personal identification based on an internal awareness—that we use today, but this has proven rather difficult because in the ancient texts this distinction is significantly blurred.

<sup>3</sup>Zwilling and Sweet [1996] page 362 and Zwilling and Sweet [2000] page 105.

<sup>4</sup>Zwilling and Sweet [1996] page 363, Goldman [1993] page 388 and Doniger O’Flaherty [1982]. A good study on the hijras is provided by Serena Nanda [1999].

<sup>5</sup>The 19th and early 20th Century sources are important because at that time the influence of globalization and the influx of Western ideas on the lives of the hijras was less prevalent than it is today. See Ibbetson et al. [1911] pages 332, Shah [1961] page 1325 and Bhimbhai [1901]. Some 19th Century accounts report that impotence was an essential qualification for admission into the hijra community and that a newcomer initiated into the community was on probation for as long as a year. During this time his impotence was carefully tested, sometimes by making the person sleep four nights ‘with a prostitute’. Only after impotence was established would the newcomer be permitted to undergo the emasculation operation and become a full member of the community. Preston [1987].

<sup>6</sup>Nanda [1999]

personate the legends, imitate what is seen as feminine dress and behavior, including menstruation, and also engage in sexual acts with men as acts of devotion. Castration may also be part of this like f.i. in the Sakhībhāva sect that worships Viṣṇu.<sup>1</sup> Various sādhus, like Ramakrishna, identify themselves with women for periods of time as part of their religious life.<sup>2</sup> The adoption of the word *napuṃsaka* as a grammatical third gender<sup>3</sup> in the 6th Century BCE seems to have prompted a significant shift in meaning, because now the *napuṃsaka* was interpreted as meaning ‘neither male nor female’. This resulted in the previously mentioned ‘not males’ being regarded as people with ambiguous sex or gender.<sup>4</sup> The individuals that the word *napuṃsaka* originally referred to were however all males, just not conforming to gender-role expectations. The fact that the word *liṅga* (sex)<sup>5</sup> was adopted as the technical term for grammatical gender created a lot of confusion because now the same word was used to express natural sex and grammatical gender.<sup>6</sup> The third grammatical gender for humans became equivalent to the ‘third sex’ and comprised of anybody who did not neatly fit into the categories of ‘male’ and ‘female’.

Just after the late Vedic period we see that a set of terms relating to the class of *napuṃsakas* emerged like *klība* (sexually defective man<sup>7</sup>), *ṣaṅḍha*<sup>8</sup> and *paṇḍaka* (‘impotent’, or ‘sterile’<sup>9</sup>). All of these types were associated with cross-dressing, singing and dancing,<sup>10</sup> as we have also seen in the above description of the contemporary hijras. With the word *napuṃsaka* having gained a much broader meaning, it seems likely that these new sub-categories represent different names for the original meaning of ‘not males’, although not clearly defined and overlapping in meaning.

Serena Nanda<sup>11</sup> mentions the practices and beliefs in Tantric Hinduism which started emerging in India from the middle of the 1st millennium CE:

1Nanda [1999] page 21.

2Robert Goldman [1993] pages 384–391 discusses various sects with these practices.

3Sātapatha Brāhmaṇa (SB) 10.5.1.2–3.

4Zwilling and Sweet [2000] page 362.

5The original meaning of *liṅga* is ‘characteristic mark or sign’ (Nirukta 1.17) but it later starts to mean ‘sexual characteristic’. See also chapter 3 for a detailed description of *liṅga*.

6Zwilling and Sweet [1996] page 365.

7As pointed out by Zwilling and Sweet [1996] page 363, the nature of the *klība* is suggested by the Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad 6.1.12 and is the result of the destruction of the penis as in ŚB 1.4.3.19.

8The Monier Monier-Williams dictionary gives the translation ‘eunuch, hermaphrodite’.

9Atharva Veda (AV) 8.6.7, 11.16. The etymology of *paṇḍaka* is unknown but cf. *baṇḍa* at AV 7.65.3 is glossed by the commentator as *nirvīrya* (‘impotent, powerless, unmanly’ (Monier-Williams, Sir M. (1988) dictionary). Albrecht Wezler [1998] has suggested that *paṇḍa* and *paṇḍaka* be regarded as ultimately derived from \*apa+ āṇḍā, thus: “one who has no testicles (anymore),” i.e. a eunuch. Allan Bomhard [2016] points out that there is a range of translations and interpretations that can apply to the *paṇḍaka*. He believes that the word could be a loan-word from the Dravidian *paṇṭan*, *paṇṭakan*, *paṇṭakam*, which can mean both hermaphrodite and eunuch.

10The term *klība* surfaces in the Mahābhārata in the myth of Arjuna, who refuses the advances of a nymph who curses him to become a *klība*. Arjuna takes the name Brihannala, dresses in women’s clothes and gains access to the princess Uttarā for whom she becomes a performer in the arts of music, singing and dancing. See Conner et al. [1998] for details.

11Serena Nanda [1999] quotes Bullough pages 21–22.



... there was a third sex, which itself was divided into four categories: the male eunuch, called the 'waterless' because he had desiccated testes; the 'testicle voided', so called because he had been castrated; the hermaphrodite; and the 'not woman', or female eunuch (which usually refers to a woman who does not menstruate). Those who were more feminine (whether males or females) wore false breasts and imitated the voice, gestures, dress, delicacy, and timidity of women. All these categories of persons had the function of providing alternative techniques of sexual gratification, some of which are mentioned in the classical Hindu sex manual, the Kāmasūtra.

This shows that at that time the 'third sex', the *napuṃsakas*, were not only defined by their primary sexual characteristics that made them neither completely 'male' or 'female', but they were also prescribed gender characteristics like dress and behavior as well as a certain religious sexual role in society. I have been unable to identify the Sanskrit words that the four categories mentioned refer to, but it seems likely they represent at least the *paṇḍaka*, the *klība* or *saṇḍha* and possibly the female *paṇḍaka*. The Kāmasūtra itself only uses the word *ṛtīyāprakṛtī* which literally means 'third sex'.<sup>1</sup> The characteristics of the 'hermaphrodite' and which Sanskrit term is used here remains unclear. I will discuss this in the next chapters.

## 2.2. Sex and Gender in the Jain Order

Just like in Buddhism, the Jain Order had a strong interest in controlling the sexuality of its monastics. Jain monastics practiced celibacy,<sup>2</sup> and the monks were mostly naked ascetics. The prestige and power of the Order depended to a large extent on public opinion and therefore on the purity of their behavior, as well as their external appearance. The 'third sex' was therefore the subject of a very lengthy debate within the Order. In addition to these practical considerations, there was also a debate within the Jain community as to whether women can attain spiritual liberation because the monks felt it was improper for them to go naked. Eventually it was this dispute that led to the schism between the two major Jain Orders.<sup>3</sup> This controversy hinged on the identification of the signs to designate somebody as a woman, which logically also led to the examination of what is male, and 'neither male nor female'.

<sup>1</sup>At the beginning of the Common Era the term *ṛtīyāprakṛtī* was introduced, possibly among the schools of traditional medicine, to indicate a true 'third sex'. This term is usually used as a synonym for *napuṃsaka* and only appears in a few times in the later Brahmanic Sastra collections (See Zwilling and Sweet [1996] page 362). The Pali equivalent of the word is *tatiya pakati*, which appears a few times in later Buddhist Abhidhamma sub-commentaries.

<sup>2</sup>Celibacy is the state of voluntarily being unmarried, sexually abstinent, or both, usually for religious reasons. In this paper I will use the word in the meaning of sexually abstinent.

<sup>3</sup>See Paul Dudas [2002] for an extensive account of the schism. The two main sects of Jainism, the Digambara and the Śvētāmbara sects, likely started forming about the 3rd Century BCE and the schism was complete by about the 5th Century CE.

The speculations and discussions that followed focused on the characteristics necessary to identify a person as belonging to one of the three groups. The paṇḍaka, klība and keśavan (long-haired male)<sup>1</sup> were recognized as males, but their gender-role nonconformity assimilated them to females, so not 'real males' and therefore still napuṃsakas. This discussion was influenced by the Brahmanical views at that time concerning the essential markers for sex/gender assignment (liṅga).<sup>2</sup> By the 3rd Century BCE two views had developed to define liṅga.

1. The first view went from the premise that liṅga was defined by what one perceived as a man, woman or neither based on the presence or absence of primary or secondary characteristics.<sup>3</sup>

2. The second view is that liṅga assignment has to do with the ability to procreate or conceive.

Both these Brahmanical views were rejected by the Jains as being inadequate to determine sex/gender. Paul Dundas [1964] describes how the Jains developed a system to define sex/gender as a combination of sex, behavior, physical characteristics and also the underlying sexuality and feelings. The Jains came up with their own term veda to describe these characteristics.<sup>4</sup> This conception of sexuality most likely predates the schism between the two major Jain sects but was not part of the earliest Jain doctrine. This concept appears frequently in the later canonical Jain texts but is also mentioned once in the early Jain literature where male sexuality is explained as sexual desire for women and female sexuality is explained as sexual desire for men.<sup>5</sup> The sexuality of the napuṃsaka is not clearly defined in the earlier texts but is seen as a threat to the chastity of monks.<sup>6</sup> Zwillling and Sweet<sup>7</sup> mention: ... we may infer that sexual desire for a man forms at least one aspect of third-sex sexuality. In a set of similes descriptive of the relative intensities

<sup>1</sup> Apparently long hair was seen as a sign of a woman.

<sup>2</sup> I will discuss the meaning of this term in more detail in chapter 3.

<sup>3</sup> Mahābhāṣya 4.1.3: Q: "What is it that people see when they decide, this is a woman, this is a man, this is neither woman nor man?"; A: "That person who has breasts and long hair is a woman; that person who is hairy all over is a man; that person who is different from either when those characteristics are absent, is napuṃsaka."

<sup>4</sup> This move is rather remarkable because for the Brahmins veda meant their sacred knowledge and scriptures. But it is not unprecedented because the Jains often used existing words and gave them new meaning. In the Buddhist Suttas we also find instances where the Buddhists use different terms for the same things as the Jains. F.i. Majjhima Nikāya 56 recounts a discussion between the Buddha and the Jain ascetic Tapassī in which the ascetic mentions that their leader Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta (i.e. Mahāvīra) doesn't speak in terms of 'deeds', like the Buddha, but uses the term 'rods'. See also Zwillling and Sweet [1996] note 34.

<sup>5</sup> See Viyāha 2.5.1.

<sup>6</sup> See Ācārāṅga Sūtra (English translation by Jacobi [2008]) p.220: monks are warned that a danger of drunkenness is seduction by a woman or a klība. Page 285: sleeping places frequented by women or paṇḍakas are to be avoided.

<sup>7</sup> Zwillling and Sweet [1996] page 368.

of the sexualities of the three sexes, that of the third sex is viewed as most intense of all: a woman's veda is compared to a dung fire, a man's to a forest fire, but the third sex's is compared to a burning city. Thus third-sex persons are not only sexual persons, but hyperlibidinous ones at that.

The word *napuṃsaka* has been the subject of much debate within the Jain Order, resulting over time in changes in meaning and use and the definition of sub-categories. The word in the canonical texts seems to have referred only to males who were cross-dressing and had a female gender-expression, who are identified by the way they dress, their behavior and sexual orientation. Because they looked like a woman, they were also assumed to have sexual desire for men. Because of this characterization, the *napuṃsaka* can also be an object of lust for celibate monks and this would have been seen as problematic for ordination as a male monastic. Part of the discussion was also fuelled by the nakedness of the Jain monks and therefore their physical male appearance as well as their behavior. As celibate monks, same-sex relations and the possibility of same-sex attraction were issues. The public perception, and the fear thereof, was of utmost importance for the livelihood of the Jain Order. We also see a shift in the discussion over time regarding the abilities of a *napuṃsaka*, or at least some sub-categories thereof, to attain enlightenment or to ordain. The Śvētāmbara in their later *Bhāgavatī Sūtra*<sup>1</sup> even define a fourth type, namely the *puruṣanapuṃsaka* (male *napuṃsaka*, possibly a *napuṃsaka* who appeared the same as other men).<sup>2</sup> Lacking any of the external characteristics of a *napuṃsaka*, the only characteristic left to define them as such must have been their sexuality (i.e. attraction to men). During the period of the commentarial literature the sexuality of the *napuṃsaka* was redefined as being of a more bisexual orientation. Leonard Zwillling and Michael Sweet<sup>3</sup> believe that this new definition was not so much driven by actual observations of the behavior of *napuṃsakas* but rather by theoretical discussion. This bisexual orientation was not conceived of as a separate orientation, but as possessing the sexuality of both males and females. This is a change from the canonical literature, where the sexuality of a *napuṃsaka* was characterized as female only. During the period in which the commentarial literature was established the terms male and female *napuṃsaka* were redefined further. The female *napuṃsaka* was the old category defined in the Canon of which the *klība* and *paṇḍaka* are sub-categories, and the male *napuṃsaka* was the aforementioned *puruṣanapuṃsaka*. The female *napuṃsaka* seems to act as a female partner only (i.e. be acted upon), while the male *napuṃsaka* acts in both ways. So here male and female sexuality are no longer just defined as the sexual desire to have sex with a female and male respectively, but also in terms of the role

<sup>1</sup>Bhāgavatī Sūtra 4.1–2.

<sup>2</sup>See Zwillling and Sweet [1996] for more details.

<sup>3</sup>Zwillling and Sweet [1996] pages 371–374.

taken in intercourse.<sup>1</sup> The hyperlibidinous nature of the napuṃsaka was ascribed to the bisexual character of his sexuality. As we have seen above, from around the same time that the commentarial literature was established, the ‘third sex’ became identified with their religious sexual role of providing alternative techniques of sexual gratification as in the Kāmasūtra. It is therefore not surprising that they came to be seen as hyperlibidinous in nature.

It is interesting to note that throughout this discussion the napuṃsaka and its sub categories always refer to males who are somehow blocked in terms of exercising their male sexuality in one way or another owing to their performance of some unvirtuous act (karma) in a previous life. Females who did not conform to gender-expectations were not considered in the class of napuṃsakas or are only very rarely mentioned, without much explanation as to their nature.

### 2.3. Jain Monastic Ordination

In the formative years of the Jain Order, the rules for ordination were still rather simple. Only the klība, the paṇḍaka and ill people were not allowed to ordain. Of the two Jain sects after the schism, the Digambara maintained nakedness and eligibility to ordain as a monk was quite straightforward: one had to be a man without genital defects and virile, except for when that man was overly libidinous.

For the Śvētāmbara, who wore a cloth, the matter was far more complex and they devised an intricate system of people suitable for ordination, whereby the napuṃsaka was divided into sixteen types.<sup>2</sup> Over time, the ban against ordination of napuṃsakas was relaxed, first based on practical grounds like a known and well-behaved candidate, and later an exception was made for those who were able to control their sexuality. One of the main grounds why certain napuṃsakas were denied ordination was their perceived hyperlibidinous-ness, which would render them incapable of keeping their vows of celibacy and made them unfit to live in either the monks’ or nuns’ communities. Only ten of the sixteen were not allowed to be ordained because they were regarded as uncontrollable in their passions. Among these were the original two categories of klība and paṇḍaka. The aforementioned puruṣanapuṃsaka was allowed to ordain, presumably because they could not potentially evoke a monk’s lust. Since external appearance was no longer a clear indication of being a napuṃsaka, the candidate for ordination had to be questioned. By the 17th Century CE, this rule on ordination had been nearly abolished. So we have seen a radical shift from total non-acceptance to almost total acceptance of napuṃsakas in the Jain Order over time.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Niśītha Sūtra 3507.

<sup>2</sup>See Bhagavatī 5166–67.

<sup>3</sup>Zwilling and Sweet [1996] reference Yuktīprabodha in footnote 80.

### 3. Liṅga and the Dispute about Women's Ordination

As we have touched upon in the context of the developments in the Jain Order there was a lively discussion around the 3rd Century BCE on what the characteristics of sex or gender (liṅga) are. This controversy hinged on the identification of the signs to designate somebody as a woman, which logically also led to the examination of what is male, and 'neither male nor female'. This was a much wider religious debate that involved both the Jain and Buddhist communities, and possibly other religious traditions as well. Bhikkhu Sujato<sup>1</sup> points out that these discussions were conducted by the monks, while the women themselves were notable by their absence. We have no indication that this was any different in the Jain Order. It is therefore not surprising that at the Second Buddhist Council, which was held at around the same time, rules were laid down with regards to the ordination of nuns, and most likely the 'third sex' category, with its perceived hyperlibidinous-ness, was also touched upon. We also find for instance various passages with regards to women's roles in the Order that seem out of place in the Buddhist scriptures but which appear with near identical wording in the Jain texts<sup>2</sup> so it is clear that these two Orders influenced each other. This discussion regarding liṅga in the light of ordination into the Buddhist monastic Order is all the more remarkable because monks and nuns forego the usual markers of sex and gender when they put on robes and shave their heads. Giving up gendered attire is one of the distinguishing characteristics of monastic life. In the Jain Order this discussion made more sense.<sup>3</sup> The Jains were naked ascetics and therefore the physical marks of sex could not so easily be given up. The female monastics needed to wear a cloth to cover their bodies while the males could go naked. This was a very important point for the Jains because this difference also meant that as females could not let go of all earthly possessions they could also not reach enlightenment. This was one of the main points of dispute between what became the two sects in Jainism.

