

Buddhist Values and the Quest for Coexistence

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Abstract

This paper explores the universal relevance of Buddhist values by examining their influence across diverse cultural and geographical contexts. It investigates how foundational principles—specifically compassion, non-violence, and mindfulness—align with humanistic ideals that transcend religious boundaries. Through an analysis of classical texts and contemporary interpretations, the study demonstrates how these values contribute to the formation of inclusive, respectful, and coexistent communities.

A primary focus is placed on the intersection of Buddhist ethics and gender diversity. The research highlights evolving efforts within Buddhist traditions to integrate gender-diverse individuals, arguing that Buddhism's inherent "ethical flexibility" allows it to adapt to modern concerns regarding identity, equity, and justice. This adaptability reflects an enduring emphasis on the dignity of all beings, irrespective of gender identity.

By synthesizing perspectives from Buddhist philosophy, gender studies, and social justice theory, the paper positions Buddhist ethics as a practical framework for fostering harmony in pluralistic societies. Ultimately, the study affirms that core Buddhist values provide a robust foundation for addressing contemporary social divisions and nurturing a more compassionate, equitable, and globally coexistent society.

Introduction

Buddhism originated in ancient India and spread globally, resulting in various adaptations emphasizing its core principle of interconnectedness. This principle posits that all beings and phenomena are interconnected, nurturing unity and harmony within the Buddhist framework. This study explores the universal relevance of Buddhist values across various cultures, investigating their compatibility with broader humanistic ideals. Through an analysis of traditional texts, historical contexts, and contemporary discussions, this study illustrates how Buddhist principles can shape

attitudes to promote an inclusive community. Key findings of this study unveil the inclusivity of individuals from diverse backgrounds, highlighting the emphasis on respect and dignity for all beings. Qualitative research methodology is employed to gather and analyze data to approach concepts and opinions. In today's globalized world, promoting shared values and respecting diversity is crucial, making this research essential for exploring the potential of an inclusive society.

Literature Review

Buddhist modernity embodies adjusting Buddhist customs to suit present-day contexts marked by globalization, technological advancements, and socio-political transformations. McMahan (2008) has investigated how Buddhist modernism entails reinterpreting ancient teachings to align with modern values while tackling urgent societal concerns. Garfield (2015) has scrutinized the influence of modernity on Buddhist philosophy and epistemology. He explores how Buddhist scholars have engaged with Western philosophical concepts and scientific progress, facilitating cross-cultural dialogue and the advancement of Buddhist philosophy in contemporary society. Furthermore, Garfield delves into the socio-political dimensions of Buddhism in the modern context, tackling subjects such as nationalism, globalization, and human rights. He investigates how Buddhist communities have responded to changes in society and politics, actively interacting with and reassessing modern ideologies and institutions. Benavides (2004) contributes to it by investigating institutional modernity and the economics of modernity. On the other hand, Gross (1993) has promoted inclusive approaches that celebrate diversity across gender and sexual orientation. Her works underscore the significance of breaking down barriers to engagement and fostering inclusivity within Buddhist communities. Another aspect is that Buddhist modernity raises questions about the compatibility of universal ethical norms with Buddhist-specific ethical frameworks. Keown (2005) has investigated how Buddhist doctrines intersect with broader ethical principles regarding human rights, environmental sustainability, and social justice in addressing contemporary challenges. He engages with modern ethical dilemmas, showcasing the applicability of Buddhist ethics to contemporary living. Buddhist ethics fundamentally prioritize compassion, non-violence, and interdependence; however, challenges may arise when attempting to apply these principles in complex socio-political contexts. Hence, pragmatic solutions are needed.

