



Homosexuality and Theravada Buddhism

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Buddhism teaches to, and expects from, its followers a certain level of ethical behaviour. The minimum that is required of the lay Buddhist is embodied in what is called the Five Precepts (*panca sila*), the third of which relates to sexual behaviour. Whether or not homosexuality, sexual behaviour between people of the same sex, would be breaking the third Precept is what I would like to examine here.

Homosexuality was known in ancient India; it is explicitly mentioned in the Vinaya (monastic discipline) and prohibited. It is not singled out for special condemnation, but rather simply mentioned along with a wide range of other sexual behaviour as contravening the rule that requires monks and nuns to be celibate. Sexual behaviour, whether with a member of the same or the opposite sex, where the sexual organ enters any of the bodily orifices (vagina, mouth or anus), is punishable by expulsion from the monastic order. Other sexual behaviour like mutual masturbation or interfemural sex, while considered a serious offense, does not entail expulsion but must be confessed before the monastic community.

A type of person called a *pandaka* is occasionally mentioned in the Vinaya in contexts that make it clear that such a person is some kind of sexual non-conformist. The Vinaya also stipulates that *pandakas* are not allowed to be ordained, and if, inadvertently, one has been, he is expelled. According to commentary, this is because *pandakas* are "full of passions, unquenchable lust and are dominated by the desire for sex." The word *pandaka* has been translated as either hermaphrodite or eunuch, while Zwilling has recently suggested that it may simply mean a homosexual. It is more probable that ancient Indians, like most modern Asians, considered only the extremely effeminate, exhibitionist homosexual (the screaming queen in popular perception) to be deviant while the less obvious homosexual was simply considered a little more opportunistic or a little less fussy than other 'normal' males. As the Buddha seems to have had a profound understanding of human nature and have been remarkably free from prejudice, and as there is not evidence that homosexuals are any more libidinous or that they have any more difficulties in maintaining celibacy than heterosexuals, it seems unlikely that the Buddha would exclude homosexuals per se from the monastic life. The term *pandaka* therefore probably does not refer to homosexuals in general but rather to the effeminate, self-advertising and promiscuous homosexual.

The lay Buddhist is not required to be celibate, but she or he is advised to avoid certain types of sexual behaviour. The third Precept actually says: '*Kamesu micchacara veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami*.' The word *kama* refers to any form of sensual pleasure but with an emphasis on sexual pleasure and a literal translation of the precept would be "I take the rule of training (*veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami*) not to go the wrong way (*micchacara*) for sexual pleasure (*kamesu*)". What constitutes "wrong" will not be clear until we examine the criteria that Buddhism uses to make ethical judgments.

No one of the Buddha's discourses is devoted to systematic philosophical inquiry into ethics such as one finds in the works of the Greek philosophers. But it is possible to construct a criterion of right and wrong out of material scattered in different places throughout the Pali Tipitaka, the scriptural basis of Theravada Buddhism. The Buddha questioned many of the assumptions existing in his society, including moral ones, and tried to develop an ethics based upon reason and compassion rather than tradition, superstitions and taboo. Indeed, in the famous Kalama Sutta he says that revelation (*anussana*), tradition (*parampara*), the authority of the scriptures (*pitakasampada*) and one's own point of view (*ditthinijjanakkhanti*) are inadequate means of

determining right and wrong.

Having questioned the conventional basis of morality, the Buddha suggests three criteria for making moral judgments. The first is what might be called the universalisability principle - to act towards others the way we would like them to act towards us. In the Samyutta Nikaya he uses this principle to advise against adultery. He says: "What sort of Dhamma practice leads to great good for oneself?... A noble disciple should reflect like this: 'If someone were to have sexual intercourse with my spouse I would not like it. Likewise, if I were to have sexual intercourse with another's spouse they would not like that. For what is unpleasant to me must be unpleasant to another, and how could I burden someone with that?' As a result of such reflection one abstains from wrong sexual desire, encourages others to abstain from it, and speaks in praise of such abstinence."

In the Bahitika Sutta, Ananda is asked how to distinguish between praiseworthy and blameworthy behaviour. He answers that any behaviour which causes harm to oneself and others could be called blameworthy while any behaviour that causes no harm (and presumably which helps) oneself and others could be called praiseworthy. The suggestion is, therefore, that in determining right and wrong one has to look into the actual and possible consequences of the action in relation to the agent and those affected by the action. The Buddha makes this same point in the Dhammapada: "The deed which causes remorse afterwards and results in weeping and tears is ill-done. The deed which causes no remorse afterwards and results in joy and happiness is well-done." This is what might be called the consequential principle, that behaviour can be considered good or bad according to the consequences or effects it has.

