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[The articles in this compilation are contributed by various authors who participated in the Conference on Freedom of religion or belief and Sexuality organized in June 2016. The compilation illustrates different perspectives of the intersection of freedom of religion or belief and sexuality.]

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The rise of Rainbow Dharma: Buddhism on sexual diversity and same-sex marriage

Michael Vermeulen¹

1. From Pride to Enlightenment?

Can you take part in Gay Pride as well as Buddhist meditation? In other words: is being queer² a road-block on the spiritual journey towards Enlightenment? Or is it a highway? Or does it not matter? Many people - Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike - believe Buddhism is very accepting of diversity, including sexual diversity. We live in times where religion often advocates homo-hatred, even murders. Given such a hostile religious context, Buddhism can indeed be proud of the fact it has no history of hate-speech or physical violence towards sexual minorities. But it would be wrong to claim it has never been subject to prejudices and discrimination. Despite its openness to people who did not fit in the patriarchal Indian society of the 5th century BCE, Buddhism failed from the start to be fully inclusive.

This article will map both the openness Buddhism expressed as well as the prejudices to which it was subjected, from the days of the Buddha³ to the present. In this 2500 year history, Buddhism did spread to widely different cultures with different sensitivities on family life, sexual orientation and gender identity. It also became doctrinally extremely diverse, stretching from soteriological⁴ Pure Land Buddhism (with its faith that one will be reborn in the Pure Land of Amida Buddha, a Buddhist Savior who vowed to save all beings without any discrimination), to atheist secular Buddhism (which does not believe in the supernatural or in literal rebirth). Throughout this diversification process, some scholars have tried to incorporate local prejudices rather than fighting them. But only in Tibet did homo-negativity become included in mainstream Buddhist teachings (although never leading to violence or persecution).

With the globalization of Buddhism in the 20th century, Buddhists became more aware of historical prejudices within their own traditions⁵. Many Buddhists also became strong advocates for human rights and social change within their societies and their traditions.

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² Queer refers to a sexual orientation outside culturally established norms. In the present globalised culture, it refers to someone who is not heterosexual - a person who identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersexual, gender diverse/non-binary, or someone who is questioning their sexual identity.

³ The word 'Buddha' is not a name but a title, meaning 'one who is awake'. His original name was Siddhartha Gautama. It is not clear when exactly the historical Buddha lived. According to Theravada tradition he lived 624-544 BCE, but most Buddhologists agree he probably lived about a century later (+/- 490-410). Some date his life even more recent.

⁴ From the Greek σωτήρ (soter), meaning 'saviour'.

⁵ Vermeulen (2016) survey on European Buddhism and sexual diversity (not published) - reply by the National Unions Committee of the European Buddhist Union: *"Because of more knowledge about LGBTI there are less prejudices within Buddhism compared to the old times."*

2. Early Buddhism

The Buddha was at the head of his community of lay and monastic followers for more than four decades. During this long period, he was asked for advice on a very wide variety of issues on sex and sexuality that would impress many present day sexologists. As a result, there are literally dozens of references in the Buddhist canons⁶ to all sorts of sexual relationships and practices, mainly hetero- and homosexual activities but also to pedophilia, bestiality, necrophilia, etc.

Before analysing these counsels in detail, we can make some general remarks. First, almost all of these are discussed in the *Vinaya* (the monastic code). In other words, the most common context is that of a monk or a nun struggling to lead a celibate life. Second, given the wide variety of items addressed, the Buddha was obviously not ignorant or naive on human sexual passions and activities in the broadest sense. And last but not least, there is nowhere in his teachings any sense of homo-negative language or condemnation of gay or lesbian homosexual behavior.

Let us get a closer look at the specific ethical advice given to lay and monastic followers.

2.1. Lay members of the Early Buddhist community: do no harm

Lay followers of the Dharma⁷ commit to train five skills⁸ (mostly called precepts): abstain from killing living beings, from taking what is not given, from sexual misconduct (also referred to as ‘the third precept’), from wrong speech and from intoxicants. ‘Precept’ is a misleading term, as people raised in an Abrahamic culture may wrongly presume the five precepts function in a similar way to the divine commandments in theistic religions. But Buddhist precepts do not refer to a list of rules we must follow blindly, regardless of the various contexts we live in. The Buddhist Spiritual Path is about training the mind to think, speak and act free from any greed, hatred and delusions. Failing these is not a sin that leads to eternal damnation. Its approach is more empirical: with trial and error and guided training one becomes more skilled to lead an ethical life in changing contexts.

‘Misconduct’ on the other hand is a very vague concept, which has to derive its meaning from its cultural context. In the scriptures *“The third precept relates primarily to the avoidance of causing suffering by one’s sexual behaviour. Adultery (...) is the most straightforward breach of this precept. The wrongness of this is seen partly in terms of its being an expression of greed, and partly in terms of its harm to others. (...) What counts as ‘adultery’ varies according to the marriage patterns of different societies, though, and Buddhism has been flexible in adapting to these.”*⁹ Most teachers therefore rephrase the third precept as ‘do not use sex in a harmful way’, which puts more emphasis on the

⁶ There is no consensus on one single Buddhist canon. The Theravada Pali canon is by most Buddhologists considered to be the oldest. Referrals in this article are to the Pali canon (Pali Text Society edition).