Universal Ethics and Buddhist Ethics

Universal ethical values, often regarded as the foundation of collective morality, include principles like human dignity, justice, non-harming, and compassion. Harvey (2000) contends that a crucial element of Western ethical frameworks is the establishment of moral guidelines applicable to all individuals capable of comprehending them. Keown (2005) identifies the most prominent Western ethical theories: deontology, Utilitarianism, and virtue ethics. He compares these influential Western ethical frameworks with Buddhist ethics and discusses the relevance of Buddhist ethical principles in

today's global context. Keown delves into the historical evolution of Buddhist ethics and examines its philosophical underpinnings, exploring how concepts such as *kamma* and the Noble Eightfold Path shape a unique Buddhist ethical framework. The concept of *kamma*, defined as the law of cause and effect, bears a fundamental resemblance to the notion embraced by Utilitarianism that one's actions entail consequences. Moreover, the concept of *kamma* can be likened to the universal ethical principle that actions have repercussions, whether positive or negative.

Interestingly, the nature of *kamma* in Buddhism is determined by the intention (*cetanā*) behind an action. According to Buddhist teachings, the intention (*cetanā*) constitutes *kamma*. When one wills to act, whether through body, speech, or mind, *kamma* is generated.[8] In other words, intention encompasses the motive behind the action.

Harvey (2000) explores parallels between Aristotle and Buddhism, highlighting their shared goal of human perfection through the development of knowledge and character, known as 'head' and 'heart'. In Buddhism, this entails overcoming ignorance and craving while cultivating virtues reflecting the ultimate goal. Similarly, Aristotle's ethics focus on virtues that contribute to human perfection. While Kantian ethics prioritize duty over personal good, Buddhism sees morality as a path to happiness rooted in compassion; however, Buddhism is not alien to duty and obligation. In contrast to Utilitarianism, Buddhism rejects morally questionable actions, emphasizing ethical conduct to minimize suffering. According to Harvey (2000), one of the criticisms of Utilitarianism is its potential to justify ethically questionable actions under the premise that 'the end justifies the means'. Buddhism, especially in its Theravāda form, rejects this notion. In Buddhism, only wholesome means are believed to lead to truly wholesome ends. While both Utilitarianism and Buddhism aim to minimize suffering, Buddhism places a significant emphasis on ethical conduct as essential for achieving this goal. This emphasis contrasts with the utilitarian perspective, which primarily focuses on the consequences of actions rather than the ethical qualities of those actions (Harvey, 2000).

The universal relevance of Buddhist ethics lies in its emphasis on compassion. Universal norms recognize compassion as a foundational principle, advocating for empathy and concern toward others' well-being. Indeed, compassion (*karuṇā*) holds a central place in Buddhism, extending not only to human interactions but also to all sentient beings. This mutual dedication to alleviating suffering highlights compassion as a universal link between diverse ethical traditions. Moreover, the principle of non-harming, which occupies a crucial position in traditions such as Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism, reflects universal values. In short, compassion, non-harming, and mindfulness provide a shared foundation that suggests the possibility of ethical universality. Challenges and differences underscore the importance of nuanced comprehension and intercultural exchange. By recognizing shared traits and distinct features, we enrich the global ethical conversation, nurturing a more inclusive and compassionate approach to ethical living.

Buddhist Insights on Inclusion

Within the tapestry of human experience, diversity serves as the vibrant thread that intricately weaves together the fabric of societies. Recently, there has been a significant focus on inclusivity and diversity across various realms, indicating a shared and nuanced understanding of these concepts. It is important to recognize that diverse cultures, perspectives, backgrounds, and abilities collectively contribute to shaping our interconnected world. In today's society, inclusivity is vital across various settings, including workplaces, educational institutions, communities, and social spaces. It nurtures a sense of belonging and contributes to a fairer and more equitable society. Inclusive environments are crucial for individuals to learn about diversity, equity, and inclusion, and to develop essential skills. Wolbring and Nguyen (2023) have explored the impact of diversity and inclusion on organizational performance and innovation, stressing the importance of nurturing an inclusive society where all individuals feel valued and supported.