The third way of determining right and wrong is what might be called the instrumental principle, that is, that behaviour can be considered right or wrong according to whether or not it helps us to attain our goal. The ultimate goal of Buddhism is Nirvana, a state of mental peace and purity and anything that leads one in that direction is good. Someone once asked the Buddha how after his death it would be possible to know what was and was not his authentic teaching and he replied: "The doctrines of which you can say: 'These doctrines lead to letting go, giving up, stilling, calming, higher knowledge, awakening and to Nirvana' - you can be certain that they are Dhamma, they are discipline, they are the words of the Teacher."

This utilitarian attitude to ethics is highlighted by the fact that the Buddha uses the term *kusala* to mean 'skillful' or 'appropriate' or its opposite, *akusala*, when evaluating behaviour far more frequently than he uses the terms *punna*, 'good', or *papa*, 'bad'. The other thing that is important in evaluating behaviour is intention (*cetacean*). If a deed is motivated by good (based upon generosity, love and understanding) intentions it can be considered skillful. Evaluating ethical behaviour in Buddhism requires more than obediently following commandments, it requires that we develop a sympathy with others, that we be aware of our thoughts, speech and actions, and that we be clear about our goals and aspirations.

Having briefly examined the rational foundations of Buddhist ethics we are now in a better position to understand what sort of sexual behaviour Buddhism would consider to be wrong or unskillful and why. The Buddha specifically mentions several types of unskillful sexual behaviour, the most common of which is adultery. This is unskillful because it requires subterfuge and deceit, it means that solemn promises made at the time of marriage are broken, and it amounts to a betrayal of trust. In another passage, the Buddha says that someone practicing the third Precept "avoids intercourse with girls still under the ward of their parents, brothers, sisters or relatives, with married women, with female prisoners or with those already engaged to another." Girls still under the protection of others are presumably too young to make a responsible decision about sex, prisoners are not in a position to make a free choice, while an engaged woman has already made a commitment to another. Although only females are mentioned here no doubt the same would apply to males in the same position.

As homosexuality is not explicitly mentioned in any of the Buddha's discourses (more than 20 volumes in the Pali Text Society's English translation), we can only assume that it is meant to be evaluated in the same way that heterosexuality is. And indeed it seems that this is why it is not specifically mentioned. In the case of the lay man and woman where there is mutual consent,

where adultery is not involved and where the sexual act is an expression of love, respect, loyalty and warmth, it would not be breaking the third Precept. And it is the same when the two people are of the same gender. Likewise promiscuity, license and the disregard for the feelings of others would make a sexual act unskillful whether it be heterosexual or homosexual. All the principles we would use to evaluate a heterosexual relationship we would also use to evaluate a homosexual one. In Buddhism we could say that it is not the object of one's sexual desire that determines whether a sexual act is unskillful or not, but rather the quality of the emotions and intentions involved.

However, the Buddha sometimes advised against certain behaviour not because it is wrong from the point of view of ethics but because it would put one at odds with social norms or because it is subject to legal sanctions. In these cases, the Buddha says that refraining from such behaviour will free one from the anxiety and embarrassment caused by social disapproval or the fear of punitive action. Homosexuality would certainly come under this type of behaviour. In this case, the homosexual has to decide whether she or he is going to acquiesce to what society expects or to try to change public attitudes. In Western societies where attitudes towards sex in general have been strongly influenced by the tribal taboos of the Old Testament and, in the New Testament, by the ideas of highly neurotic people like St. Paul, there is a strong case for changing public attitudes.