⁷ Buddhists refer to themselves as follower of the Buddhadharmā: the teachings of the Buddha.

⁸ The *panca-sila* (five precepts or five skills) are present in all Buddhist traditions, although some use extended lists.

⁹ Harvey (2000), at p. 71.

evaluation of ones actions, rather than complying with a rule: Is there misuse of power? Is there consent? Is there addictive behaviour? Etc.

As mentioned, the Buddha was well aware of sexual diversity in general and homosexual behaviour in particular. If this had been an issue for him, he had plenty of opportunities to condemn it, or to say that Buddhists should live a heterosexual life only. But instead there is silence. Some scholars interpret this silence as neutral (Cabezón, 1993) or negative (Harvey, 2000)¹⁰. The majority of the teachers however, consider this to be a positive, accepting silence. They compare it to the silence they are familiar with within their own tradition: *“Bernard Faure, in his cultural critique of Zen Buddhism titled The Rhetoric of Immediacy remarks that homosexuality seems to be overlooked in Zen teachings, and indeed in classical Buddhist texts. My impression from my own monastic experience suggests that homosexuality has not been taken as an aberration, and so did not receive comment.”*¹¹ In my survey on European Buddhism and sexual diversity most comments were indeed along this line. Many teachers are silent on the topic, not because they disapprove on certain sexual orientations or gender identities, but because they consider this an irrelevant issue¹².

2.2. Monastic members of the Early Buddhist community: have no sex

In what is probably the oldest documented story on the interface of religious and LGBTI-rights, the Buddha was approached by what we nowadays would call a transgender monk and a transgender nun¹³. They were not happy as members of their all male and all female monastic communities (monks and nuns lived mostly separately) and asked for help. The Buddha pragmatically ruled that the trans-female monk should join the nuns and the trans-male nun should join the monks.

The red line for monks or nuns was engagement in sexual activities. Sex (whether homo- or heterosexual in nature) is condemned because the monks and nuns are expected to be celibate. There is no negative attitude towards sex or sexual diversity as such, but towards a lack of discipline to control lust: *“It is notable that these prohibitions against homosexuality in the Vinaya are not given any special (homophobic) metaphysical, philosophical, or doctrinal support. They are merely expressions of uncontrolled desire on the part of persons who have vowed to control their desires.”*¹⁴

It would however be wrong to presume there was no discrimination towards sexual minorities at all within the early Buddhist community. A varied range of people were not

¹⁰ As a proof Harvey refers to a comment by Buddhaghosa. (Harvey (2000), at p. 421) Buddhaghosa lived in the 5th century AD, roughly a millennium after the Buddha, and his comments were not mainstream in Theravada (see below).

¹¹ In 1995, some religious leaders gave testimony to the Hawaii Commission on Sexual Orientation and the Law in support of same-sex marriage. One of them was zen priest Robert Aitken, co-founder of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship. (See: <http://www.qrd.org/qrd/religion/zen.buddhist.perspective.on.same.sex.marriage>)

¹² Vermeulen (2016) survey on European Buddhism and sexual diversity (not published). Silence, however also confirms the (heteronormative) social status quo. This will therefore be challenged by the queer sangha (see 4.4.)

¹³ Vin III. 35. The story speaks of a rather magical sudden change of characteristics. It seems more meaningful to consider this a way to express their ‘coming out’.

¹⁴ Corless (1998), at p. 255.

allowed ordination, although they were welcome to become lay followers. The reasons why are sometimes hidden in the mists of the past. The prejudice against intersexed people¹⁵ in particular, as well as the rather unusual category of people called *pandakas*¹⁶, seems to have been that their anatomical variety also meant they could not control their sexual desires. Hence they were believed to lack the discipline to live a celibate life. The most important of these stories within the *Vinaya*, refers indeed to a *pandaka* with extreme uncontrollable sexual lust (Vin I. 85-86). Someone we would nowadays define as a sex-addict, which was understandably troublesome for a community of monks and nuns.

3. Sexual diversity and marriage after the Buddha: Asia

In the millennia after the Buddha, three major, geographically distinct traditions were formed in Asia. Some consider these traditions to be so different that it makes it impossible to speak about Buddhism as one religion or talk about 'a' Buddhist point of view. That is probably a bit over the top, for despite all differences there is a clear sense of belonging together. With regard to marriage, Buddhism never claimed marriage as an exclusive or 'sacred' Buddhist religious institution, nor did it reject marriage in favour of celibacy or restrict itself to one specific type of marriage.

3.1. Buddhism in South-East Asia: Theravada¹⁷

With a few exceptions, Theravada has been largely silent on sexual diversity, but its silence might reflect a certain apathy by the monks for sexuality in general. Theravada is simply very focused on the monastic life. The early Theravada comments are completely silent on sexual acts between women, and by the 12th century AD (17 centuries after the Buddha) only one commentary was known to expand the third precept to sexual acts between men: "*This may simply be due to an oversight, in which the texts concentrate on the most common ways of breaking the third precept, rather than a positive acceptance of homosexual acts. Even so, it shows that most Indian Buddhist commentators did not have a particular bee in their bonnet about condemning such acts.*"¹⁸

¹⁵ Intersex refers to people who are born with anatomical characteristics that are not typically male or female. In early Buddhism they were called *ubhato-byanjanakas*. The reason why they were not allowed to become a monk or a nun is because they might persuade other monks and nuns to have sex with them (Vin I. 89 and Vin II. 271). In other words, intersexed people were believed to be unable to control their sexual lusts (Harvey (2000) pp. 412-413).