The Buddhist perspective on inclusiveness draws from fundamental teachings encapsulated in the fourfold sublime attitudes called *brahmavihāra*. These teachings underline the recognition of the shared nature of human experience. Tho (2024) explains that in Buddhist philosophy, the notion of equanimity (*upekkhā*) emphasizes inclusivity and non-discrimination, encouraging followers to regard all individuals with equal respect and fairness. He stresses the importance of cultivating equanimity in all circumstances and maintaining an equal attitude towards everyone. From his viewpoint, there is no fundamental difference between humans; every individual is valued and should be treated with justice.

In addition, Buddhism's acknowledgment of the interconnectedness of all existence leads to an inclusive approach that transcends ego and self-centeredness. The *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* highlights the concept of 'anatta' (non-self), indirectly undermining the notion of a permanent, unchanging self. This notion challenges barriers based on identity to nurture the idea of inclusion by recognizing the fluidity and interconnected nature of individuals and their experiences.[13] In addition, Buddhism offers comprehensive psychological training aimed at achieving enlightenment, designed to assist practitioners in recognizing the reality of the mind-body (*nāma-rūpa*). It also involves understanding the ever-changing phenomena of the Five Aggregates (*khandha*).

Another significant aspect to consider is the concept of *papañca*, which refers to conceptual elaboration or mental proliferation. In Buddhist literature, *papañca* comprises three elements: craving (*taṇhā*), view (*diṭṭhi*), and conceit or pride (*māna*). Exclusion and discrimination stem from this mental proliferation, which involves projecting concepts onto people or things. This occurs when individuals crave their identity, hold mistaken views, or are conceited about their existence. Thanissaro also clarifies that the classification of *papañca* originates from perceiving oneself as the

thinker. Through self-reflective cognition, we construct notions of 'self,' which can lead to concepts such as 'I,' 'being,' 'not being,' 'me,' 'not me,' 'mine,' and 'not mine.' [14]

The *Saṅgha*: An Inclusive Community

In Buddhism, the *saṅgha* refers to the community of practitioners. It is seen as an inclusive community where individuals, regardless of their backgrounds, can unite to support each other in their spiritual journey. The emphasis on the *saṅgha* reflects the idea of inclusiveness within the context of a spiritual community. The *saṅgha* is expected to represent a non-discriminatory organization and treat all members equally and respectfully. The Buddha permitted individuals within the *saṅgha* to transition between genders, allowing them to change from monk to nun or vice versa. Rules regarding seniority within the *saṅgha* were carefully outlined in the *Vinaya Pitaka* to facilitate these transitions. These groundbreaking rulings established a precedent for gender inclusivity and emphasized the Buddha's dedication to embracing diversity within his community.

The *saṅgha*, as an inclusive community, is thought to go beyond boundaries of nationality, ethnicity, gender, and social status. It is a diverse gathering of individuals who share a common aspiration for spiritual growth and understanding. It must be remembered that the inclusiveness of the *Saṅgha* is not confined to theoretical ideals since Buddhism recognizes the inherent equality of all beings. Therefore, the *saṅgha* serves as a living testament to this principle. Whether novices or experienced practitioners, everyone within the *saṅgha* is an integral part of the community.

The Buddha was not a radical social reformer calling for the eradication of all social distinctions. While he recognized that past *kamma* shaped a person's social status at birth, He held the belief that individuals were not obligated to remain restricted within those confines. Instead, he valued talent and energy, suggesting that people could surpass their social class if their abilities guided them elsewhere (Harvey, 2018).

The Buddha's teachings emphasize an inclusive ethos, welcoming individuals from diverse backgrounds to join the *saṅgha*. This principle is exemplified in the Buddha's rejection of the prevalent caste system during his era. This rejection of discriminatory practices underlines the Buddhist commitment toward inclusiveness and acknowledgment of the value of each individual. Buddhist teachings prioritize all sentient beings' equality and fairness, explicitly dismissing caste distinctions. Buddhism reveals that every individual, irrespective of social background, possesses the potential to achieve enlightenment. According to the *Vasala Sutta* of *Suttanipāṭa*, a person's social standing is not predetermined by their birth but by their actions. [16] Being born into a particular caste does not automatically make one an outcast or a *Brahmin*. Instead, the deeds and behavior of an individual define whether they are considered an outcast or a *Brahmin*. Acting by moral principles and righteousness elevates one's status to that of a *Brahmin*, while actions contrary to these values lead to

being labelled as an outcast. It highlights how personal conduct shapes societal position, regardless of birth circumstances.