The original meaning of the term liṅga before this dispute was 'characteristic mark or sign',<sup>4</sup> but during this dispute the term was refined and the different Orders developed different opinions about the characteristics of 'male' and 'female'. Bee Scherer<sup>5</sup> takes the term liṅga as a reference to the 'secondary sex organs' and other characteristics of gender difference, which also include behavioral differences so the term can be used to denote both biological sex and some aspects of the expression of gender-identity as we define it

<sup>1</sup>Sujato [2009] pages 241–242.

<sup>2</sup>Sujato [2009] pages 54–55.

<sup>3</sup>Maes [2016b] pages 11–17 points out that the Jains' nakedness was one of the primary distinctive marks that set them aside from Buddhist monastics. The wearing of a bowl and robe was an important part of the Buddhist identity and is also referred to with the term liṅga.

<sup>4</sup>Nirukta 1.17.

<sup>5</sup>Scherer [2006] page 68.

today. They base this conclusion on the work of Buddhaghosa,<sup>1</sup> who listed the secondary characteristics of the male and female, which included beards and mustaches, motherly instincts, way of walking, etc. The fact that next to male and female characteristics we also have the term *napuṃsakaliṅga* makes it indeed very unlikely that this would denote primary sex characteristics only. The term is also used in for instance *bhikkhuliṅga*, *gihiliṅga* and *hatthiliṅga*, which are defined as the distinctive marks or character of a monk, householder and elephant respectively. The Brahmanical *Mahābhāṣya*<sup>2</sup> makes it clear that the term *liṅga* refers to the sex/gender of a person as perceived by those who behold them and that this can refer to sexual characteristics, dress, hair and behavior. This view is confirmed in the Buddhist *Abhidharmakośa* <sup>3</sup>, and the *Samantapāsādikā* commentary<sup>4</sup> and elsewhere. There is no indication that the Buddhists agreed with the Jains on the inclusion of underlying sexuality and sexual feelings in the definition of *liṅga*<sup>5</sup>, nor that our modern definition of gender as a personal identification based on an internal awareness was part of it. There are several other words that are used as synonyms for *liṅga* in the Pali and Sanskrit texts. These are *nimitta* and *byañjana* (Skt. *vyañjana*). Both of these words have a much more general meaning of ‘sign’ or ‘mark’ but are also used in relation to sex and gender in various places. In Appendix B, Section B.2, I have charted the occurrences of these words throughout the Pali and Sanskrit texts. I have done the same for their Chinese equivalents ‘root/faculty’ (根) and ‘shape’ (形). In order to get an idea as to the frequency in which these words are used in relation to sex/gender characteristics as opposed to general characteristics I have used the prefixes *itthi* (‘female’ Skt. *strī*, Chn. 女) and *purisa* (‘male’ Skt. *puruṣa*, Chn. 男). This is not an exact method and we cannot draw definite conclusions from it but it gives an idea of the way in which these words are used in the texts.

In the Pali texts the words *itthiliṅga* and *purisaliṅga* are the only ones used in the Suttas and Vinaya to denote sex/gender characteristics. There is one occurrence of the word *purisabyañjana* in the *Bhikkhunikkhandhaka*, but this is very likely a later addition.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Buddhaghosa lived in the 5th Century CE. He was a commentator, translator and philosopher. He worked in the Great Monastery (*Mahāvihāra*) at Anurādhapura, Sri Lanka. He is also the main author of the *Samantapāsādikā* commentary as well as many other works. He is generally recognized as the most important philosopher and commentator of the Theravāda Canon. His best-known work is the *Visuddhimagga* (‘Path of Purification’), a comprehensive summary of older Sinhala commentaries on Theravāda teachings and practices.

<sup>2</sup>*Mahābhāṣya* 4.1.3. “What is it that people see when they decide, this is a woman, this is a man, this is neither woman nor man?”

<sup>3</sup>*Abhidharmakośa* IV.14 c. using the word *vyañjana* as a synonym for *liṅga*.

<sup>4</sup>See Anderson [2016a] pages 237–240 for an English translation of the passage on change of *liṅga* in a monastic. The *Samantapāsādikā* is a translation of Sinhala commentaries into Pali by Bhikkhu Buddhaghosa and possibly others in the 5th Century CE. It was based on the *Mahāpaccariya* and the *Kurundi Atthakathā*. See Goonesekere [2008] for details on Theravāda commentaries.

<sup>5</sup>The Jains also defined the sexual desire for the male body as part of the female characteristics and vice versa.

<sup>6</sup>See chapter 6. The fact that this word is further only used in the later commentaries seems to confirm its lateness.

The words *itthinimitta* and *purisanimitta* appear in the *Abhidhamma* and all six words are used in the commentaries. It seems therefore likely that the use of these alternative words to denote sex/gender characteristics is a later development. Especially the word for ‘female characteristics’ *itthiliṅga* becomes very prominent over time. We also see that in the *Abhidhamma* the word *liṅga* is used exclusively to denote sex-characteristics. In the *Vinaya* the word *byañjana* is used mostly to denote sex/gender characteristics but also appears a few times in the meaning of ‘curry’. In the other collections both these words are used relatively little to denote sex/gender characteristics. In the Sanskrit texts we see a very different picture. Again, in the *Vinayas* only the words *strīliṅga* and *puruṣaliṅga* are used to denote sex/gender characteristics, but for the other Buddhist texts the result is rather garbled which is especially shown in the chart of the relative number of words (see Appendix B.2, Figure 14). This is mostly due to the fact that the Sanskrit texts, unlike the Pali, are not shown in order of approximate lateness and the collections from which the data are drawn are not complete. In all the collections both words *liṅga* and *vyañjana* are used relatively little to denote sex/gender characteristics. The most interesting feature here is that the words denoting ‘female characteristics’ are used far more than the words for ‘male characteristics’ especially in the Vedic/Brahmanical texts. Just like in the Pali we see a growing prominence of the word *strīliṅga*, which becomes most important in the later Śāstra collections. This could point to an increasing interest over time as to the question of what the characteristics of a ‘woman’ are in ancient Indian society and to a later pre-occupation with sex and gender that is not found in earlier times.

In the charts for the Chinese texts we see that the words for male and female ‘root/faculty’ (根) are most prominent in the *Abhidhamma*<sup>1</sup> as well as the *Vinaya*<sup>2</sup> and slightly less in the later sub-commentaries.<sup>3</sup>

In the *Tantra* collections<sup>4</sup> however, the word for ‘female shape’ (女形), is far more prominent than its male counterpart. In all collections both words ‘root/faculty’ (根) and ‘shape’ (形) are used relatively little to denote sex/gender characteristics and are used more in other meanings. To summarize, it is unclear what the word *liṅga* refers to exactly in relation to sex and gender. It is certain that it does not relate merely to primary sex characteristics and most likely refers to secondary characteristics that also include behavior, dress, hair, etc. The words *byañjana* and *nimitta* seem to be used mainly in the later texts in relation to sex/gender and I treat them in this paper as synonyms of *liṅga* but there might be more subtle differences. At least in the case of the *ubhatobyañjanaka* there seems to be more of an emphasis on primary sexual characteristics as I will discuss in chapter 5.

<sup>1</sup>T26–T29. For a description of the sections in the Taishō Canon see wikipedia.org.

<sup>2</sup>T22–T24.

<sup>3</sup>T40–T44.

<sup>4</sup>T18–T21.

In the next chapters I will discuss the terms *paṇḍaka* and *ubhatob yañ janaka* in the Buddhist texts as well as terms relating to sex and gender as they occur in the *Bhikkhunikkhandhaka*. A listing of the occurrences of the most common terms pertaining to sex and gender in Chinese texts is given in Appendix A.

#### 4. The *Paṇḍaka*

##### 4.1. The *Paṇḍaka* in the Pali Vinaya

In the Theravāda Vinaya the term *paṇḍaka* is mainly used in the context of individuals a monastic should not have sexual relations with or as a form of insult. The rule regarding the ordination of *paṇḍakas* is laid down in *Khandhaka 1 1* and reads as follows:<sup>2</sup>

Tena kho pana samayena aññataro *paṇḍako bhikkhūsu pabbajito hoti*. So dahare dahare *bhikkhū upasaṅkamitvā evaṃ vadeti*—“*etha, maṃ āyasmanto dūsethā*”*ti*. *Bhikkhū apasādentī*—“*nassa, paṇḍaka, vinassa, paṇḍaka, ko tayā attho*”*ti*. So *bhikkhūhi apasādito mahante mahante moḷigalle sāmaṇere upasaṅkamitvā evaṃ vadeti*—“*etha, maṃ āvuso dūsethā*”*ti*. *Sāmaṇerā apasādentī*—“*nassa, paṇḍaka, vinassa, paṇḍaka, ko tayā attho*”*ti*. So *sāmaṇerehi apasādito hatthibhaṇḍe assabhaṇḍe upasaṅkamitvā evaṃ vadeti*—“*etha, maṃ āvuso dūsethā*”*ti*. *Hatthibhaṇḍā assabhaṇḍā dūsesuṃ*. Te *ujjhāyanti khiyyanti vipācentī*—“*paṇḍakā ime samaṇā sakyaputtiyā*. *Yepi imesaṃ na paṇḍakā, tepi ime paṇḍake dūsentī*. *Evaṃ ime sabbeva abrahmacārino*”*ti*. *Assosuṃ kho bhikkhū tesāṃ hatthibhaṇḍānaṃ assabhaṇḍānaṃ ujjhāyantānaṃ khiyyantānaṃ vipācentānaṃ*. *Atha kho te bhikkhū bhagavato etamatthaṃ ārocesuṃ*.

“*Paṇḍako, bhikkhave, anupasampanno na upasampādetabbo, upasampanno nāsetabbo*”*ti*.

At one time a certain *paṇḍaka* had gone forth as a monk. He approached the young monks and said, “Venerables, come and have sex with me.” The monks dismissed him, “Go away, *paṇḍaka*. Who wants you?” He went to the big and fat novices, said the same thing, and got the same response. He then went to the elephant keepers and horse keepers, and once again he said the same thing. And they had sex with him. They complained and criticized them, “These Sakyān ascetics are *paṇḍakas*. And those who are not have sex with them. None of them is celibate.”

<sup>1</sup>*Khandhaka 1 Pabbajjā PTS vol 1 pages 85–86.*

<sup>2</sup>Translation by Ajahn Brahmali.



The monks heard their complaints. They told the Buddha and he said, “A paṇḍaka should not be given the full ordination. If it has been given, he should be expelled.”

There are a couple of interesting things to note about this passage. First of all, the paṇḍaka in question was already ordained at the time of this incident. The rule against ordination of paṇḍakas clearly mentions that full ordination of these individuals, the upasampadā, is not allowed. This really only makes sense if we understand the word pabbajjā (translated by Ajahn Brahmali as ‘gone forth’) here to be equivalent to upasampadā. In fact this equivalence between pabbajjā and upasampadā is what we find throughout the earliest Vinaya, and indeed the Suttas.<sup>1</sup>

In any case, the rule itself is clearly limited to upasampadā (full ordination) and novice ordination seems to be allowed. The Theravāda commentary, both in regards to the paṇḍaka and the ubhatob yañ janaka, differs from the Vinaya in making a distinction between pabbajjā (in the meaning of novice ordination) and upasampadā (full ordination) and does not allow either. We would expect that the paṇḍaka (and the same counts for the ubhatob yañ janaka) in this story would be expelled from the Order on the grounds of breaking the first rule of conduct in the pāṭimokkha, namely the rule against sexual intercourse (pārājika 1 2).

This is the very first rule that was laid down by the Buddha. Instead, not only is he expelled but also all others who are judged to be a paṇḍaka, even if those others were exemplary monks themselves. Brenna Artinger<sup>3</sup> points out that there seems to be the perception (or prejudice) of a fundamental mental flaw in paṇḍakas that makes them especially troublesome and unable to remain celibate. The promiscuous nature of the paṇḍaka would harm the whole Saṅgha and give it a bad name among the lay supporters on which it depends.

Another interesting point is that the monks and novices that are approached by the paṇḍaka react in an exemplary manner and send him away. It is only the elephant and horse keepers, those of a lower class, who engage in sexual relations with him. But afterwards, they still complain about it and criticize the paṇḍaka while they have themselves also engaged in the same act. This seems a bit odd and revolves around the stock passage “Te ujjhāyanti khiyyanti vipācenti” (“They complained and criticized them”) that is used throughout the Vinaya as a typical pattern of narration. In the majority of cases it is the manussā (people) who complain and criticize, after which the monks would hear about

<sup>1</sup>The sāmaṇeras/īs are barely mentioned in the Suttas. Instead we find the figure of the samaṇuddesa, ‘one designated as a samaṇa’, who seems to have had a looser affiliation with the Saṅgha, that is, no proper ordination. The commentaries gloss them as sāmaṇeras, but this might be an oversimplification. More likely they were a kind of precursor to the more formal status of novice. It seems likely that such people merely put on robes, and then lived with a loose connection to a particular community of ascetics, in which case their sex and gender would have been a non-issue. I would argue it is natural to see novices proper in the same way. But the samaṇuddesa remains obscure.

<sup>2</sup>PPTS vol. 3 page 1.

<sup>3</sup>Artinger [2020] page 21.

it, also complain and criticize (“Ye te bhikkhū appicchā ...pe...te ujjhāyanti khiyyanti vipācenti”) and then relate the story to the Buddha. So the word te (they) usually refers to the monks who criticize after they have heard it from the ‘people’. Here however the word te is used right after the elephant and horse keepers, seemingly referring to them. However, it would make much more sense if others would complain about this scandalous behavior rather than the elephant and horse keepers themselves. Indeed this is what we find in the same story in the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya, where the people (lay Buddhists) complain and criticize (時諸居士見已譏嫌言). Claire Maes<sup>1</sup> points out that this phrase could have been used to conceal debates that might have influenced the Bhikkhu Saṅgha to implement specific precepts to be in conformity with the praxes of other ascetic communities with the main purpose of placing the origin of precepts within the Buddhist Order with the Buddha himself in a leading role. She successfully demonstrates this with the Jain concept of ekindriya jīva (one-facultied life) and argues that this concept entered the Buddhist Vinaya as a result of interactions and discussions with the Jain contemporaries. I believe that the term paṇḍaka could also have entered the Buddhist Vinaya in a similar manner. As we have seen previously, the position of the paṇḍaka was discussed at length in the debate among the Jains.

In Appendix B, Section B.1, I have charted the occurrences of the various words throughout the texts. This illustrates that the term paṇḍaka mainly occurs in the Vinaya and the commentaries of the Pali texts and is relatively most important in the Vinaya. The Sanskrit texts are not entirely organized by lateness but it is clear that the term paṇḍaka mainly appears in the Vinaya and Śāstraṭīka. The term klība is notable by its absence in all Buddhist texts and only appears in the Vedic and later Brahmanical texts.

One explanation for this might be that the terms klība and paṇḍaka have been mixed up because their meanings were at least in part overlapping. What is also striking is that the umbrella term napuṁsaka only appears in the Pali commentarial texts and not in any of the earlier collections. It is however a recurrent term in the Vedic and Brahmanical texts. We also see that this term becomes more prominent in the later Anya commentaries as well as in the Brahmanical Śāstra collections, which points to a shift in emphasis, and possibly meaning, of this term in later times at the expense of the prominence of the term paṇḍaka. As these are later texts I have not looked into them in great detail and this might be an interesting topic for future studies.

Considering that the word paṇḍaka does not appear in any of the early Suttas, nor in the early parts of the Vinaya<sup>2</sup>, this is an indication that the inclusion of the word in the Vinaya did not happen in the Buddha’s lifetime but was added later as a result of the discussions with the Brahmins and Jains, for whom paṇḍakas could not ordain.

<sup>1</sup>Maes [2011] pages 98–101.

<sup>2</sup>The word is not found in the pātimokkhas, the lists of rules for monastics. Next to the Pali Vinaya, it appears twice in the Aṅguttara Nikāya, but both of these occurrences only have parallels to the Vinaya or later texts and are most likely later additions.

Brenna Artinger<sup>1</sup> discusses the idea found in commentarial and Abhidhamma texts that paṇḍakas, saṇḍhas and ubhatob yañ janakas are unable to practice the Dhamma because due to their inherent kamma they do not have the capacity for cultivation of any kind. They mention that they find the lack of examples of paṇḍaka and other sexual nonconforming individuals in these texts problematic and there is a lack of data from which these statements can be made. It seems to me a highly theoretical stance and it could indeed be the reason why the rule prohibiting paṇḍakas and the ubhatob yañ janakas from ordaining was included in the Vinaya. This would be another indication of the later origins of this clause. In his analysis of the Bhikkhunī Vinaya Bhikkhu Sujato<sup>2</sup> points out that there is indeed a strong relationship between the Vinaya and the later Abhidhamma texts.