¹⁶ There is no agreement to what *pandaka* exactly meant in the days of the Buddha, and the term appears in a variety of contexts. But if we analyse the most commonly attributed characteristics, combined with the above prejudice (the presumed link between anatomical variation and lack of discipline in intersexed people), we can make sense of these diverse rulings. First, *pandaka* seems to refer to men lacking the full anatomical characteristics of a man, in a few occasions to women lacking the full anatomy of a woman. A second characteristic of a *pandaka* is that they were considered to be men who prefer to have passive sex with other men; or women who could not have sex with men. In either case this seems to be attributed to their anatomical variation (which one believed made them unable to control their lusts), rather than to a homosexual orientation. Zwilling (1992) translates the term as 'one without testicles', not necessarily as in a eunuch but also someone who's impotent or lacks the energy, courage and self-control that a patriarchal society associates with 'full maleness' (in common language: someone 'lacking balls').

¹⁷ Theravada - the School of the Elders - is the religion of the vast majority of the population in Sri Lanka, Burma/Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand.

¹⁸ Harvey (2000), pp. 421-422. Zwilling (1992) states there are two early Theravada comments that did expand the third precept to include sexual acts between men: Buddhaghosa (5th century AD) and an anonymous commentary on

When Theravada cultures were confronted with the criminalisation of homosexuality by the British colonisers, Buddhists did not stand up to defend equality but stayed silent. Even after independence, homosexuality remained illegal in the former British colonies Sri Lanka and Burma up to the present day. Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam were under French protectorate. These countries have never known any laws against same-sex sexual activity.

Marriage in Theravada cultures was and is largely considered to be a secular institution, although it is custom to ask the monks for a blessing after marriage. Heterosexual monogamy is the usual practice, but polygamy (of the kings of Burma and Thailand and of wealthy farmers) has also been tolerated. In 2004, the Buddhist king Norodom Sihanuk of Cambodia called for the legalization of same-sex marriage in his country. In 2013, the Thai parliament debated legalising same-sex marriage¹⁹. The influential and conservative legal body of Thai monks remained silent in this debate²⁰. But the well-known Buddhist activist Sulak Sivaraksa and the scholar Suraphot Thaweesak gave public support²¹. They emphasised that Buddhism never prohibited same-sex marriage, that it is normal for lay people to have sex, and that sex in Buddhism is not only in function of procreation. Therefore, it doesn't matter to Buddhism whether sex is same-sex or not. The Australian (Thai trained) Theravada monk Ajahn Brahm also explicitly campaigns for marriage equality²². In March 2015, the Thai parliament passed the Gender Equality Act. It is the first law in South-East Asia to punish discrimination based on gender identity or sexual orientation..

3.2. Buddhism north of India: Vajrayana²³

It was the 12th century Buddhist teacher Ganpopa who expanded²⁴ the third precept for lay people to include sex between men (notably 17 centuries after the Buddha). He gives a long list of sexual behaviours he considers inappropriate for Buddhists. They clearly reflect social taboos in 12th century Tibet, rather than early or universal Buddhist

Asanga's (4th century AD) *Abhidharma-samuccaya*. But Harvey uncovers that the inclusion of Buddhaghosa is based on a wrong translation: "the passage is simply saying that 'for men', intercourse with various categories of females breaks the precept." (Harvey (2000) at p. 421) "The *Upasaka-janalankara*, a popular guide to Buddhism written in twelfth-century Sri Lanka, where Buddhaghosa worked, also explains the third precept simply by discussing the categories of women with whom a laymen should not have sex." (Harvey (2000), at p. 421)

¹⁹ Legislation to legalise same-sex marriage was submitted to parliament in 2012, but was put on hold indefinitely due to political instability.

²⁰ But several attempts have been made to expand *pandaka* to gays, and thus ban them from being ordained as a monk.

²¹ Interview in *The Nation*, July 27 2013, *Keep Buddhism out of same-sex marriage debate, activist advises*.

²² See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GOPcbFhCEj0&feature=youtu.be>

²³ Vajrayana - the Diamond Vehicle, also called Tantrayana - includes Buddhism from Tibet, Bhutan, Mongolia and Kalmykia. Vajrayana is the smallest Buddhist tradition in numbers, but became the best known worldwide due to the Tibetan diaspora in the 1950s and 60s.