The *Pahārāda Sutta* from the *Aṅguttaranikāya* illustrates how the Buddha embraced individuals from various social strata, whether noble or outcast, into his monastic community without bias or discrimination. Just as the vast ocean has a single taste—salt, similarly, the *dhamma* and *vinaya* also possess a single taste: the flavor of liberation.[17] His emphasis on sharing his teachings ensures that all members of the *saṅgha* have the opportunity to learn and practice. According to the *Pahārāda Sutta*, just as mighty rivers flow into the vast ocean, losing their distinct identities to become part of the greater whole, individuals from various social backgrounds — *khattiyas*, *brahmins*, *vessas*, and *suddas* — discard their former names and associations when they adopt a life of renunciation following the teachings of the *Tathāgata*. They let go of their previous identities and familial connections, recognized simply as ascetics following the Sakyan son.[18]

Most importantly, Buddhism always urges its *saṅgha* community to use respectful and inclusive language and avoid terms and words that may be exclusionary or offensive. It can be found in the *Subhāsita Sutta* of the *Suttanipāta*. According to the *sutta*, one should utter only pleasant speech that does not harm oneself nor cause harm to others and speak only kind and gladly welcomed words that bring no evil.[19] It is none other but to be mindful of the words coming out of one's mouth. One must be aware that words are powerful as they can turn people into unity; otherwise, divisiveness.

In reality, the Buddha highly values harmony within the monastic *saṅgha*, emphasizing its importance for the flourishing of the community.[20] He emphasizes the necessity of regular meetings where members gather, interact, and conduct their affairs in a spirit of unity. He advises that members should convene, disband harmoniously, and conduct their activities with mutual accord.[21] This emphasis on harmony reflects the *Buddha's* recognition of its pivotal role in embracing a conducive and inclusive environment for spiritual growth and collective well-being within the *saṅgha*.

While the Buddha did not actively seek social reform, his groundbreaking inclusion of women in his monastic community challenged traditional gender roles and societal norms. He initially encountered some resistance while establishing a female monastic order, which underscored the early Buddhist commitment to gender equality. The Buddha's firm assertion of women's equality in intellectual and spiritual capacities, particularly in their pursuit of enlightenment, remains unparalleled and underscores his progressive stance.

In this case, Sponberg (1992) explores early Buddhism's complex attitudes, identifying four perspectives: soteriological inclusiveness, institutional androcentrism, ascetic misogyny, and soteriological androgyny. The first underscores Buddhism's inclusive salvation doctrine, going beyond gender bias. Yet, with the institutionalization of Buddhism, societal norms of male dominance became

entrenched, reflecting cultural biases against women. Sponberg also points out a positive aspect: an endeavor within Buddhist scriptures to address these conflicting attitudes by embracing a more inclusive viewpoint.

On the other hand, Gross (1993) examines how feminist principles can be integrated into Buddhist thought and practice, offering a fresh perspective of Buddhism that is more inclusive, equitable, and empowering for women. She calls for a reexamination of traditional Buddhist texts and teachings to uncover and challenge patriarchal biases, as well as a greater emphasis on the voices and experiences of women within Buddhist communities. Gross offers a feminist critique of Buddhist teachings, highlighting areas where gender bias may have influenced interpretations and advocating for greater gender equality within the tradition. Rather than simply critiquing Buddhism, Gross proposes constructive ways forward and suggests strategies for reform in terms of feminist principles (Young, 1994). While social and legal changes play a crucial role in combating discrimination against women, *dhamma* goes beyond gender limitations. It promotes inclusivity and embraces individuals of all genders, including male, female, transgender, and intersex persons. This wide view is shown in the two truths of Buddhism, where gender is recognized as a phenomenon existing solely in the conventional world and not in the ultimate truth. Some scholars have cited the *Somā Sutta* of the *Saṃyuttanikāya* to indicate the inclusiveness of gender differences (Bodhi, 2000). It is stated that womanhood does not matter at all when one comprehends *dhamma* profoundly and fully. This statement uncovers how gender becomes irrelevant in pursuing and achieving spiritual practice.