#### 4.2. The Five Types of Paṇḍaka

Going beyond the Vinaya itself into the commentarial scriptures, we find the following explanation in the Theravāda Samantapāsādikā with regards to the nature of the paṇḍaka<sup>3</sup>:

Paṇḍakobhikkhaveti ettha āsittapaṇḍako usūyapaṇḍako opakkamikapaṇḍako pakkhapaṇḍako napuṃsakapaṇḍakoti pañca paṇḍakā. Tattha yassa paresaṃ aṅgajātaṃ mukhena gahetvā asucinā āsittassa pariḷāho vūpasammāti, ayaṃ āsittapaṇḍako. Yassa paresaṃ ajjhācāraṃ passato usūyāya uppannāya pariḷāho vūpasammāti, ayaṃ usūyapaṇḍako. Yassa upakkamena bijāni apanītāni, ayaṃ opakkamikapaṇḍako. Ekacco pana akusalavipākānubhāvena kālapakkhe paṇḍako hoti, juṇhapakkhe panassa pariḷāho vūpasammāti, ayaṃ pakkhapaṇḍako. Yo pana paṭisandhiyaṃyeva abhāvako uppanno, ayaṃ napuṃsakapaṇḍakoti. Tesu āsittapaṇḍakassa ca usūyapaṇḍakassa ca pabbajjā na vāritā, itaresaṃ tiṇṇaṃ vāritā. Tesupi pakkhapaṇḍakassa yasmaṃ pakkhe paṇḍako hoti, tasmīnyevassa pakkhe pabbajjā vāritāti kurundiyāṃ vuttāṃ. Yassa cettha pabbajjā vāritā, taṃ sandhāya idaṃ vuttāṃ—“anupasampanno na upasampādetabbo upasampanno nāsetabbo”ti. Sopi liṅganāsaneneva nāsetabbo. Ito paraṃ “nāsetabbo”ti vuttasupī eseva nayo.

A ‘paṇḍaka’, monks, means in this case, āsittapaṇḍaka, usūyapaṇḍaka, opakkamikapaṇḍaka, pakkhapaṇḍaka, napuṃsakapaṇḍaka. Five paṇḍakas:

1. āsittapaṇḍaka: a man who gains satisfaction from performing oral sex on another man and from swallowing his semen or who only becomes sexually aroused after swallowing another man’s semen.

<sup>1</sup>Artinger [2020] pages 26–32

<sup>2</sup>Sujato [2009] pages 211–216.

<sup>3</sup>Samantapāsādikā: Vol. V, p. 1015f. Translations/explanations as in Bomhard [2016], Thānissaro [1996] and Artinger [2020] pages 22–23.

2. usūyapaṇḍaka: a voyeur, that is, a person who gains sexual satisfaction from watching others have sex.
3. opakkamikapaṇḍaka: eunuch, due to castration.
4. pakkhapaṇḍaka: those who become sexually aroused in parallel with the phases of the moon.<sup>1</sup>
5. napuṃsakapaṇḍaka: a person born without sexual organs.<sup>2</sup>

Of these, the āsittapaṇḍaka and usūyapaṇḍaka are not prevented from ordination, but the other three are prevented. It is said in the Kurundi [commentary], “of these, the pakkhapaṇḍaka is prevented from ordination in the fortnight in which they are a paṇḍaka.” In this case with regards to those who are prevented from ordination, it is said, “if they are ordained they should be expelled.” He should be expelled just by confiscation of his robe. Hereafter, when it is said that “he should be expelled”, this is the procedure.

The castrated paṇḍaka i.e. a eunuch, is only one of the three types that cannot ordain, which makes it highly unlikely that the word paṇḍaka means ‘eunuch’, at least at the time these five types were defined. We would also not expect a eunuch to have hyperlibidinousness. After all, castrated men were often employed as harem guards just for the reason that they are no longer interested in sexual activity and therefore considered safe. Moreover, the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya treats the castrated man as something other than a paṇḍaka.

However, as we have seen in Tantric Hinduism these men had a social religious function that involved the provision of alternative sexual techniques according to the sacred texts, at least from the middle of the 1st millennium CE or thereafter.

As we have seen in the Jain scriptures, the discussion to overcome the ambiguities in the understanding of the word napuṃsaka resulted over time in changes in meaning and the definition of sub-categories, and I believe this has also occurred in the Buddhist Vinayas with the word paṇḍaka. I believe that it is likely that the term opakkamikapaṇḍaka represented a castrated man, the klība, while the napuṃsakapaṇḍaka was the re-definition of the original paṇḍaka or the ‘female napuṃsaka’ that we saw emerging in the Jain

<sup>1</sup>According to Bomhard [2016], the term pakkhapaṇḍaka (Skt. pakṣapaṇḍaka) probably does not refer, as traditionally understood, to an individual who becomes sexually aroused parallel to the phases of the moon, i.e., to someone who is aroused during the fortnight of either the waxing or waning moon, but to someone “who acts wrongly sexually, who behaves badly sexually.” He hypothesizes that pakkha of the compound pakkhapaṇḍaka should be understood in terms of its alternative meaning ‘a cripple’, and that the corresponding Sanskrit should not be understood as pakṣa but rather phakka (‘cripple’, adj. ‘lame, crippled, maimed’), derived from the Skt. verbal root phakk, “(a) to creep, to steal along; (b) to have a preconceived opinion; (c) to act wrongly, to behave badly.” He thus considers the third meaning of phakk as most relevant to the case at hand.

<sup>2</sup>The Sanskrit equivalent is prakṛtipaṇḍaka. The term prakṛti means something like ‘nature’ or ‘fundamental form’ and the term tṛtīyāprakṛti became the official word for the ‘third sex’ at around the beginning of the Common Era. I therefore do not believe this translation by Thānissaro [1996] to be correct but that the literal meaning reflects more the original meaning of napuṃsaka.

commentarial texts. Also from the Chinese sources it is clear that the person has to be born this way. The pakkhapaṇḍaka is interesting and several explanations have been given by authors over time, none of which I find convincing. Allan Bomhard [2016] advocates that the word pakkha should not be translated as ‘half moon’ but that the meaning of the word is something like a sex-addict. I refute this argument because the characters used to denote this type of paṇḍaka in the Chinese Vinayas of all schools are 半月, which literally means ‘half moon’. It is also mentioned in various Chinese commentarial texts<sup>1</sup> that the ‘half moon’ is ‘not a male’ and thus a form of napuṃsaka for half of the month and the other half he is a male. All texts are consistent in this. As we can still understand the meaning of the other four categories in light of people’s physiology or sexual fetishes, the ‘half-moon’ paṇḍaka is an enigma. Turning back to the Vedic texts however, we find in the Uttarakanda of the Rāmāyaṇam<sup>2</sup> the story of King Ila. In this epic tale the king accidentally stumbles upon the Goddess Pārvatī in intimate embrace with Śiva, who turns him into a woman. Now Ilā, she turns to the Goddess for mercy to restore her manhood but is only granted half her wish, namely that she has to change sex/gender each month. The theme of changing sex and gender based on the phases of the moon is a recurrent theme in the Vedic myths and it is not unlikely that this mythical theme has found its way into the commentaries in the form of the pakkhapaṇḍaka. After all, another rule in the Vinayas of all the schools tells the tale of a shape-shifting serpent, a mythological beast, a Nāga<sup>3</sup>, who ordains as a monk, is later discovered and a new rule is laid down in much the same manner as for the paṇḍaka, barring him and all his kind from ordination. The fabric of myth and reality can easily overlap in Indic culture. The Vinaya is full of various strange and wonderful beings. The Bhikkhu Pā rāji ka 1, the rule against sexual intercourse, mentions that a monk is not allowed to have sex with a list of beings, namely a dragon, a spirit, a ghost and a paṇḍaka.<sup>4</sup> The fact that the paṇḍaka is listed in a list of mythological beings is indicative of its origins and how they were viewed at that time.

We find similar lists in the Vinayas of the other schools. As for the other two types of paṇḍaka, the āsittapaṇḍaka and the usūyapaṇḍaka, who at least in the Theravāda tradition are allowed to ordain, I believe they embody another of the Jain categories, namely the category of the puruṣanapuṃsaka (male napuṃsaka). Although they might be impotent and are therefore also in possession of the female veda, their appearance is male to the lay supporters but also to the celibate monks they live with who are not aroused by their presence. The relaxation of the rules for these two

1 f.i. X44 0744 0432c17 四分律名義標釋

2 Rām 7.78–79. See also Goldman [1993] pages 379–380.

3 Khandhaka 1 Pabbajjā PTS vol 1 pages 86–88.

4 PTS vol. 3 page 37: Tena kho pana samayena aññataro bhikkhu nāgiyā methunaṃ dhammaṃ paṭisevi ...yakkhiniyā methunaṃ dhammaṃ paṭisevi ...petiyā methunaṃ dhammaṃ paṭisevi ...paṇḍakassa methunaṃ dhammaṃ paṭisevi. Tassa kukkuccaṃ ahoṣi ...pe ...“āpattiṃ tvaṃ, bhikkhu, āpanno pārājikaṃ”ti.

types also runs parallel with the development in the Jain scriptures. But unlike the Jains, no further abolishment of this entire rule against the ordination of paṇḍakas was reached simply because the Buddhist scriptures were closed while the Jain scriptures continued to evolve for many centuries thereafter.

One consistent characteristic of the paṇḍaka which we find throughout the Vinayas of all the schools is that they are perceived as troublesome as a monastic because they are unable to maintain their precept of celibacy due to their hyperlibidinous nature. However, the āsittapaṇḍaka and the usūyapaṇḍaka are, judging from their description, far more sexually active than the other three types, yet they are allowed to ordain. This apparent inconsistency shows the prejudiced perception of the paṇḍaka and public opinion based on outside appearances seems to have been an important factor; these two types could not be distinguished from other men based on outside characteristics and did not belong in any of the classes of men who perform the religious sexual duties as we have seen in Tantric Hinduism.

#### 4.3. The Paṇḍaka in the Chinese Vinayas

The first thing that is striking when comparing the various Chinese schools<sup>1</sup> is that there is no clear consistent term that denotes the paṇḍaka. The Mahāsaṅghika and Sarvāstivāda Vinayas use the term 不能男 (impotent lit. incapable) in the descriptions in the first Khandhaka on ordination. In the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya this term is only used in the description of the ‘half-moon’ paṇḍaka. The term 黃門 (‘eunuch’) is used in the Dharmaguptaka and Mahīśāsaka Vinayas while in the Sarvāstivāda Vinaya the term is used everywhere but in the ordination Khandhaka. As both of the terms 不能男 (impotent) and 黃門 (‘eunuch’) are used in the same way in different schools, we can assume that both can denote paṇḍaka but that the difference in terms points to historical changes in understanding and translation.<sup>2</sup>

The translation ‘eunuch’ is a later interpolation due to the etymological development of the Chinese 黃門, meaning ‘yellow gate’ and derived from the palace eunuchs in the Early Han Dynasty,<sup>3</sup> while the word ‘impotent’ seems to be an earlier interpretation and

See Appendix A for details.

<sup>2</sup>Shinsan text X44 0744 0432c13 (四分律名義標釋第 4 卷) 0432c09–0433a01 links both terms: there are five types of 黃門 (lit. yellow gate) and six types of 不能男 (i.e. incapable men), the sixth type being those born from a concubine.

<sup>3</sup>The word 黃門 is translated as ‘eunuch’ but the characters spell a different word, namely ‘yellow gate’. The etymology of the word can be traced back to the Han Dynasty. See Shinsan text X44 0744 0432c09–0433a01: 此翻黃門。阿毗曇。譯為閹人。以無男根故。 “This is a 黃門. Translated as castrated man. Because he has no male roots/faculty.” This tells the story of the imperial ruler who appointed eunuchs to work for him. Yellow is the color of the middle in the ‘Five Directions’ and of the earth in the ‘Five Elements’ and therefore stands for imperial power and state. The color is only used by the emperor and others are not allowed to wear it. Therefore, the palace of the emperor is called the ‘Yellow Gate’. In the Eastern Han Dynasty, the emperor hired eunuchs and they held rather powerful positions as palace guards, scribes and other official functions. They were called the ‘yellow gates’. It is a long story but the

we also find this back in the Vedic scriptures.<sup>1</sup> The Chinese culture was vastly different from the ancient Indian culture and I suspect that their own palace eunuchs were the only thing they could relate to as an explanation of the term paṇḍaka.

Table 1 compares the description of the types of paṇḍaka in the various schools, adding the Sanskrit<sup>2</sup> and Tibetan<sup>3</sup> for reference.<sup>4</sup>

| Theravāda            | Mahāsaṅghika | Dharmaguptaka | Sarvāstivāda | Sanskrit          | Tibetan                   |
|----------------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|-------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. āsittapaṇḍaka     | 4. 因他 種不能男   | 4. 變黃門        | 4. 精 種不能男    | 4. āsekapaṇḍaka   | 'khyud pa'i ma ning       |
| 2. usūyapaṇḍaka      | 5. 妬 種不能男    | 3. 妬黃門        | 3. 妬 種不能男    | 2. irṣyāpaṇḍaka   | phrag dog can gyi ma ning |
| 3. opakkamikapaṇḍaka | 3. 割却 種不能男   | 2. 變黃門        | 5. 病 種不能男    | 5. lūnapaṇḍaka    | bcad pa'i ma ning         |
| 4. pakkhapaṇḍaka     | 6. 半月生者 種不能男 | 5. 半月黃門       | 2. 半月 種不能男   | 3. pakṣapaṇḍaka   | ma ning zla phyed pa      |
| 5. napuṃsakapaṇḍaka  | 1. 生 種不能男    | 1. 生黃門        | 1. 生 種不能男    | 1. prakṛtipaṇḍaka | rang bzhin gyis ma ning   |
|                      | 2. 捺破 種不能男   |               | 1. 生 種不能男??  |                   |                           |

Table 1: The types of paṇḍaka in the various schools.

It is striking that the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya continues to describe several types of castrated men but does not equate these to the term paṇḍaka, while the word used for paṇḍaka is 黃門 (i.e. 'eunuch'), which is the exact definition of a castrated man. The Theravāda and Mahīśāsaka Vinayas agree on the background story and do not mention a list of types of paṇḍakas, but the five types of paṇḍakas are described in the commentaries. The other Vinayas all have a list of paṇḍakas who are not allowed to ordain but some of these types differ from each other or seem to have a different description.

Bhikkhu Sujato<sup>5</sup> also observes that there are various terms where "... a statement on the matter is found explicitly in all or most of the mainland Vinayas, while the Pali Canon is silent, and the judgment is found in the commentary." He therefore concludes that there is an obvious explanation for this pattern, namely that the Pali is earlier. This is also confirmed by Zwilling and Sweet who write: "... both Pali and Sanskrit Buddhism accepted a list of five kinds of paṇḍakas, all of which are known to the brahminical and Jain traditions as varieties of ṣaṇḍas and napuṃsakas; this list seems an obvious later scholastic accretion."<sup>6</sup>

It is therefore likely that at the time when the five types of paṇḍakas were introduced, the Theravāda and Mahīśāsaka Vinayas were already closed and therefore these five types appear in the commentarial text instead.<sup>7</sup>

eunuchs became very powerful and eventually caused the downfall of the Han Dynasty (see Wikipedia).

So 'yellow gate' became a synonym for 'eunuch'.

<sup>1</sup>Zwilling and Sweet [1996] pages 363–364.

<sup>2</sup>Abhidharmakośavyākhyā-Skt: 94, 15–25.

<sup>3</sup>Abhidharmakośavyākhyā-Tib: D, vol. gu, 85b6–86a3; P, vol. cu, 97b2–7.

<sup>4</sup>See itlr.net for details as well a more complete listing of possible meanings and occurrences of these terms.

<sup>5</sup>Sujato [2009] pages 216–217.

<sup>6</sup>Zwilling and Sweet [2000] page 117.

<sup>7</sup>Although the Samantapāsādikā is attributed to Buddhaghosa in the 5th Century CE, this was based

The fact that the descriptions of the five terms do not always seem to match seamlessly between schools and that there are conflicting descriptions of a castrated man in the Dharmaguptaka and Mahīśāsaka Vinayas seems to point to some ambiguity as to the meaning of the term paṇḍaka; it seems that the Chinese scribes were unsure about the exact meaning.

In Appendix B, Figure 7, I have charted the various terms as they appear in the Chinese Taishō Tripiṭaka. Both terms that denote paṇḍaka are most prominent in the Vinaya collections and are also present in the later Abhidhamma and commentaries. This follows the same pattern as we have seen in the Pali and Sanskrit charts (Figures 3–6). The Tibetan charts in Figure 9 also show this pattern.

4.4. Development of the Paṇḍaka in the Scriptures After having looked at the references and descriptions of the word paṇḍaka in Vedic texts, Jain discussions and Buddhist scriptures in both Pali and Chinese, a clearer picture emerges of what the paṇḍaka really is and the reasons behind the Buddhist rules against ordination.

As we have seen in the previous chapter the oldest occurrence of the terms paṇḍaka and klība as sub-categories of the napuṃsaka (‘neither male nor female’) happened just after the late Vedic period. They are the ‘not males’, the ‘impotent’, destined to play a role in the larger fabric of Indian religion, society and culture. They are the embodiment of the feminine in the masculine, a living myth. They are categorised by their feminine behavior and dress, their impotence, and their occupation as religious dancers and singers. They are there to remind us of the deeply ambivalent attitude of men towards women and women’s sexuality; their desire for, and at the same time their fear of the feminine.

Allan Bomhard [2016] points out that the word can be a loan-word from the Dravidian peṇṭan, peṇṭakan, peṇṭakam, which can mean both hermaphrodite and eunuch. This is interesting because it is clear that at least in Dravidian no difference is made between a eunuch and a hermaphrodite and I believe that the way we need to see the term paṇḍaka is indeed as embodying aspects of both these terms.