²⁴ Ganpopa's *Jewel Ornament of Liberation* (12th century AD) is using a list from the *Abhidharma-kosa-bhasya* (Treasury of the Abhidharma, by Vasubandhu, 4th century AD) But he is adding several items to the list, among others: not using 'improper parts of the body' (i.e. the mouth and the anus) as well as sex between men (Harvey (2000), at p. 73) According to Ganpopa, a lay Buddhist should for example not have sex more than five successive times or in daylight. Only at the very end of his list of various types of sexual misconduct with women, he adds in a very brief type of afterthought sex between men before he proceeds to describe how all these people will be reborn 'in dusty places'.

teachings. Ganpopa's influence however, is far stretching, because the 14th Dalai Lama - one of the best known Buddhists of our time - upholds his views: *"I think that, according to Buddhism, homosexuality is a breach of certain [Tibetan Buddhist] prescriptions²⁵, but it is not a harmful act as such, as opposed to theft, murder and other crimes that make other people suffer. (...) That's why there is no reason to reject homosexuality or to discriminate against homosexuals."*²⁶ In other words: even Buddhists who are convinced that being gay is a breach of a moral precept make it clear this is no license to discriminate or expel gays (a distinction that is often blurry in Abrahamic traditions). The Dalai Lama repeatedly condemned hate speech and violence towards sexual minorities, emphasized that being gay does not mean one can no longer be Buddhist, and explicitly supports secular same-sex marriage²⁷.

Not all Asian Vajrayana teachers stick to Ganpopa's homo-negative interpretations though. The Bhutanese Lama Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse for example clearly states that gay people are welcome in Vajrayana²⁸, and most, if not all, Vajrayana teachers in the West explicitly accept sexual diversity within their communities. Shambhala, a worldwide but mainly Western community, is fully inclusive, including queer meetings and networks.

Next to heterosexual monogamy, Tibetan Buddhism has also known polygamy and polyandry (in the form of a woman marrying several brothers). Several scholars also mention the existence of same-sex relationships in Tibetan monasteries, especially among the so called *ldab-ldob*²⁹, a type of laborer-monk.

3.3. Buddhism in East-Asia: Mahayana³⁰

When the first Jesuit missionaries arrived in China and Japan in the 16th century, they were shocked by the acceptance of homosexuality by Buddhism. They would use it as one of their main arguments to prove that the cultures of the Far East were in decline and inferior to the West, and more specifically, that Buddhism was a decadent religion, inferior to Christianity. From their side, the Buddhists were shocked by the hate-speech

²⁵ Many gay Buddhists are upset by the Dalai Lama's homo-negative point of view. This resulted in a meeting with representatives of the San Franciscan LGBTI community in 1977. No agreement was reached on the interpretation of the third precept, but there was a common press release stating that the Dalai Lama *"was greatly concerned by reports made available to him regarding violence and discrimination against gay and lesbian people. His Holiness opposes violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation. He urges respect, tolerance, compassion and the full recognition of human rights for all."* (quoted in Harvey (2000), at p. 433)

²⁶ Dalai Lama (2001) - own translation. In the same book the Dalai Lama emphasizes that whether it is considered to be a breach of prescriptions or not, gay Buddhists who are actively homosexual are still Buddhists and can continue to practise the Buddhist way of life.

²⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pJVvVSr8E2M>

²⁸ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qA_Kp9v9ZtA

²⁹ *Ldab-ldobs* were not the same as monks. Their function has been compared to that of lay brothers in some Catholic monastic orders. They were allocated heavy physical labor as well as security tasks during religious festivals or as body guards for important monks. Unlike monks, *ldab-ldobs* let their hair grow and took part in sports, including fighting. They were infamous for fighting for young boys, or even kidnapping them for sex (Goldstein (1964)) Some of them seemed to have engaged in long term same-sex relationships.

³⁰ Mahayana Buddhism - the Great Vehicle - includes Pure Land and Chan/Zen Buddhism in countries such as China, Vietnam, Korea and Japan. Mahayana is followed by over half of the world's Buddhists. Pure Land and Zen would play an important role in giving spiritual and social support to the LGBTI community in the US in the 20th century.

of the Jesuits when it came to something the Buddhists considered to be a fact of life. Due to ideological pressure from Christian missionaries and European colonial powers, both China and Japan went through an era of 'Westernisation'. In this process, their acceptance of homosexuality was considered to be backwards compared to the West, just as other traditions such as polygamy or forcing women to bind their feet. Ironically, many present day Chinese and Japanese consider tolerance for sexual minorities to be an ideological importation from the West, alien to their own cultures. *"This is yet another modern assumption about sexuality which is demonstrably false. In fact, it is especially ironic since China, also among world cultures, has an unbroken documented history of homosexuality covering nearly three thousand years of its history, from the early Zhou dynasty until the 20th century."*³¹

China also had a centuries old tradition of same-sex marriages, often in a Buddhist religious context. During the Yuan and Ming dynasties (1271-1644), the men in the province of Fujian were famous throughout the empire for their long-term relationships with other men. These were often formalized by legal marriage ceremonies that were almost identical to opposite-sex rituals³².