Buddhist Perspective on Sexuality

Like other religions, Buddhism has faced scrutiny over its approach to sexuality from a range of sources, within and outside the religion. Keown (2005), in his study on sexuality, has undertaken a comparative analysis between Buddhism and Christianity. In his analysis, initially, it appears that Buddhism and Christianity have stark differences regarding sexuality. However, upon Keown's closer examination, they share more commonalities than initially presumed. Some may argue that certain aspects of Buddhist values are not universally applicable or probably face challenges in contemporary contexts, especially when confronted with issues like gender equality or sexuality. Sweet (2007) contends that within the historical context of Indian civilization, a significant aspect relevant to Buddhism is the prevailing negative attitude toward sexual desire and sexuality. This perspective is particularly prevalent among the various orders of ascetics who renounce worldly pursuits. He asserts that these ascetic traditions have been integral since the inception of Indian society, emphasizing the renunciation of worldly attachments, including those related to sexual desires. Langenberg (2018) proposes that because celibate monasticism holds a central role in Buddhist practices, it is common to anticipate Buddhist sexual ethics as straightforward and uneventful. Some scholars and casual observers perceive Buddhism as a religion that holds unfavorable views toward sexuality.

It is important to clarify that Buddhism emphasizes the control of desires and attachments for spiritual progress; however, it does not mean that it inherently promotes a negative attitude toward the opposite sex. Instead, Buddhism teaches practitioners to cultivate mindfulness, compassion, and ethical behavior in all interactions, including those with individuals of the opposite sex, recognizing the potential for attachment, craving, and suffering that may arise from uncontrolled desires. Indeed, this principle applies not only to interactions with the opposite sex but to all relationships and experiences. Buddhism typically sees sexuality as a realm where one must navigate the challenges of attachment and desire, ultimately seeking liberation from suffering. Within monastic circles, celibacy is upheld as a path toward spiritual enlightenment. Coleman (2002) suggests that the intertwining of gender and sexuality often presents a complex and contradictory situation within Buddhist philosophy. Hence, this research endeavors to explore potential solutions to the criticisms surrounding sexuality within Buddhist contexts.

Criticisms and Challenges

In societies where Buddhism is a dominant religion, cultural attitudes toward sexuality shape how Buddhist communities perceive it. Occasionally, societal biases or misconceptions regarding LGBTQ+ matters may manifest within Buddhist contexts. Keown (2005) points out that the topic of homosexuality has sparked intense debates within numerous religious traditions, resulting in significant splits between those with more liberal views and those adhering to traditional beliefs. From the earliest times, Buddhism has banned all sexual behaviors with little differentiation between heterosexual and homosexual acts. Critics may contend that cultural biases and social norms have influenced interpretations of Buddhist scriptures, thus perpetuating gender inequality and discrimination. Similarly, some Buddhist communities or institutions face criticism for their failure to embrace LGBTQ+ inclusivity, resulting in potential discrimination, marginalization, or an absence of supportive resources for LGBTQ+ Buddhists. Based on some Buddhist texts, some may argue that sexual desires toward individuals of the same sex are viewed unfavorably. *Vinaya* sources reveal that *paṇḍaka* (homosexual) and *ubhatobyañjanaka* (hermaphrodite) have been prohibited from ordination, and their spiritual potential in their current life has been viewed as limited (Brahmali, 2021).

Another notable point is found in the *Paloka Sutta*, which elucidates the underlying cause of famine. The *sutta* describes the term '*micchādhmmaparetā*,' referring to harboring sexual desires toward what is deemed inappropriate.[31] Later interpretations expand this term to encompass sexual desires between individuals of the same gender, siblings, and even between parents and their offspring. The *sutta* appears to unveil behaviors that deviate from the natural order within society. It does not seem to criticize or exclude individuals with sexual deviations. Rather, the *sutta* simply explains objectively what is supposed to be.