As none of the words paṇḍaka, klība and napuṃsaka appear in the early Buddhist Suttas or early parts of the Vinaya and seem out of place in the Buddhist scriptures in the light of the Dhamma taught in the overall Canon but are found elsewhere in Jain or other Indic texts, there is a fair chance that these rules in the Vinaya do not originate from the Buddha himself. Most likely the word paṇḍaka entered the Vinaya as part of the redaction during the Second Council, especially since we have seen that this redaction occurred at a time when a wider religious debate with regards to the position of women in religious life

on earlier commentaries, now lost, in Prakrit and Sinhala, which were written down at the same time as the Canon, in the last Century BCE. As we see here, some material in the commentaries is found in canonical texts of other schools, suggesting an early common source.



was taking place.<sup>1</sup> As this discussion hinged on what it means to be a ‘male’ or ‘female’, as a consequence what it means to be ‘neither male nor female’ was discussed also. The Vinaya describes the paṇḍaka as hyperlibidinous and unable to maintain his monastic precepts, which is an idea also found in the Jain texts where it is explained as the result of him possessing both male and female veda. But the Vinaya itself falls short of defining a paṇḍaka as anything else than simply hyperlibidinous and no further explanations are offered.



(a) Palace eunuchs in ancient China

(b) Hijra in India

Figure 1

It is in the later commentaries that we find more of a description in the form of the five types of paṇḍakas. But this also causes further confusion because the concept in its entirety did not seem to be known to the translators of the Chinese texts so they used words they knew from their own culture. There the word paṇḍaka was first translated as ‘impotent’ (不能男) and later as ‘eunuch’ (黃門). The translation ‘eunuch’ however was taken from the words ‘yellow gate’, denoting the Han Dynasty imperial palace eunuchs.

This was possibly the only way that the Chinese could relate to a paṇḍaka, being unfamiliar with the rich religious concept that they embody. It is clear that the Chinese palace

eunuchs cannot be compared to the hijras from India, who are most likely the closest modern-day representative of what the paṇḍakas would have been (see Figure 1). The concept of paṇḍaka does not allow itself to be reduced to a mere word to make it acceptable and understandable for the rational mind. The people this term referred to showed a combination of sex- and gender-characteristics and had a religious (and probably sexual) role in society. They are the divine representation of the feminine within the masculine. It is the human representation of the mythical tales which have deep

<sup>1</sup>Sujato [2009] pages 141–142 and 215–216.

psychological roots, namely the ambivalence that leads to the inner struggle between man's love of the feminine and his fear thereof. The concept of paṇḍaka does not match any contemporary notions. Both the paṇḍaka and the 黃門 only have meaning in the unique social context in which these terms existed and cannot be reduced to their emasculated body nor to any other bodily characteristic.

#### 5. The Ubhatob yañ janaka

In the Theravāda Vinaya Khandhaka 1 we find the following passage:<sup>1</sup>

Tena kho pana samayena aññataro ubhatobyañjanako bhikkhūsu pabbajito hoti. So karotipi kārāpetipi. Bhagavato etamatthaṃ ārocesuṃ. Ubhatobyañjanako, bhikkhave, anupasampanno na upasampādetabbo, upasampanno nāsetabboti. At one time an ubhatob yañ janaka had gone forth as a monk. He had sex and made others have it. They told the Buddha and he said, "An ubhatob yañ janaka should not be given the full ordination. If it has been given, he should be expelled."

Just like with the paṇḍaka, the ubhatob yañ janaka in this passage is already ordained at the time of this incident and in a similar way we can deduce that the rule itself is limited to upasampadā (full ordination) while novice ordination is allowed. The commentarial texts again mention that both are prohibited. And just like with the paṇḍaka we would expect the subject of the story to be expelled on the grounds of breaking the first rule against intercourse, but instead not only he but also all others like him are expelled. Again, there seems to be a prejudiced perception of these individuals as possessing an inherent flaw that makes them unable to keep their precepts. For the term ubhatob yañ janaka<sup>2</sup> we have less material to go on than for the term paṇḍaka. They are only briefly mentioned in the Chinese Vinayas as those with two roots/faculties (二根) who are not allowed to ordain, but without any further explanation. The Therāvada Vinaya merely states that this person "acted and was acted upon". The commentarial literature is slightly more forthcoming but no less confusing as to the meaning of the word. The Samantapāsādikā<sup>3</sup> states<sup>4</sup>:

Ubhatobyañjanako bhikkhaveti itthinimittuppādanakammato ca purisanimit-  
tuppādanakammato ca ubhato byañjanamassa atthīti ubhatobyañjanako. Karotīti

<sup>1</sup>Khandhaka 1 Pabbajā PTS vol 1 page 89, translation by Ajahn Brahmali.

<sup>2</sup>Ubhato meaning 'in both ways, on both sides' and byañjana or vyañjana means 'sign or mark'.

<sup>3</sup>Samantapāsādikā, vol. 3, para. 116. Translation by Ajahn Brahmali.

<sup>4</sup>Note that the word liṅga is not used here. Instead the word nimitta is used to denote 'characteristic of sex/gender'.

purisanimittena itthīsu methunavītikkamaṃ karoti. Kārāpetīti paraṃ samādapetvā attano itthinimittē kārāpeti, so duvidho hoti—itthiubhatobyañjanako, purisaubhatobyañjanakoti. Tattha itthiubhatobyañjanakassa itthinimittam pākaṣam hoti, purisanimittam paṭicchannam. Purisaubhatobyañjanakassa purisanimittam pākaṣam, itthinimittam paṭicchannam. Itthiubhatobyañjanakassa itthīsu purisattam karontassa itthinimittam paṭicchannam hoti, purisanimittam pākaṣam hoti. Purisaubhatobyañjanakassa purisānam itthibhāvam upagacchantassa purisanimittam paṭicchannam hoti, itthinimittam pākaṣam hoti. Itthiubhatobyañjanako sayaṇca gabbham gaṇhāti, paraṇca gaṇhāpeti. Purisaubhatobyañjanako pana sayam na gaṇhāti, paraṃ gaṇhāpetīti, idametaṃ nānākaraṇam. Kurundiyam pana vuttam—“yadi paṭisandhiyam purisaliṅgam pavatte itthiliṅgam nibbattati, yadi paṭisandhiyam itthiliṅgam pavatte purisaliṅgam nibbattati”ti. Tattha vicāraṇakkamo vitthārato aṭṭhasāliniyā dhammasaṅgahaṭṭhakathāya veditabbo. Imassa pana duvidhassāpi ubhatobyañjanakassa neva pabbajjā atthi, na upasampadāti idamidha veditabbam.

The ubhatob yañ janaka means: Because of kamma giving rise to female characteristics and kamma giving rise to male characteristics, there is for them the characteristics of both. With the male characteristic they act to transgress through sexual intercourse with women. Having encouraged another, they cause action in their own female characteristic.

They are twofold: the female ubhatob yañ janaka and the male ubhatob yañ janaka. In regard to this, the female characteristic of the female ubhatob yañ janaka is apparent, but the male characteristic is hidden. The male characteristic of the male ubhatob yañ janaka is apparent, but the female characteristic is hidden. While the female ubhatob yañ janaka is acting with manliness among women, the female characteristic is hidden, whereas the male characteristic is apparent. When the male ubhatob yañ janaka enters the state of a woman for the sake of men, the male characteristic is hidden, whereas the female characteristic is apparent. The female ubhatob yañ janaka becomes pregnant and causes others to become pregnant. The male ubhatob yañ janaka does not become pregnant, but causes others to become pregnant. This is the difference between them.

It is said in the Kurundi [commentary]<sup>1</sup>—“if male characteristics should occur in the rebirth-linking, then female characteristics appear at rebirth, and if female characteristics should occur in the rebirth-linking, then male characteristics appear at rebirth.” In regard to this, as to the details, it is to be

<sup>1</sup>Note that the word used for sex/gender characteristics is liṅga, but the characteristics here are linked to rebirth.

understood according to the Atthasālini, the commentary on the Dhammasaṅgaṇī. And for this twofold ubhatobyañjanaka there is no going forth, nor full ordination. This is to be understood here. The sub-commentary<sup>1</sup> adds the following:<sup>2</sup>

Ubhinnampi cesam ubhatobyañjanakānam yadā itthiyā rāgo uppajjati, tadā purisabyañjanam pākaṭam hoti, itaram paṭicchannam. Yadā purise rāgo uppajjati, tadā itthibyañjanam pākaṭam hoti, itaram paṭicchannam.

For both ubhatob yañ janakas, when lust for a woman arises, then the male characteristic is apparent, whereas the other is hidden, and when lust for a man arises, then the female characteristic is apparent, whereas the other is hidden.

The Chinese equivalent of the Pali Samantapāsādikā can be found in T24 1462: 善見律毘婆沙 3:

There are three kinds of two-facultied people (二根): those who can impregnate and conceive, those who can impregnate but not conceive, and those who cannot impregnate but who can conceive. These three types of people are not allowed to become monks and take the full precepts. If they have already taken the full precepts, they should be expelled.

Other Chinese commentaries have variations of the same passage:<sup>4</sup> It is said that a person has two roots/faculties (二根): male and female. There are three kinds: The first is able to self-reproduce. He can impregnate and conceive. The second can impregnate others but cannot conceive himself. The third type cannot impregnate but he can conceive when impregnated by another.

The Samantapāsādikā identifies two types of ubhatob yañ janakas while the Chinese commentaries identify three. The Samantapāsādikā's explanation is all the more puzzling because it describes the female ubhatob yañ janaka as having apparent female characteristics and the male characteristics hidden, but if they feel attracted to a woman, they seem to be able to hide the female characteristic and make the male characteristic apparent. The opposite is described for a male ubhatob yañ janaka. Moreover the female ubhatob yañ janaka is able to become pregnant but also impregnate others so they become pregnant. This

<sup>1</sup>Vimativinodanī Mahāvaggavaṇṇanā Mahākhandhako Vmv.3.116, translation by Ajahn Brahmali.

<sup>2</sup>Note that again the word liṅga is not used but instead it uses the word byañjana for 'sex/gender characteristic'.

<sup>3</sup>T24 1462 善見律毘婆沙 0792c03–0792c06. 5th Century CE.

<sup>4</sup>See f.i. Shinsan X44 0744 四分律名義標釋 0450b01–0450b04.

last aspect is also mentioned as one of the three types in the Chinese commentaries. The other two types in the Chinese are just described as being able to either get pregnant or impregnate others, just like females and males but with no further explanation as to why they are different from females and males.

Apparently the ability to procreate is very important here and I would like to point out that it is humanly impossible to both conceive and impregnate.<sup>1</sup> However, as we have seen in the Vedic mythology this is a recurrent theme and there are many instances where a person is both mother and father. King Ila himself, in the form of the woman Ilā, becomes pregnant and bears a son. He/she is bound to keep on changing sex/gender which also results in a change in sexual desires. In the Mahābārata Anuśāsanaparvan<sup>2</sup> we find the tale of King Bhaṅgāśvana, who is longing for a son, and performs a divine ritual as a result of which he gets one hundred sons, but in doing so invokes the anger of the god Indra, who turns him into a woman. As a woman she conceives another hundred sons. Also in the Buddhist scriptures, in the story of Sorreya,<sup>3</sup> we find a similar account whereby somebody changes sex and gender involuntarily due to their ‘instant kamma’, triggered by impure thoughts. The difference with the Vedic stories is that the sex-change is attributed to causality and not to a spell or curse. This shows an underlying assumption of gender inequality, namely that the male sex is considered preferable and the result of ‘good kamma’, while the female sex is a result of ‘bad kamma’.

There are also many instances in Vedic mythology where a sex/gender change is a deliberate choice. Gods are able to enact a sex/gender change in others, but also use it themselves for a variety of reasons, most notably for the purpose of sexual intercourse. One well-known story is the story of Kṛṣṇa who transforms himself into a woman in order to marry and have sex with Aravan. This story is reenacted each year by men who dress as women or who are hijras during the thali festival.<sup>4</sup> Another story is recounted in the Mahā Bhāgavata Purāṇa where the gods Śiva and Kālī both change sex/gender in order to experience sexuality from the perspective of the other sex.<sup>5</sup> Another reason for a deliberate sex change is to destroy the power of meditative yogis. Celibate men (and therefore celibate monks) are seen as particularly powerful and can only be defeated if a god changes himself into a female form to seduce them, or he gets a woman to do so for him.<sup>6</sup> The gods Visnu and Śiva (see Figure 2) change sex/gender frequently.<sup>7</sup>

1 In Appendix C, section C.2 I have described our current medical understanding of what it entails to both procreate as a male and a female.

2 MBh 13.12.

3 See Dhammadinnā [2019] for a detailed analysis of this story that appears in the Soreyyattheravattu of the Dhammapada-aṭṭhavaṇṇanā. The Dhammapada-aṭṭhavaṇṇanā was seemingly translated from Pali into Sinhalese by Buddhaghosa on the invitation of an otherwise unknown Kumārakassapa Thera. Buddhaghosa is mentioned as the author in the epilogue of this work at Dhpa IV 235–236.

4 Goldman [1993] page 388 and Nanda [1999] page 21.

5 Doniger O’Flaherty [1982] page 334.

6 See Doniger O’Flaherty [1969] for detailed stories whereby yogis were seduced to break their power.

7 Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty [1982] gives a particularly interesting account on androgyns in the ancient texts. These androgyns can have a large variety of possible characteristics and origins. See for instance pages 261–313 for detailed stories.

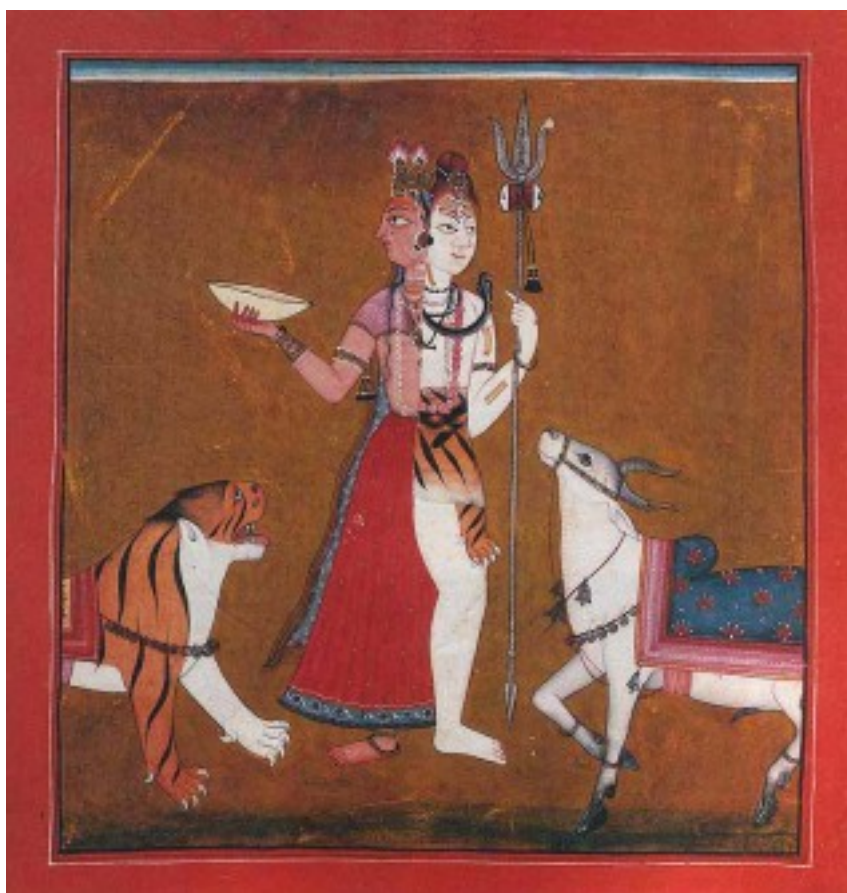


Figure 2: Śiva in their androgynous form of Ardhanārīśwara.

According to Serena Nanda,<sup>1</sup> Tantric Hinduism holds that all people contain both male and female principles within themselves. The Supreme Being is conceptualized as a complete hermaphrodite, which is the ideal. In some sects, males (never females) imitate women in dress and behavior to achieve salvation or to realize the ‘woman’ in themselves in order to reach true love.

The other types of ubhatob yañ janakas mentioned in the commentaries seem to be similar in their ability to have sex as both a male and a female, but being sterile in one of these faculties. Again, this is not something we naturally find in human beings but it is a theme extensively found in the Vedic myths.

The word ubhatob yañ janaka does not appear in any texts outside of the Buddhist Vinaya and the Vinaya commentaries.<sup>2</sup>

It seems however logical that by the sheer definition of the napuṃsaka as ‘anything that is not entirely male or female’ the term ubhatob yañ janaka also falls under this category. As a sub-category of the napuṃsaka they would have been seen as hyperlibidinous, which is explained in later texts by the fact that

<sup>1</sup>Serena Nanda [1999] quotes Bullough pages 21–22.

<sup>2</sup>Appendix B, Figure 5 shows that the word ubhatob yañ janaka does not appear in any Vedic or Brahmanical texts and only appears in the Buddhist texts.

napuṃsakas have both male and female characteristics.<sup>1</sup> The explanation in the commentaries and sub-commentary as mentioned above also shows they are seen as bisexual in nature, similar to what we have seen in the Jain commentarial literature description of napuṃsaka.

The term paṇḍaka as a subset of napuṃsaka was also seen as having both male and female characteristics in the Jain scriptures but is obviously not the same as the ubhatob yañ janaka. The difference between the paṇḍaka and the ubhatob yañ janaka clearly seems to be on the procreative level in that the ubhatob yañ janaka is able to conceive and impregnate while the paṇḍaka, as an impotent man, can do neither. From the descriptions given in the Samantapāsādikā we can also conclude that the ubhatob yañ janaka is able to change their primary and secondary characteristics, including external appearance and behavior to appear to be either male or female. Again, this is not possible outside the realm of mythology.