We will now briefly examine the various objections to homosexuality and give Buddhist rebuttals to them. The most common Christian and Muslim objection to homosexuality is that it is unnatural and "goes against the order of nature". There seems to be little evidence for this. Miriam Rothschild, the eminent biologist who played a crucial role in the fight to decriminalize homosexuality in Britain, pointed out at the time that homosexual behaviour has been observed in almost every known species of animal. Secondly, it could be argued that while the biological function of sex is reproduction, most sexual activity today is not for reproduction, but for recreation and emotional fulfillment, and that this too is a legitimate function of sex. This being so, while homosexuality is unnatural in that it cannot lead to reproduction, it is quite natural for the homosexual in that for her or him it provides physical and emotional fulfillment. Indeed, for him or her, heterosexual behaviour is unnatural. Thirdly, even if we concede that homosexuality "goes against the order of nature", we would have to admit that so do many other types of human behaviour, including some religious behaviour. The Roman Catholic Church has always condemned homosexuality because of its supposed unnaturalness - but it has long idealized celibacy, which, some might argue, is equally unnatural. Another Christian objection to homosexuality is that it is condemned in the Bible, an argument that is meaningful to those who accept that the Bible is the infallible word of God, but which is meaningless to the majority who do not accept this. But while there is no doubt that the Bible condemns homosexuality, it also stipulates that women should be socially isolated while menstruating, that parents should kill their children if they worship any god other than the Christian God and that those who work on the Sabbath should be executed. Few Christians today would agree with these ideas even though they are a part of God's words, and yet they continue to condemn homosexuality simply because it is condemned in the Bible.

One sometimes hears people say: "If homosexuality were not illegal, many people, including the young, will become gay." This type of statement reflects either a serious misunderstanding about the nature of homosexuality or perhaps a latent homosexuality in the person who would make such a statement. It is as silly as saying that if attempted suicide is not a criminal offense then everyone will go out and commit suicide. Whatever the cause of homosexuality (and there is great debate on the subject), one certainly does not 'choose' to have homoerotic feelings in the same way one would, for example, choose to have tea instead of coffee. It is either inborn or develops in early childhood. And it is the same with heterosexuality. Changing laws does not change people's sexual inclinations.

Some have argued that there must be something wrong with homosexuality because so many homosexuals are emotionally disturbed. At first there seems to be some truth in this. In the West, at least, many homosexuals suffer from psychological problems, abuse alcohol, and indulge in obsessive sexual behaviour. As a group, homosexuals have a high rate of suicide. But observers have pointed out that such problems seem to be no more pronounced amongst African and Asian homosexuals than they are in the societies in which they live. It is very likely that homosexuals in the West are wounded more by society's attitude to them than by their sexual proclivity, and, if

they are treated the same as everybody else, they will be the same as everybody else. Indeed, this is the strongest argument for acceptance and understanding towards homosexuals.

Christianity grew out of and owes much to Judaism with its tradition of fiery prophets fiercely and publicly denouncing what they considered to be moral laxity or injustice. Jesus was very much influenced by this tradition, as have been the Christian responses to public and private morality generally. At its best, this tradition in Christianity to loudly denounce immorality and injustice has given the West its high degree of social conscience. At its worst, it has meant that those who did not or could not conform to Christian standards have been cruelly exposed and persecuted. The Buddhist monk's role has always been very different from his Christian counterpart. His job has been to teach the Dhamma and to act as a quiet example of how it should be lived. This, together with Buddhism's rational approach to ethics and the high regard it has always given to tolerance, has meant that homosexuals in Buddhist societies have been treated very differently from how they have been in the West. In countries like China, Korea and Japan where Buddhism was profoundly influenced by Confucianism, there have been periods when homosexuality has been looked upon with disapproval and even been punishable under the law. But generally the attitude has been one of tolerance. Matteo Ricci, the Jesuit missionary who lived in China for twenty-seven years from 1583, expressed horror at the open and tolerant attitude that the Chinese took to homosexuality and naturally enough saw this as proof of the degeneracy of Chinese society. "That which most shows the misery of these people is that no less than the natural lusts, they practise unnatural ones that reverse the order of things, and this is neither forbidden by law nor thought to be illicit nor even a cause for shame. It is spoken of in public and practiced everywhere without there being anyone to prevent it." In Korea the ideal of the *hwarang* (flower boy) was often associated with homosexuality especially during the Yi dynasty. In Japan, a whole genre of literature (novelettes, poems and stories) on the love between samurais and even between Buddhist monks and temple boys developed during the late mediaeval period.

Theravada Buddhist countries like Sri Lanka and Burma had no legal statutes against homosexuality between consenting adults until the colonial era when they were introduced by the British. Thailand, which had no colonial experience, still has no such laws. This had led some Western homosexuals to believe that homosexuality is quite accepted in Buddhist countries of South and South-east Asia. This is certainly not true. In such countries, when homosexuals are thought of at all, it is more likely to be in a good-humored way or with a degree of pity. Certainly the loathing, fear and hatred that the Western homosexual has so often had to endure is absent and this is due, to a very large degree, to Buddhism's humane and tolerant influence.