Similar records can be found about lesbian relations. For women who wanted to escape the very patriarchal Confucian society, the only real way out was to become a Buddhist nun. During the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) an alternative movement arose in the silk province Guangdong, commonly known as The Golden Orchid sisterhoods³³. Their motivation was similar to the Beguines in medieval Europe: women who combined forces to stay (physically and financially) independent from men. They rejected being subordinate to a husband in marriage or to male clergy as a nun. The movement considered themselves the continuation of The Ten Sisters society which was created by a Buddhist nun several centuries earlier. Both movements referred to the Buddhist Bodhisattva Guan-Yin³⁴ (the Bodhisattva of Compassion) as their spiritual paragon. Members of The Ten Sisters lived together as couples and went through legally binding same-sex marriage ceremonies. Many Golden Orchid members also lived as couples and took legally binding vows for life. Some were close friendships, others were sexual relationships. They also had the right to adopt abandoned or orphaned girls as their legal daughters and heirs. The Golden Orchid sisterhoods would be banned by the Communist Party after the CCP rose to power in 1949.

Only in Japanese Buddhism is the clergy allowed to marry. Many of them also engaged in same-sex relationships, often in the form of *nanshoku* (an elder monk with a younger

³¹ Neill (2009), at loc. 4765.

³² Hinsch (1990)

³³ Much of their history is preserved due to the field work of anthropologist Marjorie Topley (1955)

³⁴ Guan-Yin (In Tibet known as the male Avalokiteshvara, in Japan as the female Kannon), is best known in Buddhism as the Bodhisattva of Compassion. She/he sees all the suffering of the world, even in the darkest loneliest corner. Less known is that Guan-Yin somehow became the Buddhist patron saint of sexual diversity. In China there was a legend that Guan-Yin was once a princess who refused heterosexual marriage, turning her into the heroine of women opposing patriarchal dominance as well as of people engaged in same-sex relationships.

acolyte). As in China, the Bodhisattva of Compassion was an important spiritual figure for same-sex relationships³⁵.

Since the Meiji reforms (1868-1912)³⁶, traditional Japanese Buddhism focused on funeral services and had no habit of performing marriages. At present, same-sex marriage is not legal in Japan, but the Zen Shunkoin temple in Kyoto started performing Buddhist same-sex wedding ceremonies in 2010. The lay Buddhist organization Soka Gakkai International (SGI) is a Japanese Nichiren tradition practiced in 192 countries and territories. In 1995, SGI USA - one of the largest Buddhist organizations in the States - announced they would allow same-sex weddings at all their centres, later followed by many other SGI organizations.

4. Buddhist Globalization

In the centuries following the first contacts between Christian missionaries and Asian cultures, a clash of civilizations between East and West took place, and Asian tolerance towards homosexuality was at the heart of this debate. In the Christian world-view of those days there was no space for diversity (and certainly not sexual diversity). In this ideological collision, Asia in general and Buddhism in particular were initially on the defense.

The British Empire made homosexual activities punishable by law, and in doing so globalized homo-criminalization. Meanwhile, Christian missionaries successfully convinced the world that homosexuality is an 'unnatural' activity within god's creation. They did this with such vitriolic language that they also globalized homo-hatred. Although Buddhism does not believe in a creator god, many traditional Buddhist countries adopted Western views, including its homophobia.

The psychological turning point for Buddhism was the meeting of the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893³⁷. Buddhism revived and started spreading to the West. So, contrary to common belief, the roots of a settled Buddhist presence in the Europe and America did not start with the social revolution of the 1960s, but can be traced back to the late 19th century.

4.1. Buddhism in the West: Europe, America, Australia

Europeans have historically lived in quasi mono-religious regions and are therefore often less comfortable with religious diversity than Americans are. As a result, European Buddhists did put more emphasis on internal ecumenical dialogue than on social action,

³⁵ Japanese religious trans-gender legends mention how the (female) Kannon sometimes transformed into a (male) acolyte engaging in a *nanshoku* same-sex relationship with an older monk.

³⁶ The Meiji governments wanted to modernise Japan into a 'civilized' nation, which meant a focus on the West and on Christian values. State support for Buddhism was withdrawn, and the tolerance towards *nanshoku* gradually evaporated.

³⁷ Especially the speech of the Sri Lankan Theravada monk Anagarika Dharmapala got worldwide media attention. Some days later, he conducted the first known conversion of an American to Buddhism in the USA.

and the first European Buddhist congress took place as early as 1933³⁸. In 1975, the European Buddhist Union (EBU) was founded³⁹. The EBU has always put great emphasis on human rights and equality⁴⁰.

As is well known, European countries were the pioneers in legalizing same-sex marriage: the Netherlands in 2001, followed by Belgium in 2003. Buddhists supported this evolution⁴¹. The oldest documented European Buddhist same-sex ceremony I could trace took place near Paris, in 1995⁴². Many European Buddhist teachers of various traditions have told me they would be very happy to perform same-sex marriages, but were not yet asked to do so by members of their community. Others said their tradition does not (or very rarely) perform a religious marriage, but would be happy to bless a marriage if the couple would wish them to do so. In the same survey, all teachers said they have no problems with sexual orientation or gender identity among their members⁴³.

American culture is more religious and also has a stronger tradition of religious diversity and religious charity activities than Europe. In 1987, Zen priest Issan Dorsey⁴⁴ took in a homeless student dying of AIDS. This was the start of the Buddhist Maitri Hospice, which may well be the first hospice in the world that was set up for people dying from AIDS.