All the Vinayas agree that the ubhatob yañ janaka/二根 is one of the four sex/gender types next to male, female and paṇḍaka/黃門. Considering that males and females were both seen as having just one root/faculty (in the meaning of procreative ability), and the paṇḍaka as having none<sup>2</sup>, the person with two faculties fills a gap. Bee Scherer notes that this fourfold taxonomy ('male', 'female', 'both ...', 'neither ...') is intended to achieve the Classical Indian (and especially Buddhist) fourfold logical tetralemma called the *catuṣkoṭi*<sup>3</sup> and that the categories of paṇḍaka and ubhatob yañ janaka are largely academic. This might indeed have played a role but I believe there are also other considerations like the fact that these types, either as mythological beings or the enactment thereof, are indeed found in India.

Just like the term paṇḍaka, I believe that the ubhatob yañ janaka is a later addition to the Vinaya. The word only appears briefly in the Vinaya. It does not appear in the early Suttas, or in the Pāṭimokkhas, or in other early parts of the Vinaya.<sup>4</sup> The description is so brief and hardly existent in the Chinese texts that it seems to be added almost as an afterthought. Appendix B, Figure 7, shows that the words used for the ubhatob yañ janaka in the Chinese texts mainly appear in the Vinaya collections T22–T24 and the later Abhidhamma and commentaries as well as most prominently in T54, which

1 As we have seen in chapter 3 it is likely that 'characteristics' are defined as more than merely genital or procreative. Jackson [1996], quoting Bunmi Methangkun (1986) (article in Thai), observes that psychological as well as physiological factors are involved in the constitution of the ubhatob yañ janaka. He also observes (without reference) that in early Buddhist communities men who engage in receptive anal sex are seen as feminized and thought to be hermaphrodites.

2 Note that when the paṇḍaka appears in the texts in the list of these four sex/gender types, it is always described in the Chinese Vinayas with the characters 黃門 ('eunuch') and never as 不能男 ('impotent'). Indeed we find in the Chinese texts that a eunuch is somebody with the 'male faculty' removed. There might be some confusion here as to what entails characteristics and the Chinese scribes would have only been able to describe this based on their own experiences in their own culture.

3 Scherer [2006] page 68 and Dr. M. Vermeulen, whose book on this subject is yet to be published.

4 See Appendix B, Figure 3.

are non-Buddhist texts. And again we see the same pattern in the Tibetan charts in Figure 9. The insertion of this word would have most likely occurred during the redaction of the Vinaya at the Second Council as discussed in the previous chapter. Ubhatob yañ janaka seems to be a rather elusive term that does not allow itself to be captured easily. Various scholars have tried to explain this as a form of intersex<sup>1</sup> for the sole reason that intersex people were previously erroneously called ‘hermaphrodite’ and a hermaphrodite can procreate in both the male and female way as in the description of the ubhatob yañ janaka in the commentaries. This is confusing as a true hermaphrodite does not exist among humans and is distinct from intersex. From the descriptions in the commentaries, the ubhatob yañ janaka is not human in nature. It is a concept, a mythological being, the embodiment of the feminine principle in the male. And just like the paṇḍaka it is likely that there were also people involved in the religious enactment of these mythological tales as we have seen in Tantric Hinduism, which would have included strong sexual motifs.<sup>2</sup>

It is likely that people with ambiguous genital characteristics were among these, as they naturally bear some resemblance to the idealized hermaphrodite Supreme Being, but the concept entailed more than just physical characteristics; it also involved gender-expression and social religious roles. As Robert Goldman [1993] points out: “... the whole phenomenon appears to be deeply bound up with a patriarchal culture’s ambivalent construction of women and their sexuality.” The Vedic stories explore the deep longing of men to be able to conceive and this idea is found in a variety of Indian sources. Again, this is a concept that does not match any contemporary notions.

#### 6. Itthipaṇḍaka, Animittā, Nimittamattā, Vepurisikā

There are various other words mentioned in the ordination procedures for Bhikkhunīs as described in the Theravāda Bhikkhunikkhandhaka that are interesting in this context. The last three of these do not exclude an aspirant from ordination:<sup>3</sup>

itthipaṇḍaka female paṇḍaka

animittā woman who lacks genitals

nimittamattā woman with incomplete genitals

vepurisikā woman who is manlike

The word animittā literally means ‘signless’ and appears a number of times in the Canon but mostly with a different meaning, namely as in animitto (ceto)samādhi, which is translated by Bhikkhu Sujato as ‘signless immersion’, a term used in the context of

<sup>1</sup>For a brief description of the term ‘intersex’ see Appendix C, section C.2.

<sup>2</sup>Nanda [1999] page 22.

<sup>3</sup>Khandhaka 20 Bhikkhunikkhandhaka PTS vol 2 page 271, translated by Ajahn Brahmali.



meditation. In the context of not having genitals, it only appears in the Canon in the Bhikkhunikkhandhaka and as a form of abuse for women in the Bhikkhu Saṃ ghā di sesa 3; never on its own but always in the same sequence of words of which the above are a few. The words nimittamattā and vepurisikā are explained in the Samantapāsādikā:

1

Nimittamattāsīti tava itthinimittam aparipuṇṇam saññāmattamevāti vuttam hoti.

...

Vepurisikāti samassudāṭhikā purisarūpā itthī.

You are a nimittamattā: you have incomplete female characteristics (nimitta), merely a token.

...

Vepurisikā means a woman who has a beard and a mustache like a man.

Table 2 gives an overview of the terms.

| Translation             | Theravāda        | Mahāsaṅghika | Dharmaguptaka | Sarvāstivāda | Mahīśāsaka |
|-------------------------|------------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|------------|
| female paṇḍaka          | itthipaṇḍaka     |              |               |              | 黃門         |
| sterile                 |                  | (石女)         |               | 是不能產         | (石女)       |
|                         | ubhatobyañjanaka |              | 二根            | 二根           |            |
| lacking genitals        | animittā         | 石女           |               |              | 石女         |
| incomplete genitals     | nimittamattā     |              |               |              |            |
| rectovaginal fistula    |                  | 二道通          | 二道合           | 二道合          | 二道合        |
| underdeveloped genitals |                  |              | 道小            | 女根小          | 女根具足       |
| woman who is manlike    | vepurisikā       |              |               |              |            |
| no breasts              |                  | 無乳           | 無乳            | 無乳           |            |
| one breast              |                  | 一乳           | 一乳            | 一乳           |            |

Table 2: The terms for sex/gender non-conforming individuals in the Bhikkhunikkhandhaka in the various schools.

The first three of the above mentioned terms in the Theravāda Bhikkhunikkhandhaka are rather vague in their descriptions. The Chinese texts are not very clear on this point either but the overall questions asked here seem to be mostly to do with menstruation and diseases. At first glance it seems that the rules regarding ordination are trying to make sure that the girl in question is old enough for ordination and not ill. Rules concerning whether or not a girl has breasts can be explained as a question with regards to age, or it can be explained as a question to find out if she has developed the secondary characteristics needed or is possibly intersex. We will never know the true purpose behind

these questions but it is not unlikely that these questions about the development of sexual organs were asked for the sole purpose of establishing age. After all, we also find rules in the Bhikkhunīpātimokkha that prohibit the ordination of married girls under the age of 12.<sup>1</sup> The question about whether a girl is sterile would point to her at least having had one child (how else would they know if she is able to conceive?) but this would seem strange if she wants to enter a celibate Order. It seems likely that the question was intended to establish if she is at least old enough to menstruate. Another possible explanation could be that women who could not conceive would be unable to marry or would be subject to divorce if the marriage remained barren. These women might have been considered outcastes and in order to survive and for protection might have sought refuge in the Saṅgha. The Saṅgha might have therefore established these rules in order to prevent them getting inundated with candidates seeking ordination for the wrong reasons.<sup>2</sup> There are several stories about nuns who sought refuge in the Buddhist or Jain Saṅghas after having been rejected by their husbands or being widowed. We find some of these stories in the Therīgāthā, the Verses of the Senior Nuns, for instance in the story of Isidāsī 3, Candā<sup>4</sup>, and Paṭācārā 5, or in the Jain scriptures in the story of Bhadda Kundalakesa.<sup>6</sup>

These terms hardly appear in any texts or commentaries. Bhikkhu Sujato [2009] argues that the Bhikkhunikkhandhaka, as well as other parts of the Vinaya, are a later addition, possibly dating back to the Second Council and the elusiveness of these terms seems to confirm that. He points out that the Bhikkhunī Vinaya uses its own language and terminology that is often more in line with the Jain terminology and is poorly integrated with the Bhikkhu Vinaya.<sup>7</sup> This could explain the discrepancies we see between the Bhikkhu and Bhikkhunī Vinayas in describing certain words pertaining to sex/gender as used in the ordination procedures. In any case, the variability and vagueness of these terms with reference to sex/gender do not permit a clear picture. It is certain though that the terms paṇḍaka and ubhatob yañ janaka pertained exclusively to male candidates as we have also seen in the Jain Order while the Bhikkhunīs seem to have had their own vocabulary. There are some rare cases of people who were raised from birth as girls that later became assigned as hijra after they failed to develop secondary female sexual characteristics (breast development and menstruation) at puberty.<sup>8</sup> Although there is very little evidence to go on,

<sup>1</sup>Pācittiya 65 Yā pana bhikkhunī ūnad vāda sa vassaṃ gihigataṃ vuṭṭhāpeyya, pācittiyaṃ. (“Should any Bhikkhunī give acceptance to a married woman less than twelve years old, it is to be confessed.”, translation by Thanissaro Bhikkhu)

<sup>2</sup>With sincere gratitude to Ajahn Brahmali for this suggestion.

<sup>3</sup>Thig 15.1.

<sup>4</sup>Thig 5.12.

<sup>5</sup>Hecker [1976].

<sup>6</sup>Hecker [1976].

<sup>7</sup>Sujato [2009] pages 143–145.

<sup>8</sup>Nanda [1999] page 15.

I believe that these cases could possibly be representing the *itthipaṇḍaka*. The term *itthipaṇḍaka* only appears in the Pali scriptures and in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* (黃門女). The latter defines the *itthipaṇḍaka* as either not menstruating or not having a fully formed urinal tract.<sup>1</sup> The *Mahīśāsaka Vinaya* talks about a 黃門 (*paṇḍaka*) without adding the character for ‘female’ (女). We also see a similar idea emerging in Tantric Hinduism<sup>2</sup> where a woman without menstruation is seen as a ‘female eunuch’. At least for *Bhikkhunī* ordination in the Theravāda lineage, the characteristics of an *animittā*, *nimittamattā* or *vepurisikā* do not invalidate an ordination. This is possibly also true in several of the Chinese Vinayas.

## 7. Changing Liṅga

In this chapter I want to pay some special attention to a very interesting passage in the Buddhist Canon. The Theravāda *Vinaya Pā rāji ka 1* describes the curious case where a monk changes *liṅga* and is thereafter seen as a woman. She is then admitted into the *Bhikkhunī* Order. The same is repeated for a nun who changes *liṅga* and is from that moment on a *Bhikkhu*.<sup>3</sup>

Tena kho pana samayena aññatarassa bhikkhuno itthiliṅgaṃ pātubhūtaṃ hoti. Bhagavato etamatthaṃ ārocesuṃ. “Anujānāmi, bhikkhave, taññeva upajjhaṃ tameva upasampadaṃ tāniyeva vassāni bhikkhūhi saṅgamituṃ. Yā āpattiyo bhikkhūnaṃ bhikkhūhi sādharmaṇā tā āpattiyo bhikkhūnaṃ santike vuṭṭhātuṃ. Yā āpattiyo bhikkhūnaṃ bhikkhūhi asādharaṇā tāhi āpattihi anāpatti”ti.

Tena kho pana samayena aññatarissā bhikkhuniyā purisaliṅgaṃ pātubhūtaṃ hoti. Bhagavato etamatthaṃ ārocesuṃ. “Anujānāmi, bhikkhave, taññeva upajjhaṃ tameva upasampadaṃ tāniyeva vassāni bhikkhūhi saṅgamituṃ. Yā āpattiyo bhikkhūnaṃ bhikkhūhi sādharmaṇā tā āpattiyo bhikkhūnaṃ santike vuṭṭhātuṃ. Yā āpattiyo bhikkhūnaṃ bhikkhūhi asādharaṇā tāhi āpattihi anāpatti”ti.

At one time the *liṅga* of a woman appeared on a monk. They told the Master. He said: “Monks, I allow that very discipleship, that very ordination, those years as a monk, to be transferred to the nuns. The monks’ offenses that are in common with the nuns are to be dealt with in the presence of the nuns. For the monks’ offenses that are not in common with the nuns, there’s no offense.”

<sup>1</sup>IT24 1451 根本說一切有部毘奈耶雜事 0364b16 and 0364b27. With much gratitude to Dr. Hsiao-Lan Hu for pointing this out.

<sup>2</sup>Nanda [1999] pages 21–22.

<sup>3</sup>Translation by Ajahn Brahmali, *Pā rāji ka 1*, PTS Vol. 3, page 35.

At one time the *liṅga* of a man appeared on a nun. They told the Master. He said: “Monks, I allow that very discipleship, that very ordination, those years as a nun, to be transferred to the monks. The nuns’ offenses that are in common with the monks are to be dealt with in the presence of the monks. For the nuns’ offenses that are not in common with the monks, there’s no offense.”

The appearance of this passage in *Pārājika 1* is a bit odd. This rule is to do with sexual intercourse and obviously a change of characteristics has nothing much to do with that. It is likely that this passage was added later. The same passage is found in the texts of several of the Chinese schools<sup>1</sup> but in a different section, namely below the passages on ordination. This seems more logical as there is a question implied here about ordination, namely if (s)he needs to re-ordain or needs a new preceptor. Again the Chinese characters are confusing here, mixing up the characters for ‘root’ and ‘shape’, which seem to be used as synonyms.

The Buddha seems to handle this rather curious matter in a very matter-of-fact way. The monastic in question is simply assigned to the other Order while keeping their years of seniority as well as their preceptor. It does not seem to be a problem at all. He simply responds in the compassionate way we would expect.

In regards to this passage in the *Vinaya*, Carol Anderson<sup>2</sup> argues that this actually refers to the possibility of biological sex change as well as a change of gender characteristics on the basis that both the canonical passage as well as the commentaries interpret the word *liṅga* to refer to both the biological sex as well as gender-expression. The distinction between anatomical sex and gender (either social roles or personal identification based on an internal awareness) that we have today is not made in ancient India. The section on the monk changing *liṅga* is discussed in the *Samantapāsādikā* and its Chinese equivalent (T24 1462 善見律毘婆沙). The most striking thing about the commentarial explanation is that the change in *liṅga* happens overnight and might also revert back. In fact the monastic in question can revert back and forth several times. This is something that is attributed to *kamma*.<sup>3</sup> A likely explanation of this passage is that we are dealing here with a highly academic stance with the aim of explaining something that was not well understood at the time the commentary was written. Carol Anderson argues

<sup>1</sup>This passage possibly appears in all of the Chinese schools but I have been unable to locate it.

<sup>2</sup>Anderson [2016b].

<sup>3</sup>Heirman [2012] page 430 notes that when asleep one loses control and this can lead to shameful situations. Therefore, sexual misconduct can happen during sleep like erotic dreams or the emission of semen. Another possible explanation could be due to sexual orientation. The commentaries mention that this happens when the monk is sleeping under the same roof as another monk (at least before they go to sleep) and the reverse case for a nun. If in such a case an erotic dream occurs that has to do with this other monk (/nun) i.e. same-sex attraction and the word *liṅga* also includes what is described as *veda* by the Jains, it is possible that what we have here is that this same-sex attraction is seen as a female characteristic.

that the commentarial passage can be seen as a teaching mechanism to illustrate that male characteristics are a result of good kamma in past lives while female characteristics are a result of bad kamma. This patriarchal stance is found in all Buddhist traditions so is not entirely unexpected. To conclude, we can merely say that this passage is important but also raises questions. Its position near the bottom of Pārājika 1 and in the sections on ordination in the Chinese Vinayas seem to point to a later inclusion, similar to other passages found in the Vinaya that have to do with gender non-conforming individuals. The question remains as to what has changed exactly. As discussed in chapter 3 I believe that the term *liṅga* refers to a combination of sexual characteristics and gender-expressions i.e. what a person sees when they decide if this is a man, a woman or neither. There is no indication that the Buddhists followed the Jains in including sexuality in this term and monastics have already given up gendered attire and shaved their heads. Therefore the change of *liṅga* in this passage must refer to physical characteristics like breasts, genitals, body hair, etc. as well as to gender-expressions like behavior. In a time when Hormone Replacement Therapy and surgery were not available it does not seem to be likely that anybody just changed sex from one day to the next. One possible explanation can be found in the rare case where somebody is raised as a boy or girl but during puberty turns out to be the opposite when sex markers become more apparent. We know from the Vinaya that children were ordained very young and before puberty. This could be an indication that what we now define as intersex was not seen as an obstacle to ordination. Although the monastic in question in this passage changes *liṅga*, they also seem to be different from an *ubhatob yañ janaka*. After all, they are allowed to stay in robes and their change of *liṅga* is not treated as anything special.<sup>1</sup> This is all the more evidence that the term *ubhatob yañ janaka* does not mean what we know today as intersex, nor transgender. The *ubhatob yañ janaka* is described as hyperlibidinous and being able to change characteristics at will for the purpose of sexual intercourse, while the monastic in this passage is obviously quite keen to stay celibate and practice as a monastic. The aspect of intention is important here as the monastic in this story is not in control of the change.

