

Homosexuality in the Japanese Buddhist Tradition

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INTRODUCTION

THIS IDEA FOR THIS ESSAY arose out of material I had gathered for my PhD thesis on the representations of homosexuality in Japanese popular culture. In order to contextualise modern understandings of homosexual desire as experienced between men and between women, I found it was necessary to go increasingly further back into Japanese history so that I might better understand the foundations, or what Michel Foucault terms the ‘archaeology,’ which supports modern understandings and representations of homosexuality. In so doing it became clear that ‘sex’ was not only a culture-bound concept but that the meaning and parameters of this term also changed enormously over time even within the same culture. As Foucault has argued ‘it is precisely [the] idea of sex *in itself* that we cannot accept without examination’.¹ It also became clear that, if I was to understand Japanese ‘homosexuality’ in both its present and historical contexts, I needed to bring under examination a whole host of concepts that implicitly structured the way I ‘think’ sex. [106]

The very long and complex history of homosexual relations within Japanese Buddhist institutions has only now come to light in the English-speaking world with the recent translation of a few key documents and a number of commentaries on them (these are referenced throughout the pages below). I was struck, as I hope the reader of this essay will be, by how normative sexual interactions between men in Buddhist institutions in Japan became, and how these relationships were accepted by the wider society with equanimity. Indeed, as I show, homoerotic relationships that had developed in Buddhist institutions actually served as the basis for wider same-sex sexual relationships between men throughout Japanese society from the thirteenth to the end of the nineteenth century.

My point in making this research available in this journal is not to argue that such relationships should become normative today, for the present configuration of sexuality within modern western culture makes this inconceivable. Rather, I would like to draw attention to the social forces that make sexual friendships between older and younger men ‘ideal’ forms of relationship in some societies and yet define such relationships as abusive or perverse in others. In making sense of this problem, I have found the insightful work of Michel Foucault and his various postmodern and feminist heirs to be most useful. These thinkers have done much to show how the notion of ‘sex’ in general, and more specifically, how the idea that individuals inhabit or express themselves through distinct ‘sexualities’ is a modern innovation confined largely to those cultures with their roots in northern Europe. I found that Foucault’s ideas, which so far have only really been tested in research done in western societies, were also useful when applied to Japan, a country whose understandings of sexuality have been informed by Buddhist ideas and practices.

I am increasingly convinced that ‘sex’ is invariably tied in to understandings of gender and that what is considered appropriate sexual behaviour for male bodies and female bodies is dependent, in most part, upon cultural constructions of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ which vary widely over time and across cultures. For various reasons, in Japan the Buddhist priesthood and the samurai military caste constructed a vision of the female body in such a way as to minimize its attractiveness. Conversely, the [107] youthful male body was constructed as optimally desirable and a fitting object of attraction for adult men. For men, same-sex sexual options were not distinguished as different orders of sexual interaction (homosexual as opposed to heterosexual) definitive of

specific types of people (homosexuals as opposed to heterosexuals) but were instead understood as simply a certain style, one among many, through which sexual pleasure could be enjoyed. The youthful male body was constructed and displayed as a fitting object of aesthetic and sensual appreciation for other men throughout Japanese history, beginning in Buddhist institutions from the ninth century and reaching its apogee in the samurai towns of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Because of the strong reactions that discussion of homosexuality can produce in Anglo-American cultures,² I have tried to make this an academic argument, referencing all my sources and acknowledging my own speculations as such. I hope that the material outlined here can encourage people to think about the issues surrounding homosexuality, same-sex friendship and the practice of Buddhism in new ways.

BUDDHISM AND SEX IN JAPAN

FROM THE EARLIEST TIMES until today, indigenous Japanese religion, known as Shinto, has maintained a sex-positive ideology, particularly with regard to the role of sex in procreation. Even now, it is possible to see in village festivals processions which feature enormous carved wooden phalli which are taken out of the local shrine and paraded around the fields so as to bless them and make them fecund. Unlike in Christian creation myths where the advent of awareness of sexual dimorphism is seen to mark a deterioration in the human condition (resulting in expulsion from Eden), in Japanese mythology the divine ancestors Izanagi and Izanami are shown to be curious and experimental about sex. The male Izanagi, tells his female companion that he would like to take his 'excessive part' and insert it into 'the part where you are lacking.' From this divine union springs the Japanese race. Although Shinto is largely without a developed theological system, when sex is theorized, it is usually understood to be a good thing, a 'Way' or *dō*, originating with the divine ancestors. As one seventeenth-century theologian explains: [108]