The first Buddhists to come to the USA were not Theravada as in Europe⁴⁵, but Chinese and Japanese Mahayana Buddhists⁴⁶. In 1898, the Jodo Shinshu community (Japanese Pure Land Buddhism) founded the Buddhist Church of San Francisco (BCSF)⁴⁷. They would make history, performing the oldest documented Buddhist same-sex marriages in

³⁸ These historic congresses took place in Berlin in 1933, followed by London (1934) and Paris (1937) and were halted by WWII. It would take till the 1970s before Buddhists started organising themselves again on a European level.

³⁹ The EBU is the official umbrella association of national Buddhist unions and Buddhist organisations in Europe.

⁴⁰ "We support the implementation of Human Rights, equality and individual responsibility for all, regardless of ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, language, religion, nationality, social origins, birth status or any other distinction." (EBU Statement of Mission, Vision, Values and Goals - see: <http://europeanbuddhism.org/about/mission-vision-values-goals/>)

⁴¹ "Buddhism makes a clear distinction between the Buddhist point of view and society's viewpoint. The secular society should strive for full equality and non discrimination amongst all its citizens, including sexual minorities. Buddhism has no religious objections towards a secular same-sex-marriage and many Buddhist institutions perform religious blessings or marriages for same-sex couples." (Council of Europe (2010), Report on Religion and Human Rights, Recommendations of the EBU on Chapter 5 'Sexual Orientation and Sexual Gender Identity')

⁴² The male same-sex 'alliance ceremony' of Fabrice Midal and Bruno Tyszler, performed by Julia Sagebien, with the approval of Vajradhatu/Shambhala's spiritual leader (Vajrayana). The same ritual was used as for other weddings. In the UK, David Brazier of the Amida Trust (Pure Land) performed a female same-sex marriage in 2014 in Malvern.

⁴³ Vermeulen (2016) survey on European Buddhism and sexual diversity (not published).

⁴⁴ Issan Dorsey (1933-1990) was abbot of the Hartford Street Zen Center in San Francisco. He was not only famous for his social engagement, but also because he used to be a drag queen before he became a Soto priest.

⁴⁵ The first Buddhist monasteries in Western Europe - Das Buddhistische Haus in Berlin (1924) and The London Buddhist Vihara (1926) - were both Theravada. The Russian Republic of Kalmykia, in the far Eastern corner of the European continent, has been predominantly Vajrayana Buddhist since the 17th century.

⁴⁶ During the Gold Rush to California, Chinese miners founded Buddhist and Taoist temples in California as early as 1853. The oldest surviving Taoist temple in the USA (Weaverville, CA - founded 1869) has an image of the Bodhisattva of Compassion.

⁴⁷ The BCSF is probably the oldest Buddhist Temple still in use in mainland America (Hawaii also has some older ones).

the post WWII era. In the early 1970s *“people began to seek the same services that heterosexuals already enjoyed in American society. A male couple in the congregation eventually asked Rev. Koshin Ogui, then assigned to BCSF, to perform their marriage. He readily agreed, and the ceremony was held in the main hall—identical to other marriages at the temple, except for the dropping of gender-based pronouns in the service. Without fanfare, history was made.”*⁴⁸ Some decades later, most main Buddhist traditions in the USA and Canada were also performing same-sex marriages. Buddhist organizations of Hawaii and California did also actively support the process for legalization of same-sex marriage in their states.

In Australia, both national Buddhist umbrella organizations (one for the lay and one for the clergy) advised the Australian government in 2012 to legalize same-sex marriage. Ajahn Brahm, abbot of the Theravada Bodhiyana monastery in Perth and Spiritual Director of the Buddhist Society of Western Australia: *“Religion does not own the institution of marriage and has no right to govern it. As a Buddhist leader, I would very much like to perform the Buddhist marriage ceremony for gays and lesbians. Why should Buddhists be denied this opportunity? Let other religions make the rules for their own members, but may they not make the rules for the Buddhists.”*⁴⁹

4.2. Shared minority experiences: are you one of them?

A less highlighted effect of Buddhist globalization was that many traditions suddenly found themselves in a minority position in a different culture. This had an immediate, more existential impact on their relationship with the queer community in four ways. First, a shared experience of discrimination. Belonging to a minority also means exposure to discrimination. In the States *“Jodo Shinshu ministers who support same-sex marriage frequently cite the internment experience and extrapolate from the suffering of the Japanese-Americans to reject any form of discrimination.”*⁵⁰ In Hungary, the Roma/gypsies are subject to severe discrimination in the form of school segregation and racial discrimination. Jai-Bhim, an Ambedkarite Buddhist movement for Roma, also supports the Hungarian LGBTI community by taking part in the Budapest Gay Pride. In 2013, on the road leaving the Pride, the Jai-Bhim participants were beaten up by neo-nazis. They were nevertheless *“proud to represent the struggle for LGBT rights in Hungary.”*⁵¹

Second, a shared experience of ‘being in the closet’. Buddhists (especially Western converts) suddenly realize they have to come out of a Buddhist closet: *“Heterosexual American Buddhists may have some inkling of this phenomenon, for as members of an uncommon or exotic religious group, many have had to face the issue of “coming out” as a Buddhist to relatives and friends.”*⁵²

⁴⁸ Wilson (2015)

⁴⁹ *A Buddhist's view on gay marriage*: www.aphref.aph.gov.au-house-committee-spla-bill-marriage-subs-sub-017.pdf

⁵⁰ Wilson (2012), at p. 48.