<sup>1</sup>Note that in this passage the change mentioned is a change of *liṅga* while the *ubhatob yañ janaka* is described as changing *nimitta* or *byañjana* and *liṅga* is only mentioned in relation to rebirth, quoting a commentary to the *Abhidhamma*. I have used these terms as synonyms throughout to describe sex/gender characteristics but it might be that there is a more subtle difference. In the Chinese Vinayas the same character is used in both cases.

## 8. Conclusion

I started my analysis by pointing out that a translation of the terms paṇḍaka and ubhatob yañ janaka based on a modern understanding of concepts is problematic and has led to the exclusion of transgender and intersex people from ordination.

Not only is the meaning of these terms not well understood, they have most likely been included in the Vinaya during the Second Council after the Buddha's death as the result of a wider religious debate with regards to the position of women in the Buddhist and Jain Orders. This hinged on the identification of the signs to designate somebody as a female, which logically also led to the examination of what is male, and 'neither male nor female'.

In this paper I have shown that the terms paṇḍaka and ubhatob yañ janaka are very likely to have deep roots in Vedic mythology and the religious enactment of that mythology by real people in sects and rituals, often involving sexual practices. The people involved in these practices were perceived as 'not male' due to a combination of physical sex-characteristics and gender-expressions and were attributed with a hyperlibidinous nature due to the role they had to play in society.

Over thousands of years people in different parts of the Buddhist world have been trying to find explanations and interpretations of these words based on their own culture and society. However very little research has been done as to the actual meaning of these words at the time of the Buddha and shortly thereafter as well as the influence of other Orders like the Jains. We saw that the Chinese scribes, who translated the Vinaya, could only make sense of these words using a concept they knew in that culture, namely their own imperial palace eunuchs from the Han Dynasty, a concept which is vastly different from what the term paṇḍaka is trying to convey. It would equally be a mistake for us to try and interpret these words in terms of 'transgender' or 'intersex', terms we are familiar with in our Western culture. The paṇḍaka and ubhatob yañ janaka belong in a time and place where the fabric of reality and mythology were woven into each other in a way that is daunting for our Western rational minds. For thousands of years various authors have attempted to solve the inherent ambiguities in these terms, in commentarial texts and sub-commentaries, up to the present day. The truth is that the full meaning of these terms cannot be captured in single words or phrases based on modern concepts and any interpretation of these terms will always be flawed. The only thing we can say for certain is that the paṇḍaka and the ubhatob yañ janaka are seen as problematic as candidates for ordination because they are unable to keep their precept of celibacy. This is also confirmed by the Chinese commentaries<sup>1</sup> as well as indicated in the origin stories. The idea that they are a threat to celibate monks because the monks might be attracted to them is not supported by the Buddhist origin stories,

<sup>1</sup> T85 2792 毘尼心 0667b25-0667c05.

but could possibly be inferred from the mythological stories where shape-shifting gods seduce celibate yogis.

The main, and only, undisputed criterion for not allowing ordination to certain individuals is their difficulty in keeping the precepts. This is a fair reason for barring somebody from ordination. All criteria based on perceived or imagined sex/gender characteristics that might or might not be part of a paṇḍaka or ubhatob yañ janaka are not fair reasons.

Transgender and intersex people are generally not hyperlibidinous and are just as able to keep the precepts as anyone else. It is therefore unfair, even cruel, to deny ordination to otherwise eligible individuals on the basis of a very limited and a most likely erroneous understanding of these terms, even more so because we know with a fair amount of certainty that they were inserted into the Vinaya after the Buddha's passing away, most likely influenced by discussions with other religious traditions which were held in a male patriarchal system where the fear of the feminine, and thus everything that is seen as 'not-male' is paramount. The wholesome aspiration to ordain and practice in line with the Dhamma is something that needs to be encouraged, not disparaged. Ordination as a monastic is not a right to be acquired to become part of an elite group through an initiation ritual. It is to be welcomed if someone feels inspired to play a part in the propagation of the Dhamma and to help safeguard it for future generations.

I certainly do not wish to justify ignoring any of the rules in the Vinaya. But this is an instance where contemporary social conventions are simply not covered by any of the Vinaya rules. We never before had the medical knowledge about intersex or the ability to change sex with Hormone Replacement Therapy and surgery. In such a case we must not question how to make the Vinaya rules apply to the convention, but whether such rules apply at all. When the application of such a rule causes unnecessary suffering on the basis of very feeble arguments, I think it is unjust to do this. Regardless of how the Vinaya is interpreted, the doctrine of anattā (non-self), which is fundamental to all Buddhist schools, denies that there is an identity or lasting entity at the center of any being. So this makes sex and gender differences at the deepest level a superficial factor just like race, ethnicity, appearance or social status. Therefore to deny anybody ordination on the basis of this is in itself against the Dhamma.

In speaking with Buddhist monastics the question often arises as to which Saṅgha, Bhikkhus or Bhikkhunīs, a transgender or intersex person should ordain into and as such also according to which ordination procedure. This question emerges from the distinct binary structure of the Buddhist institution that reflects a society vastly different from our Western one. This might have been appropriate at the time of the Buddha, but it is not necessarily appropriate for our current time and place and we will have to rethink how we deal with these issues. I therefore think we should leave such questions to the individuals involved based on their gender-experience in consultation with the members of the community they wish to ordain into. The Vinaya has given us an example where the person could simply live in the Saṅgha according to their own gender-experience<sup>1</sup> where they could practice in a way that was most appropriate to them in order to get the best possible opportunities to eradicate defilements and practice the teachings. As I have outlined in this article, in ancient India there was a lively debate with regards to the characteristics that make up a 'man' or a 'woman' and these are not so clear-cut and also not limited to primary sex characteristics. There are however many variables involved and in which community a person would benefit most is not a question that is easy to answer and should be carefully considered on a case-by-case basis. The preservation of the religious institution and its public image is an important reason for the establishment of the Vinaya.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>IPTS vol. 3 page 35. See also chapter 7.

<sup>2</sup>Brenna Artinger [2020] cites Shayne Clarke, page 66.

As Buddhism has spread across the world and across many socio-cultural environments, the challenge for the institution is to maintain its integrity while at the same time acknowledge the socio-cultural differences in the environments it operates in, the people who support it and to whom it aims to provide a refuge from suffering. Unfortunately we see all too often that people in Western cultures, already disillusioned with religion due to the scandals, misogyny and sexism in the Catholic Church, turn away from Buddhism and the Dhamma because they are unable to reconcile the inclusive nature of the teachings with yet another rigid patriarchal institution that seems out of place in the modern Western world. If we are not careful in addressing these issues we may end up damaging the reputation of the Saṅgha, which we aimed to preserve.

Article 1 of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights reads: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”. Denying ordination on the basis of sex or gender is against basic human rights and as Buddhists it is not only our duty to ensure the ethical standards that are expected of us in our society, but also to be the living examples of the Buddha’s compassion for all beings.

As Buddhists who espouse the ideal of unconditional loving kindness and respect, judging people on their behavior instead of their birth, we should be well positioned to show leadership on the development of gender equality in the modern world and the consequent reduction of suffering for half the world’s population. Moreover, if Buddhism is to remain relevant and grow, we must address these issues head on. But how can we speak about gender equality when some of our own Theravāda Buddhist organizations are gender biased? Ajahn Brahmavaṃso

## 9. Gratitude

When writing this paper I have had help and input from so many friends. It became clear to me how important this issue is for so many people and I feel very grateful that I have had the opportunity and time to dedicate to this worthwhile cause.

I wish to especially thank my Spiritual Advisor, Ven. Anandabodhi Bhikkhunī, who has helped me to understand my own spiritual journey as a queer female monastic in a conservative and patriarchal Buddhist Saṅgha. I also thank my good friends Ayya Yeshe Chödrön and Ven. Akālika Bhikkhu, who have always stood by me, encouraged me to do this research and in fact are the impetus for it. With regards to the practical work on this paper, I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude to Ven. Ajahn Brahmali Bhikkhu for his input, translations, discussions and feedback, to Brenna Artinger for their thorough research, to Dr. Hsiao-Lan Hu for research and feedback with regards to the Chinese texts and to Derek Sola for proofreading.

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And lastly, I wish to thank all the people, and in particular the LGBTIQ+ community and other female monastics, who have supported me as a monastic for many years and whose stories have touched me deeply.

## A. Sex and Gender Non-Conformity in the Chinese Vinayas of the Different Schools

### A.1. Mahāsaṅghika Vinaya

The Mahāsaṅghika Vinaya Bhikkhu Pakiṇṇaka describes an occasion where some monks feel groping at night and after catching the culprit, a monk, he admits to being a 非男非女 i.e. ‘neither male, nor female’.<sup>1</sup> They report this to the Buddha, who tells them there are six types of ‘not males’ (不能男者有六種)<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>IT22 1425 摩訶僧祇律 0417c14-0418a10.

<sup>2</sup>摩訶僧祇律: 生不能男、捺破不能男、割卻不能男,因他起不能男、妬不能男、半月不能男



(lit. those we are not capable/impotent).

The Buddha lays down a rule that none of these should be ordained and those already ordained should be expelled.

1. Those who are born impotent (生).
2. Those who are born from a concubine (捺破).<sup>3</sup>
3. A castrated impotent man (割却). 4
4. A transformed impotent man who is aroused by the touch of others but cannot ejaculate (因他).<sup>5</sup>
5. A jealous impotent man who is a voyeur and becomes aroused when watching others have sex (妬).
6. A 'half-moon' impotent man (半月生者) (the description of what this is exactly is unclear).

The term 非男非女 (neither male nor female) is only used by the paṇḍaka to describe himself in this Vinaya. This could be a literal translation of the term napuṃsaka as in Vedic India this is an umbrella term, which includes the paṇḍaka. The hijras of India also refer to themselves with this term. The term 二根 (i.e. 2 roots/faculties) is mentioned in passing as a question for Bhikkhu ordination but without further explanation.<sup>6</sup> The term 黃門 (translated as 'eunuch'<sup>7</sup>) is also mentioned here without further explanation.

<sup>3</sup> This is the only place in the Canon where this is mentioned. Dr. Hsiao-Lan Hu remarks: “捺破 者,妻妾生兒,共相妬嫉,小時捺破,是名捺破,” seems to suggest that 捺破 is a condition caused by wives and concubines being so jealous of one another for bearing male heirs that they deliberately caused damage to another's son's genitalia (testicles, rather than penis, it seems) when he was young.

<sup>4</sup> This person is castrated as a punishment by the king's minister (割却男根 lit. cut root/faculty of masculinity).

<sup>5</sup> This is a very free translation based on other texts where this type is mentioned.

<sup>6</sup> T22 1425 摩訶僧祇律 0413c02.

<sup>7</sup> In the remainder of this appendix I will use the translation 'eunuch' (in quotation marks) as the official translation of 黃門 according to the dictionary. I refute this translation as too narrow and probably erroneous in chapter 4.3.

Another term used in Pārājika 2 1 is 二形 ('two shapes'). There seems to be some confusion between two terms: 二根 ('two roots/faculties') and 二形 ('two shapes') that are sometimes used as synonyms in different places. Other words we find in the Bhikkhū ordination procedure are those who have no breasts (無乳) or just one breast (一乳) or those who have no vagina (石女).<sup>2</sup> In this procedure it is mentioned that the candidate can proceed if she does not suffer from these conditions.<sup>3</sup> We also find a question about whether or not she has a rectovaginal fistula (二道通).<sup>4</sup>

## A.2. Dharmaguptaka Vinaya

In the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya Pabbajja Khandhaka the story is similar to that in the Theravāda Vinaya. A 'eunuch' (黃門) is ordained and then tries to have sex with monks and novices but is rebuked. He ends up having sex with cowherds and shepherds. The story is brought to the Buddha who lays down the rule that all 'eunuchs' have to be expelled and cannot ordain. He identifies five types of 'eunuch':<sup>5</sup>

1. Those born as a 'eunuch' (生黃門).
2. A castrated 'eunuch' (犍黃門).<sup>6</sup>
3. A jealous 'eunuch' (妬黃門), who is aroused at the sight of others having sex.
4. A transformed 'eunuch' (變黃門). Transformed means while committing a sexual act with another, he loses male sexual function, and thereby becomes a paṇḍaka.
5. A 'half-moon' 'eunuch' (半月黃門), having male sexual function for half a month, and being impotent for the other half of the month.<sup>7</sup>

The regular list of persons not to be ordained is given, using the word 二形 ('two shapes'), translated by BTC [2015] as 'hermaphrodite', while in other places in the Vinaya it uses 二根 ('two roots/faculties').

After this list the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya adds the story of a monk and nun respectively who change sex/gender as mentioned in the Theravāda Pārājika 1. The Buddha concludes

1 T22 1425 摩訶僧祇律 0244a24.

2 Dr. Hsiao-Lan Hu translates 石女 as 'having no vagina' but the dictionary entry in [www.buddhism-dict.net](http://www.buddhism-dict.net) translates it as 'barren' or 'sterile'.

3 T22 1425 摩訶僧祇律 0472b05-0472b10.

4 The commentary T24 1462 善見律毘婆沙 0763 explains: “二道者,穀道水道” – “The two tracts are the solid tract and the liquid tract.”

5 Translation by BTC [2015]. T22 1428 四分律 0812b23-0812c10.

6 Lit. a bullock-'eunuch'.

7 The word 不能男 (i.e. incapable/impotent) is used here just like in the Mahāsaṅghika and Sarvāstivāda Vinayas.

that they can simply go to the other Order and do not need to be expelled.<sup>1</sup> Again, the word used here for sex/gender characteristics is 形 (i.e. form or shape). The next paragraphs list the case of a monk and nun respectively who changed sex/gender to become 男女二形 i.e. both male and female. The Buddha mentions that they have to be expelled.

The Dharmaguptaka Vinaya proceeds to list details of monks who have been castrated through various causes.<sup>2</sup> Obviously these are not seen as falling under the same category as the above mentioned ‘eunuch’. When castration happens through an accident or even when it happens through karmic causes, the monk in question can remain, but if he causes the castration intentionally himself he is expelled. Here the phrase is 截其男根 (lit. Cut off the male root/faculty).

While in the Mahāsaṅghika Vinaya one who is castrated (i.e. with the cutting off of the male root/faculty 男根) is seen as an impotent man and thus not fit for ordination, here this only matters when the action is voluntary and not accidental. In the Bhikkhunī ordination procedure we find the person with two faculties (二根) and the person with rectovaginal fistula (二道合). In the same sequence we find the word 道小, which is translated by BTC [2015] as ‘underdeveloped genitalia’.<sup>3</sup> Unlike in the Theravāda Vinaya, this condition would lead to disqualification from ordination.<sup>4</sup> Further down a separate clause is added for those who have no breasts (無乳) or just one breast (一乳), who are equally barred from ordination.<sup>5</sup>

### A.3. Mahīśāsaka Vinaya

The story in the Mahīśāsaka Vinaya Pabbajjā Khandhaka<sup>6</sup> is similar to the Theravāda Vinaya. A ‘eunuch’ (黃門) is ordained and proceeds to try and have sex with various monks, novices and others. As a result he is expelled together with others like him. Just like in the Theravāda Vinaya, there is no mention here of several types of paṇḍakas/‘eunuchs’. At the end of the expulsion spoken by the Buddha, it is simply mentioned that the same holds true for those with ‘two roots/faculties’ (二根) without further explanation of what this is.

The story of the monk who became a woman and was allowed to live with the nuns thereafter is also mentioned here and also the opposite case of a nun who became a man. The next paragraph is dedicated to a monk who, due to his great lust, self-castrated and

1 T22 1428 四分律 0813b15–0813b23. The commentary X55 0884: 表無表章 栖翫記 0230c22–0231a09 explains that there is no need for re-ordination in this case.

2 T22 1428 四分律 0813b25–0813c04.

3 T22 1428 四分律 0924c20.

4 The disqualification from ordination of the 二根 and 二道合 is confirmed in Bhikkhunī Vibhaṅga, Pācittiya 166–167, T22 1428 四分律 0773c21–0774b03.

5 T22 1428 四分律 0926c20–0926c21.

6 T22 1421 彌沙塞部和醯五分律 0117c29–0118a05.

as a result was expelled.<sup>1</sup>

In the Bhikkhunī ordination procedure we find another few terms in the questions asked during the ritual.<sup>2</sup>

It asks if a woman has no vagina (石女),<sup>3</sup> if she is not a ‘eunuch’ (黃門) and if her female genitals (root/faculty) are developed (女根具足). Here it is not specifically mentioned that somebody is barred from ordination if the answer is affirmative.

#### A.4. Sarvāstivāda Vinaya

The story in the Sarvāstivāda Vinaya Pabbajjā Khandhaka<sup>4</sup> also tells of a monk who groped other monks at night which caused problems and started rumors. Again, the Buddha identifies five types of 不能男 (impotent males). All of these are not allowed to ordain and are expelled if already ordained:

1. Those born impotent (生) (here possibly defined as a bastard).
2. A ‘half-moon’ impotent man (半月), who is impotent for half of the month.
3. A jealous impotent man (妬), who likes to see others engage in sex.
4. A transformed impotent man who is aroused by the touch of others but cannot ejaculate (精).<sup>5</sup>
5. A castrated impotent man (病).<sup>6</sup>

In another part of the Vinaya this term 二根 (two roots/faculties) is used next to the term 黃門 (‘eunuch’) but not in relation to ordination. Pārājika 1 (just like the Pārājika 1 of all the schools) mentions the existence of four kinds of offender: men, women, 黃門 (‘eunuch’) and 二根 (two roots/faculties). The same two words are used elsewhere in the Sarvāstivāda Vinaya while the word 不能男 (impotent) is only used in the list for those who cannot ordain. The Bhikkhunī Khandhaka goes more into detail about those who cannot ordain. The 二根 (two roots/faculties) is mentioned here.<sup>7</sup>

1 T22 1421 彌沙塞部和醯五分律 0119a11–0119a28. Unlike in the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya, the character 根 (root or faculty) is used here for the monk/nun who changes sex/gender while the word 形 (shape or form) is used for the monk who castrates himself.

