

A Reflection of the Inclusive Attitude towards Homosexuality from the Buddhist Perspective

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Abstract: Although homosexuality is controversial, particularly in conservative communities, many Buddhists accept those whose sexual orientation is different from the majority. In light of scriptures, the Buddhist wisdom reveals compassion towards sentient beings, regardless of sex, age, and social class. This study discusses the Buddhist views on sexual minority, and on how Buddhists react to this challenge. It reveals the significance of inclusiveness in contemporary society.

Keywords: Anti-discrimination, Buddhism, Equality, LGBTQ, Sexual orientation, Social inclusiveness.

1. Introduction

Sexual diversity, which does not only tolerate but equally important accepts heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, and various forms of sexual orientation, practices, behaviour, representations and identities, is able to cope with social vulnerability and enhance social cohesion, achieving individual wellness [1]. Playing a crucial role, religions impact the public attitude towards non-heterosexual activities [2], resulting in conflicting sexual identities [3], hostility to sexual minorities [4], and poor mental health [5]. Moreover, the disparity of traditional religious value systems responds differently to the contemporary social movements such as anti-discrimination of sexual orientation. Buddhism comparatively shows greater forbearance for the people who are labelled as dissenters of heterosexuality, whilst seldom do the Buddhists engage in the activities against homosexual rights. Many Buddhists are willing to make efforts into

looking after those whose sexual orientations are different from the majority although discrepancies turn up in various denominations of Buddhism [6]. The occasion backed up by other religious clusters on January 13, 2013 in two cities across the West and the East, namely, Paris and Hong Kong, was in the absence of Buddhist protesters. Through such an event, this study looks into the contrast between the Western religious view and a Buddhist perspective on homosexuality and same-sex marriage according to both textual analysis and practical action. As a result, it encourages further examinations in this issue.

Similar voices were pouring out on that day for the controversies about homosexual rights covering anti-discrimination, marriage, child adoption. The protest named "Demo for all" pulled 800,000 marchers converging on the Champs de Mars in Paris [7, 8] while "Inclusive Love Prayer Concert" at the

government headquarters in Hong Kong drew a large crowd of 50,000 participants [9, 10], according to the organisers' claims respectively. Anti-homosexual marriage proposal highlighted the event in Paris. Numerous protesters of Catholic background carried pink flags reflecting their fears of declining traditional French family values. Akin to that march, the disapproval of the proposed legislation on anti-discrimination law for sexual orientation marked the highest concern of the turnouts in the praying concert in Hong Kong (an international city and special administrative region in China). The attendees asserted the fadeout of Chinese family culture and Christian values and the threat of reverse discrimination if the law would allow same-sex marriage. In short, family and religious values are their commonalities against homosexual relationship. Whereas the inclusion of the "traditional family values", in terms of religion and culture, has continuously been changing without association with sexual orientation, the mystified universality of the demonstrators' religious and conventional beliefs is not necessarily the only parameter judging homosexuality. On the contrary, Mr Raymond Chan Chi-chuen, the gay man and elected member of the Legislative Council of Hong Kong, who has come out and has been fighting for legal protection of homosexual rights, is a Buddhist. This contrast of reactions between Buddhism and other religions is noteworthy in this debatable issue.

References found in religious literature disclose Buddhist views on homosexuality although there is a lack of explicit discussion in academia. For example, in the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra* [11], a prominent Buddhist canon in early Mahāyāna, there are fables and metaphors illustrate gender equality which may indirectly refer to advocate the equality of sexual orientation. The egalitarianism in Buddhism traditions emphasises on the essence of all sentient beings regardless of gender, age, race and social class [12]. Sentient beings, under the law of dependent

origination, exist as an aggregate of a proper cause and supplementary conditions [13]. The aggregate changes within the cycle of death and rebirth, and this applies to all individuals. In this sense, the equality of living and life adheres to human beings, without differences between the two sexes, involving the choice and enjoyment of their lifestyle, family life and sexual orientation. *Vimalakīrti*, the layperson and main character of the *Sūtra* mentioned earlier, is a role model showing a lay family and the equality attitude towards different kinds of people [6].

Furthermore, criticism on gender discrimination had accented the gender indiscrimination through the dialogue between Śāriputra, one of the ten great disciples of the Buddha, and a goddess in the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra*. Śāriputra asked the goddess why she did not turn to be a male body because the status of women was inferior in ancient India. The goddess, as replied, had never found a female body, expressing the notion that the body and the gender are only a phenomenon and irrelevant to the body in nature [6, 11], that is, impermanence. In Buddhism, human beings are respectable; and the focus has advanced beyond the gender issue but back to the essence of being, because of which sexual orientation is unlikely an argument in Buddhist culture. Instead, love relationship, ethics and appropriate sexual behaviours are the core concerns for both heterosexual and homosexual lay Buddhists [6, 14]. The sexual relationship is grounded on true love, respect, equality and should not violate the Buddhist rules as some modern Buddhist masters suggested such as Fanren [15].

A number of facts indicate that Buddhism is becoming open-minded and inclusive to sexual orientation [16], which enables Buddhist sexual minorities to accept themselves in the heterosexually dominated environment [17]. For instance, Venerable Soeng Hyang, for instance, has personally

exemplified her double identities of a Zen master and same-sex partnership. Also, Venerable Chao Hwei has witnessed the sacred promise of marriage for a lesbian couple in August 2012 in Taiwan [18, 19], which has caught international eyes, when same-sex partnership is still a struggle of social acceptability in many religious organisations. This symbolic wedding ceremony has received admiration from homosexual communities all over the world and been recorded “2012: The Year in Pictures” by The New York Times [20]. Her blessings do not only offer the hopes to those who come out for their happiness and the justice of sexual orientation [21], but also significantly review the dispute of equal treatment to homosexuality with respect to legislation and morality. This sexual-orientation-friendly incident reveals the de-stigmatisation and the need for compassionate caring for the marginalised groups who are facing tremendous pressure in order to look for their well-being. This seriously spells out that inevitably the right of homosexual marriage is one of the popular debates in humane societies and academia for the helping professionals (such as social workers, nurses, and psychotherapists) and scholars who are keen to take care of this group of people.

The approval of same-sex marriage legally in France in 2013 [22] and the first officially married gay couple, even though the opposition provoked a protest, does not only redefine marriage [23], more notably marks the self-determination and freedom of choice, and respect in sexual orientation connected to personal life style. Although a verdict from the Court of Final Appeal of Hong Kong allows transsexual marriage [24], the issue of legislation on responding to this verdict and on anti-discrimination towards homosexuality has not yet been on the agenda for public discussion. The road ahead of the sexual minorities in Hong Kong appears a long journey but is an optimistic one, referred to the experience of other regions.

Despite the fact that homosexuality is controversial in many countries, including Asian countries, modern Buddhists likely contribute to promote equality and inclusiveness in the sense of sexual orientation. This provides a better understanding of Buddhist values that benefit contemporary context. This study addresses such a comparison between these attitudes towards sexual minorities, and invites future research on this topic.

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