⁵¹ Vermeulen (2016) survey on European Buddhism and sexual diversity (not published) - reply from Jai Bhim.

⁵² Whitney (1998), at p. 19.

Third, a shared exposure to prejudice. Buddhists in the West were often seen as exotic, with a mix of attraction and rejection. *“One straight Buddhist acquaintance recounted wearing a Buddhist rosary (juzu or mala) around her wrist when she went to work one day. The Christian receptionist took one look at it and exclaimed: “Oh, your’re one of those!” - in a tone of voice that suggested cannibalism or witchcraft.”*⁵³

Fourth, a shared experience of ‘unity in diversity’. Buddhist globalization was not just an interaction with the West, but also resulted in an intense Buddhist ecumenical dialogue worldwide. Just as sexuality is very diverse, Buddhism also realized its own ‘unity in diversity’. One of the effects of this process is enculturation⁵⁴: the awareness that much of one’s own tradition might be more cultural than universal. This process is not only about doctrine and liturgy, but also made Buddhists worldwide more aware of local customs with regard to the third precept.

4.3. Compassion in action: the Buddhist welcoming of diversity

To be gay or lesbian in the West in the early 20th century, meant to be rejected; not just by society at large, but especially by the churches. This fuelled the conviction - by Christians and queers alike - that there is an opposition between gay and god. In other words, you can’t be gay and spiritual. When gays were looking for a spiritual environment that accepted them the way they are *“The answer most often given was that there was none. The dominant Christian, or rather quasi-Christian culture of the West (...) declared gays to be grievous sinners. To discover that one was gay, apparently, meant that one could not have a spiritual life. One could only have sex.”*⁵⁵ However, many members of the LGBTI community in search for spirituality found refuge in Buddhism. And at present, several Buddhist traditions have queer teachers, preceptors etc., actually running Buddhist communities where they teach and interpret the Dharma.

A major motivation for Buddhism to support and accept sexual diversity was, and still is, the Buddhist engagement for compassion (*karuna*) to all sentient beings, personalized in the figure of the Bodhisattva of Compassion, or by Amida Buddha’s Primal Vow to save all beings without any discrimination. Traditions like Jodo-Shinshu, Zen and new movements such as Shambhala, Soka Gakkai International and Triratna have, motivated by compassion, not just silently accepted queers in their midst or actively campaigned for more social justice, but also taken extra steps to become more inclusive. Jodo Shinshu not only performed the first Buddhist same-sex marriage in America (supra),

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Enculturation is defined as the debate about what is essential, universal about the Dharma and what is a local, cultural expression of this universal teaching. A similar debate has been taking place for much longer within the Roman Catholic Church, examining in how far the Roman liturgy and dogma’s were expressed in European concepts and symbols. In other words, enculturation is the question in how far ideas and rituals that for centuries have been vocalised and expressed in a specific cultural context, can (or cannot) be adapted to another cultural background. This Buddhist enculturation process is relatively young and will undoubtedly give rise to interesting debates for many years to come.

⁵⁵ Corless (2000), pp. 270-271.

but also showed flexibility to include bisexual people⁵⁶. In 2016, for the first time, a trans-female member of the Triratna Buddhist Order⁵⁷ (originally ordained as a man) conducted the ordination of a cis-woman: a radical step in a tradition where ordination is always single-sex. In the last two years, Triratna also had a large number of people declaring themselves as gender-diverse or non-binary. They asked to be recognized the way they are, and for Triratna to adjust so they could be included (Triratna has a long tradition of valuing single-sex activities, as well as mixed ones). In 2016 Triratna's headquarters in Herefordshire, UK held its first retreat for gender diverse people.

4.4. *Queer Sangha*⁵⁸: the need for a queer tribe

The Gay Buddhist Fellowship (GBF) in San Francisco was set up in 1980 to address the spiritual concerns of gay men. The GBF never intended to create a new Buddhist tradition, but sees itself as a service to gay Buddhists in existing traditions. As Robert Aitken Roshi formulated it powerfully: *'You can't do zazen in the closet.'*⁵⁹ The fact that, so many decades later, they still exist and several other queer Buddhist groups have been formed in the USA, Canada and Europe, proves the need for a queer sangha. Traditional sanghas replied to these groups with a mixture of liberal caution, fear of separation and fear of failure: *"Straight Buddhists often seem vaguely hurt at the idea that their own community might not be meeting the needs of gay and lesbian students."*⁶⁰ But queer Buddhists feel the need to meet with their queer tribe too, in a separate environment free from (intentional or unintentional) heteronormative pressure: *"Heterosexual persons in a heterosexual society need not be aware that they are heterosexual. (...) To be human is to be sexed. We can choose to be celibate, but we cannot choose to be asexual. This being so, if we are gay, we cannot fully practice Buddhism, or even life, in a context that denies our gayness. To be fully Buddhist, we must be fully gay. And so we practice together as gay men."*⁶¹ The lasting success of queer sangha groups also reflects the necessity of identifying structural social injustice and biased history, just as feminists and African-Americans once did: *"Not that long ago, it was argued, often on Biblical grounds, that Africans and their descendants were subhuman. It was "natural" for them to be slaves and "unnatural" for them to be in positions of power and responsibility. Similarly, it was argued that women should keep their place in the home, doing the housework and praying for their menfolk. It was also "unnatural" for them to be in positions of power and responsibility."*⁶² The queer sangha rightly exposed that Buddhist silence does not only lead to tolerance, but can also result in maintaining the status-quo of a heterosexist or homo-negative society.