2 T22 1421 彌沙塞部和醯五分律 0187c21–0187c29.

3 Translated elsewhere as ‘barren/sterile’.

4 T23 1435 0153b18–0153c17. 說一切有部《十誦律》:生不能男、半月不能男、妬不能男、精不能男、病不能男

5 “精不能男” is described as “因他人姪,身身分用,是精不能男.” Dr. Hsiao-Lan Hu remarks: “I think this is the equivalent of “因他起不能男” in the Mahāsaṅghika Vinaya. ‘精’ refers to ‘semen’.”

6 “若朽爛、若墮、若虫噉,是病不能男” – “if it is rotten, if it fell off, if it got bit off by wild animals (in classical Chinese, tiger is often referred to as ‘大虫’).” So 病不能男 is similar to ‘割卻不能男’ in the Mahāsaṅghika Vinaya (except for self-castration) or ‘形殘黃門’.

7 T23 1435 0294a23–0294a28.

A similar list of questions is asked of female candidates for ordination as with the other schools. The candidate is to be asked if she has underdeveloped genitalia (女根小) (lit. small female root/faculty), has no breasts (無乳) or just one breast (一乳) and if she is sterile (是不能產). It seems however that regardless of the answer, the candidate is not barred from ordination.<sup>1</sup>

With regards to the five types of 黃門, the Chinese commentarial texts merely add that these people cannot ordain because they have difficulty keeping the precepts.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>T23 1435 0332b11–0332b22.

<sup>2</sup>T85 2792 毘尼心 0667b25–0667b26.

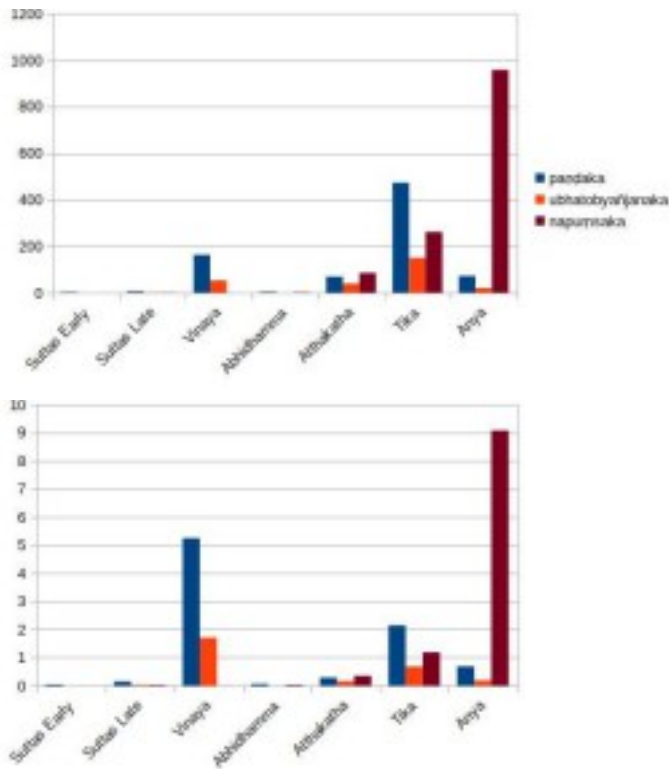
## B. Word Frequency

The following charts show how often some of the words related to ‘third sex/gender’ and to ‘sex/gender-characteristics’ are used in the Pali Canon and commentaries as well as in the Sanskrit, Chinese and Tibetan texts. In the Figures, the (b) charts show the relative number of words. This takes into account the size of the specific parts of the Canon and Commentaries.<sup>1</sup>

### B.1. Words denoting gender-nonconforming individuals

#### Pali Canon and Commentaries

The Pali charts use the data from the BuddhaNexus.net database, which comprises the data from SuttaCentral.net and VRI–Vipassana Research Institute.



<sup>1</sup>The total number of words in a collection is divided by the total number of characters in that collection times 10<sup>5</sup> (Pali and Tibetan) and 1011 (Sanskrit). For the Chinese no charts are given for the relative number of words because there was no significant difference with the charts for the total number of words. For the Tibetan no charts are given for words relating to the characteristics of sex/gender due to a lack of data.

(a) Total number of words. (b) Relative number of words.

Figure 3: Words denoting gender-nonconforming individuals in the Pali Canon and Commentaries.

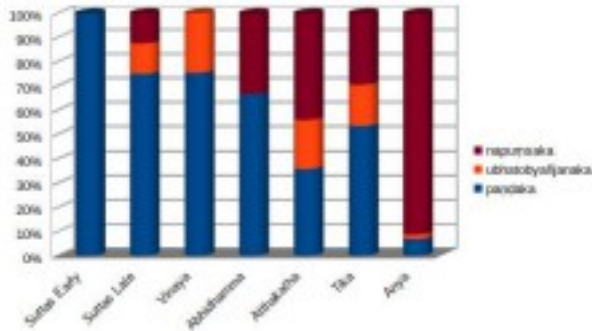
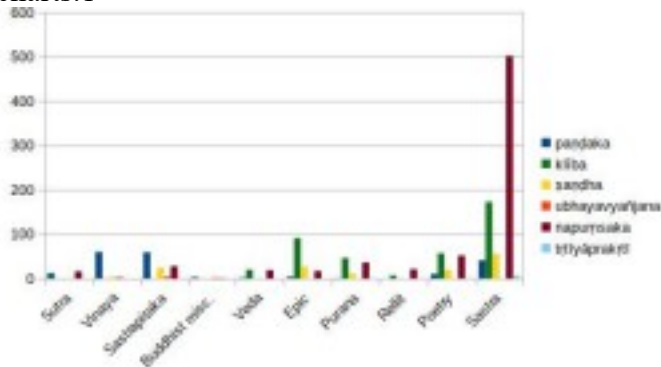


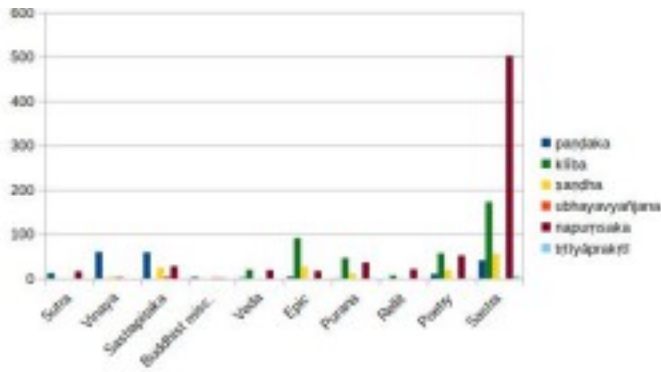
Figure 4: Relative importance of words within each collection (as a percentage).

Sanskrit Buddhist and Vedic Canon and Commentaries

The Sanskrit charts use the data from

the BuddhaNexus.net database, which comprises the data from GRETIL–Göttingen Register of Electronic Texts in Indian Languages. The data from the DSBC–Digital Sanskrit Buddhist Canon is not included in these charts because they largely overlap with the GRETIL data which would result in double entries. Unlike the texts in the Pali, Chinese and Tibetan canons, the GRETIL data used for the Sanskrit charts does not comprise the entire Buddhist Canon. They are also not ordered by approximate lateness. The Vedic/Brahmanical texts are also included in these charts.<sup>1</sup>





(a) Total number of words. (b) Relative number of words.

Figure 5: Words denoting gender-nonconforming individuals in the Sanskrit Buddhist and Vedic Canon and Commentaries.

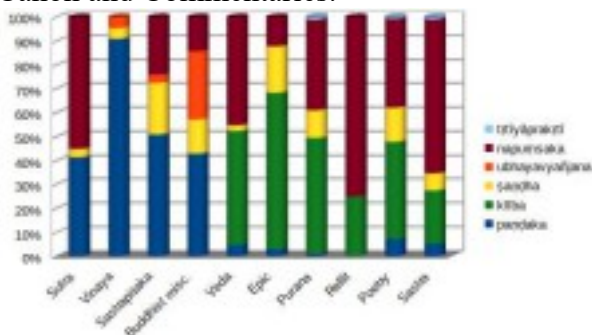


Figure 6: Relative importance of words within each collection (as a percentage).

Note that the prominence of the relative number of words in the category 'Buddhist Misc.' is mainly due to the very small size of this category.

### Chinese Buddhist Taishō Canon

The Chinese charts use the data from the BuddhaNexus.net database, which comprises the data from CBETA–Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association.

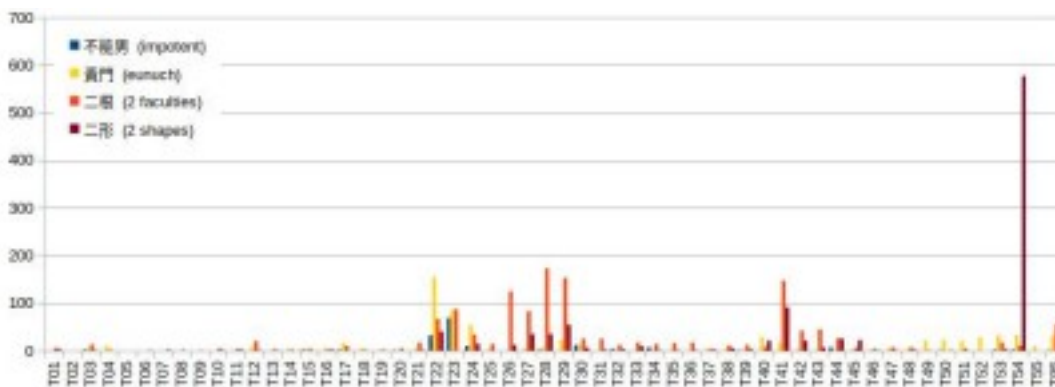


Figure 7: Total number of words denoting gender-nonconforming individuals in the Chinese Taishō



Canon.

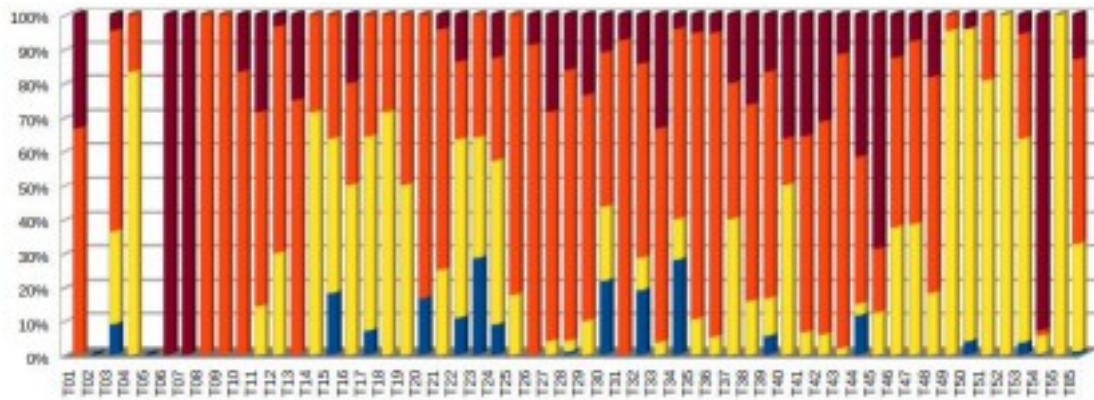
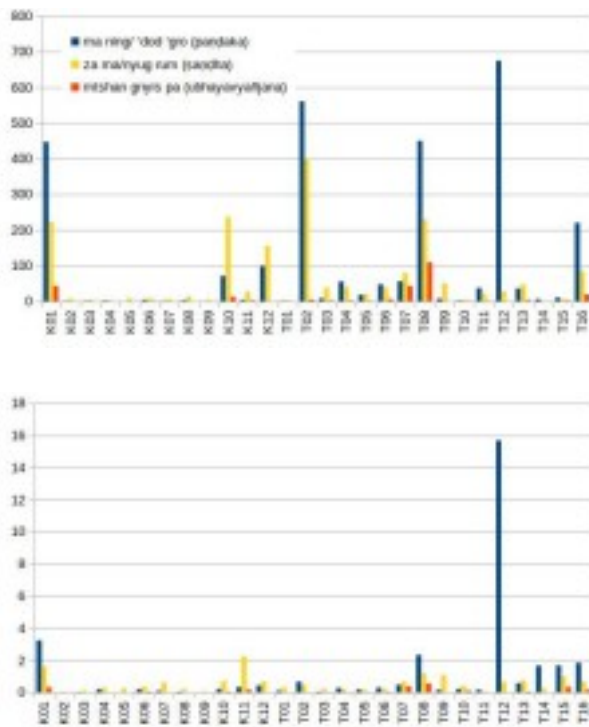


Figure 8: Relative importance of words within each collection (as a percentage).

Tibetan Buddhist Kangyur and Tengyur Canon

The Tibetan charts use the data from the BuddhaNexus.net database, which comprises the data from ACIP–Asian Classics Input Projects and BDRC–Buddhist Digital Resource Center.



(a) Total number of words. (b) Relative number of words.

Figure 9: Words denoting gender-nonconforming individuals in the Tibetan Kangyur and Tengyur Canon.

[Something was missing in the original file]

Figure 10: Relative importance of words within each collection (as a percentage).

## B.2. Words denoting sex/gender-characteristics

In order to get an idea as to the frequency in which certain words are used to denote sex/gender characteristics as opposed to general characteristics I have used the prefixes itthi ('female' Skt. strī, Chn. 女) and purisa ('male' Skt. puruṣa, Chn. 男).

### Pali Canon and Commentaries

[The pictures are missing in the original file]

(a) Total number of words. (b) Relative number of words.

Figure 11: Words denoting sex/gender-characteristics in the Pali Canon and Commentaries.

Figure 12: Relative importance of words within each collection (as a percentage).

(a) Liṅga in relation to words denoting sex/gender-characteristics.

(b) Byañjana in relation to words denoting sex/gender-characteristics.

[These pictures are missing in the original file]

Figure 13: Relative importance with regards to the root words within each collection.

### Sanskrit Buddhist and Vedic Canon and Commentaries

[The pictures are missing in the original file]

(a) Total number of words. (b) Relative number of words.

Figure 14: Words denoting sex/gender-characteristics in the Sanskrit Buddhist and

Vedic Canons and Commentaries.

[The picture is missing in the original file]

Figure 15: Relative importance of words within each collection (as a percentage).

[The pictures are missing in the original file]

(a) Liṅga in relation to words denoting sex/gender-characteristics.

(b) Vyañjana in relation to words denoting sex/gender-characteristics.

Figure 16: Relative importance with regards to the root words within each collection (as a percentage).

### Chinese Buddhist Taishō Canon

[The picture is missing in the original file]

Figure 17: Total number of words denoting sex/gender-characteristics in the Chinese Taishō Canon.

[The picture is missing in the original file]

Figure 18: Relative importance of words within each collection (as a percentage).

[The picture is missing in the original file]

Figure 19: Relative importance of words denoting sex/gender-characteristics with regards to the root word 根 (faculty) within each collection (as a percentage).

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Figure 20: Relative importance of words denoting sex/gender-characteristics with regards to the root word 形 (shape) within each collection (as a percentage).

## C. Glossary of Definitions

### C.1. Definitions of Pali and Sanskrit Words

In this section I refer to the various dictionary definitions of the words relevant to the subject matter and provide links to these dictionaries. Click on a website link to open the definition in your browser.

#### Napumsaka

Pali word: napumsaka

Pali dictionary: see [SuttaCentral.net](http://SuttaCentral.net)

Sanskrit word: napumsaka

Sanskrit dictionary: see [WisdomLib.org](http://WisdomLib.org)

#### Paṇḍaka

Pali word: paṇḍaka

Pali dictionary: see [SuttaCentral.net](http://SuttaCentral.net)

Sanskrit word: paṇḍaka

Tibetan word: ma ning or 'dod 'gro

Chinese word: 不能男 or 黃門

ITLR dictionary: see [ITLR.net](http://ITLR.net)

#### Ubhatob yañ janaka

Pali word: ubhatob yañ janaka or  
ubhatovyañ janaka

Pali dictionary: see [SuttaCentral.net](http://SuttaCentral.net)

Sanskrit word: ubhayavyañjana

Tibetan word: mtshan gnyis pa

Chinese word: 二根 or 二形

ITLR dictionary: see [ITLR.net](http://ITLR.net)

#### Ṣaṇḍha

Sanskrit word: ṣaṇḍha

Tibetan word: za ma or nyug rum

ITLR dictionary: see [ITLR.net](http://ITLR.net)

#### Vepurisikā

Pali word: vepurisikā

Pali dictionary: see [SuttaCentral.net](http://SuttaCentral.net)

#### Liṅga

Pali word: liṅga

Pali dictionary: see [SuttaCentral.net](http://SuttaCentral.net)

Sanskrit word: liṅga

Chinese word: 根 or 形

Byañ jana

Pali word: b yañ jana or vyañjana

Pali dictionary: see SuttaCentral.net

Sanskrit word: vyañjana

ITLR dictionary: see ITLR.net

Nimitta

Pali word: nimitta

Pali dictionary: see SuttaCentral.net

Sanskrit word: nimitta

Tibetan word: mtshan ma

ITLR dictionary: see ITLR.net

## C.2. Modern Definitions

In this section I list a few terms relevant to the subject matter because there are many misunderstandings with regards to these terms and their meanings. For other terms, I refer to the website of the Human Rights Campaign.