In the *Cakkavattisīhanāda Sutta*, "*micchādhamma*" is described as actions or behaviors that are morally incorrect or deviate from ethical principles. [32] This term denotes conduct that goes against accepted moral standards and may have adverse consequences on both individuals and society. The commentary, compiled alongside the *sutta*, provides additional explanations, interpretations, and historical context to help understand the profound teachings. It thus goes further: *Micchādhammoti purisānaṃ purisesu itthīnaṅca itthīsu chandarāgo*. [33] The statement indicates the presence of lustful desires among men toward men and among women toward women. Critics may interpret this statement to portray the Buddha as being against homosexuality. On the other hand, critics may present various objections regarding the treatment of sexuality in Buddhism, pointing out some interpretations of *vinaya* and *sutta* texts, as well as events within the tradition. Nevertheless, an admirable trait of Buddhism lies in its receptivity to criticism, viewing it as a valuable opportunity for constructive reflection. The *Kālāma Sutta* is the best example of welcoming doubt and criticism. As is stated, it is appropriate for one to have doubt and uncertainty; when uncertainty arises regarding what is doubtful, it is natural. [34] Therefore, it is safe to say that Buddhism welcomes challenges and criticisms to clear out doubt and uncertainty.

Sexual Deviation in Buddhist Communities

A thorough investigation into homosexuality and gender variance within Buddhism is predominantly recorded within the monastic regulations (*vinaya*) across various Buddhist schools. Buddhism's approach to sexuality and homosexuality is influenced by its principles of renunciation and the cultural environments in which it operates. Boisvert contends that any examination of the link between homosexuality and spirituality should encompass the concept of sexuality. In his view, this issue is particularly significant because sexuality is crucial in the experiences of gay, lesbian, and queer individuals, frequently intertwined with their identity. [35] Within the Buddhist community, various perspectives on homosexuality reflect the diversity of interpretations within the tradition. Central to Buddhist teachings is the notion that sensual enjoyment can hinder one's journey toward enlightenment and is regarded as less noble compared to other forms of enjoyment.

Research indicates that the inclusion of gay monks into the Buddhist *saṅgha* has sparked debate in contemporary times. In 2003, Phra Pisarn Thammapattee, a prominent Thai monk, stated that around a thousand gay monks were part of the country's 300,000-strong monk community. He suggested that individuals displaying 'sexual deviation' should be barred from wearing the saffron robes because some had caused trouble within the temples. [36] In Tibetan culture, homosexuality is generally frowned upon, and monks exhibiting homosexual traits are seen as irregular. Goldstein describes them as monks who find it challenging to maintain the rigorous discipline of monastic life yet are hesitant to give up the social standing and financial stability that come with being a monk by going back to lay life. [37]

Both Thailand and Sri Lanka incorporate Buddhism into their constitutional frameworks alongside religious freedom, but historically, Thailand has been a more permissive society than Sri Lanka colonized by the British. These historical disparities significantly shape the current status of sexual minorities in each country. According to Sands's studies, the National Department of Mental Health has officially recognized that homosexuality is not a disorder. Shockingly, in 1999, a Sri Lankan newspaper advocated for the sexual assault of lesbians, with the support of the government's Press Council, and labelled lesbianism as "sadistic" and "salacious." [38] These instances illustrate how Buddhist institutions have undergone criticisms and challenges.