⁵⁶ In 2000 "Rev. Mark Unno officiated at a lay ceremony in a Seattle dance hall. The wife was bisexual and had had a prior relationship with a woman, and the couple formulated their wedding vows in such a manner that the marriage was "open," allowing the spouses to potentially be involved with additional persons " Wilson (2012), at p. 39.

⁵⁷ Vermeulen (2016) survey on European Buddhism and sexual diversity (not published) - reply from Triratna.

⁵⁸ Sangha in the broad sense refers to the Buddhist spiritual community (in the narrow sense it refers to the monastic community only)

⁵⁹ Zen priest Robert Aitken Roshi, quoted by Corless (1998), at p. 256.

⁶⁰ Whitney (1998), at p. 16.

⁶¹ Corless (2000), at p. 277.

⁶² Corless (2000), at p. 272.

4.5. *The rise of Rainbow Dharma: transcending the binary bias of self and society*

Several Buddhist teachers realize that the process of accepting sexual diversity is also a *spiritual* learning opportunity to practice the Dharma. As the rainbow follows the rain, it is the realization of a transformation: from identifying a situation of oppression and suffering that needs our help, into seeing diversity as an opportunity to learn how we ourselves must change. *“In our effort to create an enlightened society, the dualism of gender binaries such as male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, and cisgender (people whose psychological gender aligns with their assigned physical gender)/transgender reinforces the very separation that our practice is aimed at transcending. The reality is that not all men are masculine and not all women are feminine, and no one is entirely one or the other. (...) In the phenomenal world, our everyday life, we rely on what we see to determine what gender others are. But that interpretation is a function of our attachment to a collective, societal judgment of narrowly defined gender pigeonholes. To see each person as they are, we need to let go of our attachment to those categories.”*⁶³ Rita Gross talks about suffering in ‘the prison of gender roles’, but *“At the same time, Buddhists have also claimed that gender is relatively irrelevant, that enlightened mind is beyond gender, neither male nor female.”*⁶⁴ Realising this non-binary nature of the enlightened mind (or in other words, the binary and heterosexist bias of the self) means that for Buddhists, overcoming these biases becomes a part of their spiritual path. Consequently, the ‘rise of Rainbow Dharma’ does not only mean Queer Dharma by and for queer Buddhists, but fully, existentially, engaging with diversity as a spiritual practice for all. Many Buddhists take part in their local Pride manifestations, both to support the queer people within their traditions and to engage for social equality. But it can also be part of their Dharma practice. Centro Zen L’Arco for example, has been taking part in the Rome Pride since 2012 as a spiritual practice for their sangha, to actualize the Zen teaching of ‘harmony of difference and equality’. Abbot Dario Doshin Girolami: *“It’s an indispensable spiritual work, and a social justice work. The whole Universe is like a symphony that we co-create. How do we want to contribute?”*⁶⁵

5. Conclusions

This article shows that throughout its long history, Buddhism has always shown flexibility to adjust marriage to local needs (including same-sex marriage with adoption). It did so again when the LGBTI-community in the West asked for the recognition of same-sex marriage in the second half of the 20th century. Buddhists have replied positively to this request, decades before the first legalization of secular same-sex marriage.

⁶³ McCormick (2014)

⁶⁴ Gross (2016), at p. 23.

⁶⁵ See: <http://europeanbuddhism.org/news/centro-zen-larco-holding-the-love-in-our-hearts-rome-gay-pride-2016/> (The ‘Harmony of difference and equality’ is expressed in the Sandokai, by Sekito Kisen.)

This illustrates that the present-day dynamic for marriage equality was from the start both secular and religious, and it happened both in the West and in the East. It thus falsifies the popular theory that activism for same-sex marriage (and by extension for non-discrimination of sexual orientation and gender identity) is a recent, atheist and Western demand that is alien to, and imposed upon, religious and/or non-Western cultures. If we go back far enough in history, it is clear that the West globalized homophobia, rather than non-discrimination and marriage equality. Buddhists never considered marriage to be an exclusive religious institution and they reject the claim by some religions that they have the exclusive right to define marriage, even for other religions and beliefs. Consequently, Buddhists also dismiss the view that the human right 'freedom of religion and belief' can be used by one religion (Christianity for example) to deny another (Buddhism) the right to perform same-sex marriages, as a contradiction in terms.

The history of Buddhism also proves that the popular notion that all religious attitudes are - and have always been - monolithically negative towards sexual diversity is simply false. In the past, most mainstream Buddhist traditions have shown tolerance. And those who did adopt homo-negative views never crossed the line of hate-language or preaching violence. In the process of Buddhist globalization, many Buddhist traditions have moved from passive tolerance towards active inclusion of queer people within their traditions, and public support for equal rights, including marriage equality.

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