Intersex

The definition of the term ‘intersex’ according to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights is as follows:

Intersex people are born with sex characteristics (including genitals, gonads and chromosome patterns) that do not fit typical binary notions of male or female bodies. Intersex is an umbrella term used to describe a wide range of natural bodily variations. In some cases, intersex traits are visible at birth while in others, they are not apparent until puberty. Some chromosomal intersex variations may not be physically apparent at all.

Intersex can be divided into four categories according to the US National Library of Medicine:

46, XX intersex female internal organs and chromosomes external genitals appear male

46, XY intersex male internal organs and chromosomes external genitals appear female or ambiguous

True gonadal intersex both ovarian and testicular tissue external genitals ambiguous or appear female or male

Complex or undetermined intersex chromosomes discrepancies only

Hermaphrodite

A hermaphrodite is an organism that has both male and female reproductive organs. Until the mid-20th Century, ‘hermaphrodite’ was used synonymously with ‘intersex’. The distinctions ‘male pseudohermaphrodite’, ‘female pseudohermaphrodite’ and especially ‘true hermaphrodite’ are terms that are no longer used, which reflected histology (microscopic appearance) of the gonads. Medical terminology has shifted not only due to concerns about language, but also a shift to understandings based on genetics.

Currently, hermaphroditism is not to be confused with intersex, as the former refers only to a specific phenotypical presentation of sex organs and the latter to a more complex combination of phenotypical and genotypical presentation. Using hermaphrodite to refer to intersex individuals is considered to be stigmatizing and misleading.<sup>1</sup> Hermaphrodite is used for animal and plant species in which the possession of both ovaries and testes is either serial or concurrent, and for living organisms without such gonads but which present binary form of reproduction, which is part of the

typical life history of those species. Intersex has come to be used when this is not the case.

### Transgender

Transgender people have a gender identity or gender expression that differs from the sex that they were assigned at birth.<sup>2</sup> Some transgender people who desire medical assistance to transition from one sex to another identify as transsexual.<sup>3</sup> Transgender, often shortened as trans, is also an umbrella term. In addition to including people whose gender identity is the opposite of their assigned sex (trans men and trans women), it may include people who are not exclusively masculine or feminine (people who are non-binary or genderqueer, including bigender, pangender, genderfluid, or agender). Other definitions of transgender also include people who belong to a third gender, or else conceptualize transgender people as a third gender.

The term transgender is also distinguished from intersex.

The opposite of transgender is cisgender, which describes persons whose gender identity or expression matches their assigned sex.

Many transgender people experience gender dysphoria, and some seek medical treatments such as Hormone Replacement Therapy, sex reassignment surgery, or psychotherapy. Not all transgender people desire these treatments, and some cannot undergo them for financial or medical reasons.<sup>4</sup>

1 See Intersex Society of North America.

2 Altilio and Otis-Green [2011] page 380.

3 Polly and Nicole [2011].

4 For more information on these issues, see Maizes [2015].

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## Proposals

### **The Accidental Nun of the Slum**

Ayya Yeshe

I had been a nun for a decade and struggled to find a place as a Western bi woman and feminist in the extremely patriarchal and ethnocentric world of Tibetan Buddhism. All the friends (15) I ordained with had disrobed (except one other woman) because Tibetan centres in the West only support ethnically Tibetan men even though these centres use the labour of western monastics and western lay women as teachers and administrators. In short I felt inspired by the philosophy of Tibetan Buddhism, but the day to day lives of Tibetan monks and their methods of learning by rote were not particularly meaningful for someone from my culture. Studying Tibetan language proved to be also quite dry for someone like me without great language skills. I loved meditation and I missed the social service I used to do in Australia manning a counselling hotline in a charity serving homeless people and drug users.

One day in the poorest part of India, in the holy town of Bodhgaya, where the Buddha got enlightened, I reflected that there were two worlds there : one was the marble, air conditioned enclave of international meditation centres; the other was the world inhabited by the everyday desperately impoverished Bihari villager. The state has very little industrialisation, so the only jobs are in brick factories or working the land. Poor landless people from the lower castes live a desperate life there, married at 17, popping out maybe 4 children and then dying at 50. The state was even worse in those days than it is now. Corruption was rife and it was not uncommon for a girl to be sold as a domestic slave to Tibetans for 100,000 rupees (1500 USD), or to a brothel. I thought of the Buddhas kindness in giving us Buddhism and how very little of that kindness had been repaid or landed on the lives of his descendents. If the Buddha was alive in Bihar today, which side of the 6 foot high barbed wire temple fence would he be on? I wondered. As I thought this, an Indian man came up to me and asked where he could attend teachings. I was surprised to find a man from India interested in Buddhism. He told me he was Dalit - a person from the ex "untouchable" community that had emancipated themselves from the tyranny of the Hindu caste system by converting to Buddhism in 1956 with their leader, the Martin Luther King Jr of their people, Doctor Ambedkar. Vince invited me to visit his family in Nagpur and see the Buddhist movement there for myself. When I arrived the people were happy to see a nun. As well as so many enthusiastic healthy people who asked for pujas and teachings, people put dying babies in my arms and asked me to chant over them. I soon realised that if these babies were to see the next dawn they needed real medicine and education, not just prayers. This is how I decided to start a charity for Buddhist Ambedkarite people in the slums of Central India....



## **"Gender & Variability (Dis/Ability) - a Queer Buddhist Perspective".**

Bee Scherer

People with diverse embodiment of sexualities, gender and variable physical and neurological dispositions, among others, often encounter specific difficulties and sometimes hostility when practicing Buddhism.

In this talk, I will look at these experiences of abjection, their grounding in social psychology, and how they relate to positions found in Buddhist philosophy and narratives.

How can we negotiate oppressive readings of, e.g., key Buddhist notions such as karma, No-Self and detachment?

And how can we address structural marginalisation and discrimination of “dis/abilities” (variabilities) and sexual & gender diversity in Socially Engaged Buddhist activism and as communities of practice?

From my experience in academia and as a Tibetan Buddhist teacher, I will discuss strategies of inclusion and give examples of liberatory practices.



## **Going Beyond Mindfulness: Embodying Compassion for Better Queer Mental Health Recovery**

Benny Prawira Siau

Queer people around the world have higher rates of mental health issues and suicide behaviour due to queerphobic-induced trauma and social exclusion. Buddhism, with its mindfulness practices, have been shown to provide an effective tool for supporting queer people's recovery process. However, these practices are often times too individualized to address the relational aspect of queer mental health issues such as stigma and other queerphobic-related life stressors. In this paper, I will present Buddhist doctrines of pratityasamutpada (dependent origination) and karuna (compassion) as a relational explanatory framework for queer peoples' mental health issue and recovery. I shall also offer a queer interpretation for stories of Pattacara, Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva, and Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva that can be used as resources for compassion and support for queer people mental health recovery. By offering a more relational queer framework on queer mental health issues and recovery, queer Buddhists, allies and mental health professionals can apply a holistic approach for supporting queer Buddhists recovery process.

Keywords : karuna, compassion, dependent origination, queer mental health, homophobia



## **Postmodern Religion and Seeking Queer Refuge In Pure Land Buddhism**

Gabe Rusk

Despite its relative size Pure Land Buddhism is less known among both American Buddhists and queer Buddhists alike. Part literature review, part essay, and part ethnography I will examine the work of Professor Ann Gleig, David McMahan, and Scott Mitchell to explain comparatively why queer convert Buddhists may have unique misapprehensions of Pure Land practice and doctrine. In particular, I will synthesize Gleig's *Queering Buddhism or Buddhist De-Queering? Reflecting on Differences Amongst Western LGBTQI Buddhists and the Limits of Liberal Convert Buddhism*, American Dharma, and McMahan's *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* to draw new and unexplored parallels to conversion trends in Pure Land Buddhism in America. Finally, building off of the work of Reverend Ko'e Umezu of the West Los Angeles Buddhist Temple and my own ethnographic experience at the Orange County Buddhist Church I will prescriptively explain why Pure Land Buddhism can be equally inclusive and accessible to queer Buddhists seeking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.





## **Reflections of an Asexual Buddhist: Conveniences and Challenges of a “Non” Identity**

Nathan Jishin Michon

The prefix “A-” is defined as “without” or “not.” It refers to a “lack of~.” Identity through negation can be strange. Who advocates for representation of a “non” identity? Have you ever heard anyone call out the lack of asexual presence in film? In television? In conferences, schools, or employment diversification? I personally haven’t heard an example of this once in my life. Not that I’m complaining. It’s more of a reflection. After all, I don’t want to be a hypocrite and I haven’t advocated for it myself ... despite the fact that I am asexual. I’ve never been overtly ostracized for this identity. No one has ever overtly complained about me being asexual, much less threatened my life or safety for it. On the other hand, the invisibility of this identity of mine has been stark. Sometimes it is even invisible to myself! Why put energy into thinking deeply about the parts of my life that don’t define me or the desires I do not have? Yet other times, the fact that I am not an included part of humanity is very apparent by everyday comments that people make. My existence - or at least this aspect of my existence - is left out, not even considered a part of reality. “Everyone goes through that” “We all have those desires!” “All people have needs for physical intimacy.” I’ve occasionally been left to wonder, if I am not a part of “all people,” what am I? Granted, as a Buddhist, being asexual can be rather convenient. Going on a strict retreat without physical contact is, if anything, relieving. Never felt like a challenge. That third precept? No problem!

When going to stay or live in a monastery, I’ve often felt more at home than almost anywhere else in the world. Upon reflection, being asexual was surely at least part of the comfort there. In this short talk, I will travel a little deeper into my personal experience of these issues as an asexual Buddhist, a short story about finding identity in both regards. I will explore both the conveniences and challenges that come with being asexual in Buddhist environments and in other environments in the world, including reflection on dealing with my one romantic relationship in life and asexuality’s somewhat ambiguous place within the LGBTQI+ community.



## Contributors

### **Juliane Leonie Amberger** (she, her, \*1991)

originally studied Nordic Philology and German Language and Literature at Friedrich-Alexander University in Erlangen and the University of Oslo. Being interested in culture and religion she went to Nepal after her Bachelor's where she supported the construction of an elementary school. It was at that time when she was introduced to Buddhism and became fascinated about Buddhist philosophy. Back in Germany she started her Master degree in Literary Studies and took Religious Studies as a second subject where she attended classes in Buddhist philosophy. In a lecture about Zen-Master Thich Nhat Hanh she got curious about the Plum Village Tradition and eventually became an active practitioner in the Plum Village Sangha. After her Master's she decided to do a PhD in Religious Studies writing her thesis about the Plum Village Tradition. This semester she is given a stipend which is linked to a job at the university of Ostrava, Czech Republic where she is currently living and teaching classes.

### **Stephen Kerry** (they, them)

is a lecturer in sociology at Charles Darwin University (Australia). Dr Kerry identifies as genderqueer, non-binary, and uses the pronouns they/them/their. Their areas of research are gender studies and queer theory and their intersection with health, religion, news media, and popular culture. Dr Kerry was awarded a PhD in 2006, the project documented the social identities and relationships of Australians born intersex or with variant sex characteristics. In the 2010s, their research focused on the health needs of trans and non-binary people living in Australia's Northern Territory, this included trans and non-binary Aboriginal Australians, also known as sistergirls and brotherboys. Dr Kerry also investigates the representation of intersex and trans individuals (e.g. Caster Semenya, Kathleen Worrall, and Cate McGregor) in the news media and the representation of queers in popular culture (e.g. Star Trek). They are also currently documenting the reaction of straight cismen (aka fanboys) to the increased representation of women (queers and people of colour) in science fiction. Dr Kerry is a Zen Buddhist in the Diamond Sangha tradition, in 2019 they underwent their Jukai ceremony and was assigned the Dharma name Cool Monkey (凉猿). They are a fan of science fiction (an Acafan), volunteer as a counsellor, study Chinese, and dabble in Chinese calligraphy and haiku. They live in Melbourne (the land of the Wurundjeri people) with two cats.

### **Nathan Jishin Michon** (they, them)

is ordained both as a Shingon Buddhist priest and interfaith minister.

Jishin has enjoyed long retreats and practice periods in Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana temples in multiple countries around the world. They completed an MDIV in Buddhist chaplaincy at University of the West and PhD through Graduate Theological Union. Among other works, Jishin is editor of *A Thousand Hands: A Guidebook to Caring for Your Buddhist Community* and the forthcoming *Refuge in the Storm: Buddhist Voices in Crisis Care*, and co-author of the Online Oxford Encyclopedia's article on "Buddhist Chaplaincy." They currently serve as co-director of the interfaith ministry education through the Unity and Diversity World Council.

### **Kody Muncaster** (they, them)

Kody Muncaster is a PhD student in Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies at Western University as well as a MA student in Buddhist Studies at the University of South Wales. Their research interests include queer and trans communities in Buddhism, tonglen meditation, engaged Buddhism, trauma, HIV/AIDS, and suicide prevention.

**Benny Prawira Siau** (he/him)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benny\\_Prawira\\_Siau](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benny_Prawira_Siau)

**Gabe Rusk** (he/him)

received his Masters Degree from the University of Oxford where his dissertation focused on the history of religious pluralism and secularism in the United States. While at Oxford, Gabe was a member of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies and a research aid for the Yehan Numata Professor of Buddhist Studies Stefano Zacchetti. Gabe was appointed as LGBTQIA+ Officer for the world's oldest debating society the Oxford Union where he was also a traveling competitor. Gabe was elected as the international students officer representing over 7,000 students during his time at Oxford. He completed his undergraduate degree at the University of Denver in Religious Studies and Philosophy winning the department's highest religious studies award. In high school he was the national debate champion at the Tournament of Champions.

**Bee Scherer** (they, them, their)

has been practicing for decades in the Sakya and Kagyu traditions of Tibetan Buddhism and has been serving as a dharma teacher for more than fifteen years. Formerly the chair of Religious Studies and Gender Studies at Canterbury CCU, in the U.K., Prof. Bee Scherer now heads Buddhist Studies at the Vrije Universiteit (VU) Amsterdam and directs the national Dutch Buddhist chaplaincy training programme. Trained in the classical Buddhist languages, Bee has published widely in Buddhist Studies as well as in gender and sexuality theory (Queer and Trans\* Studies) and in Critical Disabilities Studies. Both as an academic and as a queer/non-binary/trans\* & dis/ability advocate, Bee brings their unique perspective to Buddhist practice, embodiment, and social engagement.

**Ayya Vimala** (they, them)

is a non-binary monastic who was born in the Netherlands in 1967. They studied Geophysics and MBA before changing course to become a Buddhist monastic.

From an early age they were interested in meditation, but did not come in contact with the Buddhist teachings until 2001. After spending some time practising in the Goenka tradition, the wish to ordain arose. They took temporary ordination in The Pyu Tawye Monastery in Burma in 2008, where they became aware of the gender-inequality within the traditional Buddhist countries. After also meeting with several fully ordained nuns and Ajahn Brahm, they became interested in full ordination in order to help support the Bhikkhunī lineage and pave the way for women to take up full ordination, just like the men had always been able to.

After spending time in monasteries in Germany and Australia, they finally took higher ordination as a Bhikkhunī in Los Angeles in 2016 with Ayya Gunasārī from Mahapajapati Monastery as their preceptor.

In Australia, they also met Bhante Sujato, one of the main driving forces behind full ordination for women. Ven. Vimala joined the SuttaCentral.net team in 2013 and over the years added many Sutta translations and parallels to the site.

Inspired by Bhante Sujato's work, they wrote several articles on the challenges and discrimination faced by women and LGBTQIA+ in Buddhist establishments.

They are one of the founding members of Samita ASBL, a foundation with the goal to start a monastery in Europe, and of Tilorien Monastery, a monastic community based on Early Buddhist teachings. Tilorien Monastery was set up with the goal to provide a place of practice for Bhikkhunīs and other female monastics, whilst also supporting LGBTQIA+ people and other underrepresented groups to develop in the Dhamma.

**Ayya Yeshe** (she, her)

is a Buddhist nun of 21 years who has trained in Tibetan Buddhism and Theravada. She is the Abbess of a non sectarian Mahayana temple in the world heritage forests of Tasmania, Australia. Ayya is a contemplative, feminist activist and International teacher. She is the Director of Bodhicitta Foundation, a charity in the slums of Central India empowering women and children. Ayya also has 100,000 hits on her sacred chants on youtube and is a published author.



## **Outlook**

After the 1st IQBC in 2021 the idea was born to organize monthly Conscious Connections of the IQBC via zoom until the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Queer Buddhist Conference as a chance to stay in touch and exchange ideas of artsy expressions on a mindful basis.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> International Queer Buddhist Conference will take place on October 22, 23, and 24, 2022 virtually, supported by a global team of volunteers from the West Coast of the US to its East Coast, India, Indonesia, Australia, and Germany.

May it become a tradition of further International Queer Buddhist Conferences – IQBCs - as a safe and protected place, no matter, which sexuality, gender, color or culture you belong!

May all beings be happy.  
May all beings be safe, and well.  
May all beings be peaceful and at ease.





## **Acknowledgement**

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