Cabezón notes that in North America, he is not aware of any Buddhist institution that discriminates against its lay homosexual members. [39] The Friends of the Western Buddhist Order in the UK warmly welcomes homosexuals and offers introductory meditation retreats specifically designed for gays and lesbians. [40] Certain Buddhists understood homosexuality in Japan. Some Japanese Buddhists thought that relationships between adult male monks and young boys were normal in monastic life. Stories from medieval times often show these relationships, usually ending sadly with the monk feeling sorry for being too attached to the boy. [41] According to Harvey's studies, Japan has shown active support and advocacy for homosexuality, while China has exhibited greater tolerance towards it. [42]

Buddhist perspectives on homosexuality may differ based on cultural contexts. While some societies embrace it, others may disapprove. There are two primary viewpoints: One perspective regards homosexuality as consistent with Buddhist values. It highlights the importance of mindfulness and conscientiousness in sexual conduct. Conversely, some scholars oppose it, citing the third of the Five Precepts. They argue that homosexuality deviates from Buddhist teachings and may lead to self-harm and harm to others. Coleman suggests that the third precept in Buddhism cautions against "sexual misconduct," a term subject to varied interpretations based on practitioners' social norms. He posits that there was little explicit discussion about homosexual relationships in the early stages of Buddhism. [43] The third precept does not specifically talk about homosexuality. It mostly talks about how people should behave sexually when they are married to each other. In a broader context, this precept discourages sexual affairs with someone other than one's own spouse. The central concern addressed in the sexual ethics of the third precept revolves around betrayal, as it can potentially damage the trust bestowed upon us by a loved one. In the case of homosexuals in a committed and consensual marriage, we might need to rethink the usual way we understand this precept.

Recently, there has been an increasing recognition and advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights within Buddhist communities. Some Buddhist leaders and organizations have been actively promoting inclusivity and

supporting marginalized individuals, thereby challenging traditional attitudes and practices. However, obstacles persist, especially within more conservative or traditionalist circles.

According to Coleman, some Buddhist centers have implemented specialized retreats catered to their gay members. For instance, the Spirit Rock Centre organizes annual retreats tailored explicitly for gay men and lesbian women, as well as a combined retreat for both groups. Additionally, non-denominational organizations such as the Gay Buddhist Fellowship in the Bay Area and smaller groups like Dharma Sisters offer support and encouragement to gay and lesbian practitioners.[44] In contemporary Western Buddhism, the figures like the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh support the gay rights movement. While the Dalai Lama's stance is somewhat uncertain, Hanh and his community openly endorse Buddhist same-sex marriages, advocating equal moral standards for all sexual orientations.[45] In a friendly meeting, the Dalai Lama clarified his understanding of traditional Buddhist texts regarding sexuality. He indicated his openness to the idea that specific cultural and historical contexts might influence certain teachings. Though he does not have the authority to reinterpret Buddhist scriptures unilaterally, he encouraged those present to build a consensus among various Buddhist traditions and communities to collectively adapt the understanding of these texts to suit contemporary society.[46]

Homosexual and Hermaphrodite

Throughout its rich philosophical traditions and diverse cultural expressions, Buddhism has long contended with matters of gender and sexuality. Among the most controversial topics within Buddhist discourse are the concepts of *paṇḍaka* and *ubhatobyañjanaka*, individuals with ambiguous sexual characteristics or unusual sexual behavior.

The origin of the terms *paṇḍaka* and *ubhatobyañjanaka* can be traced back to ancient Indian society, where they were mentioned in Buddhist scriptures and other religious texts. In early Buddhist literature, *paṇḍakas* were depicted as marginalized individuals, excluded from certain religious and social activities due to their perceived impurity. *Ubhatobyañjanaka* is ascribed to an individual who possesses both male and female sexual characteristics, commonly known as a hermaphrodite. Harvey mentions that *paṇḍaka* is seen as homosexual. He points out that according to the *Paṇḍakavutthu* (Vin. IV. 47), the Buddha has prohibited *paṇḍakas* from ordination and required them to disrobe those who were already ordained. To have such people in the *saṅgha* community would be seen as problematic. In addition, Harvey suggests that the *Milindapañha* text views *paṇḍakas* as part of a group deemed 'obstructed,' implying they cannot realize *dhamma*, even with correct practice.[47] On the other hand, Rhys Davids interpreted the term '*paṇḍaka*' as referring to a eunuch in his translation. In the *Milindapañha*, *paṇḍakas* are seen as imperfections and persons of fickleness, sparking the exclusion attitude.[48]

The interpretation of *paṇḍaka* and *ubhatobyañjanaka* within Buddhist tradition has been debated and controversial. De Silva maintains that since homosexuality is not explicitly mentioned in the Buddha's teachings, it is assumed to be evaluated on a similar basis as heterosexuality. De Silva believes that the Buddha occasionally discouraged certain actions, not mainly due to ethical concerns but because they conflicted with societal norms or might result in legal consequences. In De Silva's opinion, the Buddha taught that abstaining from such issues could alleviate anxiety and embarrassment resulting from societal disapproval.[49] The Lotus Sutta states that *Bodhisattas* should avoid associating with *Paṇḍakas*. Vasubandhu and Asanga argue that *paṇḍakas*, consumed by defiling passions from both genders, lack the discipline necessary for spiritual practice. Their moral weakness, stemming from a deficiency in modesty and shame, renders them incapable of resisting these impulses. Both scholars reject recognizing *paṇḍakas* as laypersons, deeming them unfit for association with or service to the *saṅgha*. Yet, Asanga suggests that *paṇḍakas* may individually pursue the layman's path, albeit without formal recognition in the *saṅgha*. [50] Nevertheless, in the *Pāḷi* commentary context, Buddhaghosa categorizes five types of *paṇḍaka*, contributing to a broader perspective.

1. *Āsittakapaṇḍaka*: a man who finds pleasure in performing oral sex and ingesting semen from another man.
2. *Usūyapaṇḍaka*: a voyeur who becomes sexually aroused by observing heterosexual intercourse.
3. *Opakkamikapaṇḍaka*: a eunuch who, despite losing testicles, is still able to ejaculate.
4. *Pakkhapaṇḍaka*: a person whose sexual arousal aligns with the moon's phases.
5. *Napumsakapaṇḍaka*: a person with ambiguous genitalia or congenital impotence.[51]

These terms provide unique insights into human sexuality across various societies and historical periods. Notably, the first two *paṇḍakas* can be ordained within specific contexts according to Buddhaghosa.[52]

Hence, it is important to highlight that not all *paṇḍakas* are forbidden and excluded from ordination. While some scholars advocate for a broader, more compassionate interpretation of these terms, others strictly adhere to traditional views, considering *paṇḍakas* and *ubhatobyañjanakas* as morally inferior or impure. This tension between traditional teachings and contemporary perspectives mirrors broader societal attitudes toward gender and sexuality.

Conclusion

In today's globalized world, the pursuit of inclusiveness and gender equality has become increasingly important. Although diverse cultural and religious traditions offer uniquely distinct viewpoints on fundamental ideals, there exists a common ground of universal values. These norms serve as fundamental principles that transcend specific cultural, religious, or ideological boundaries, recognized as essential for upholding the well-being and dignity of all individuals. For example, the principle of human dignity, which acknowledges the inherent worth of every person regardless of their background, is universally respected across diverse contexts.

In Buddhism, every sentient being is regarded as having an equal capacity for enlightenment and is thus deserving of compassion and respect. This concept is the foundation for other parts of Buddhist practice, such as the growth of compassion and the commitment to refrain from causing harm to all sentient beings. The Buddha himself challenged the societal norms of his time by ordaining women as nuns and advocating their spiritual liberation. This historical event highlights Buddhism's commitment to gender equality and inclusiveness. Moreover, Buddhist ethics, encapsulated basically in the Five Precepts, promote virtues such as honesty, integrity, and compassion, which are essential for an inclusive and equitable society. Buddhism emphasizes personal responsibility for one's actions, words, and thoughts as well as a sense of responsibility toward others and the broader community. Besides, Buddhist modernism recognizes the variety of human experiences and viewpoints while striving to uphold Buddhism's core teachings. It suggests that the foundational values of Buddhism have a universal quality beyond cultural differences and can be utilized to address the challenges of contemporary society.

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