From the beginning of the two support ōmikami, Izanagi no mikoto and Izanami no mikoto, down to the birds and the beasts who receive no instruction, the intercourse of male and female is a way, like nature, that has been transmitted to us. Since the procreation of descendants is a great enterprise, it must be revered.³

The first challenge to Japanese nativism came with the introduction of Buddhism in the seventh century. It was in contrast to Buddhism, the 'Way of the Buddha', that native beliefs became codified as Shinto or the 'Way of the gods'. It is, of course, impossible to describe *the* Buddhist attitude toward sexuality because 'Buddhism' is reformulated and re-expressed in different cultures and at different times, adopting and redefining aspects of the cultures in which it has taken root. However, as with Christianity, there are broad outlines or features that have persisted over time and that can be pointed to when attempting to make generalisations. Firstly, early Buddhism discerned two forms of lifestyle appropriate to Buddhist believers: monastic and lay. For those men and women ordained as *bhikkhus* or *bhikkhunis*, total celibacy was required, while lay followers undertook to take five 'training principles,' the third of which was '*kāmesu micchācārā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi*' (I take the rule of training '*veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi*,' not to go the wrong way '*micchācārā*,' for sexual pleasure '*kāmesu*'). Unlike the Christian penitentials of the medieval period, Buddhist texts do not go into great detail explicating exactly what the 'wrong' and 'right' ways regarding sexual pleasure actually are. As with other actions, they are subject to the application of the golden mean: '[t]he deed which causes remorse afterward and results in weeping is ill-done. The deed which causes no remorse afterwards and results in joy and happiness

is well done' (*Dhammapada*). Rather than essentialising actions as good (*puñña*) or bad (*pāpa*), Buddhism instead utilised an ethic of intention, understanding acts as skilful (*kusala*) or unskilful (*akusala*). Motivations were skilful or unskilful, not in relation to a creator deity's designer-realist agenda but in terms of the degree to which they resulted in a lessening of desire. In Buddhism, desire was a problem, not because it was evil but because the attachment it produced caused suffering. [109]

Buddhism was essentially disinterested in procreation which was, after all, seen as the mechanism whereby beings were chained to a constant round of rebirths in *samsāra*. This necessarily brought it into conflict with the indigenous cultures of Eastern Asia where, under Confucian influence, the perpetuation of the family line was seen as an obligation to the ancestors. Yet, although doctrinal Buddhism had little interest in procreation and never developed a discourse about it, Mahāyāna Buddhism did utilise the powerful imagery surrounding the sex act as a hermeneutic device. From the fifth century in northern India, various Buddhist schools developed which utilised sexual imagery as a means of communicating metaphysical truths such as the non-differentiation of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. Male Buddha and bodhisattva figures were represented in sexual union with their female consorts, thus giving a heightened exposure to female elements within the tradition. Practitioners occasionally went beyond symbolism and integrated sexual practices into their rituals. However, as with Taoist sexo-yogic practices designed to promote long life, these practices were not meant to result in ejaculation but to transmute sexual into spiritual energy. The Shingon school of Japanese Buddhism founded by Kūkai (774–835) developed its own form of Tantra, Tachikawa Ryu, 'the main sex cult of Japan'⁴ which taught that the loss of self in the sex act could lead to an awakening of the spirit. These developments represent an important difference between Buddhism and Christianity with regard to sex. As LaFleur comments: 'there does not seem to be anything comparable in Europe to the Japanese Buddhist use of sexual union as either a religious symbol, or as increasingly became the case, as itself a context for religious realization'.⁵ What was remarkable about certain trends within Japanese Buddhism was that sex came to be viewed as *a good in itself apart from its role in procreation*. In Japanese Buddhism, the divorce of sexuality from procreation enabled sex to become a religious symbol released from the domesticating realm of the family.

Although present, Tantric sexual imagery which involved the unification of male and female was of marginal influence in Japan. Far more pervasive in male Buddhist institutions was the influence of homoerotic and even homosexual imagery where beautiful acolytes were understood to embody the feminine principle. The degree to which Buddhism tolerated same-sex sexual [110] activity even among its ordained practitioners is clear from the popular myth that the founder of the Shingon school, Kōbō Daishi (Kūkai), introduced homosexual acts upon his return from study in China in the early ninth century. This myth was so well known that even the Portuguese traveller, Gaspar Vilela had heard it. Writing in 1571, he complains of the addiction of the monks of Mt. Hiei to 'sodomy', and attributes its introduction to Japan to Kūkai, the founder of Koyasan, the Shingon headquarters.⁶ Jesuit records of the Catholic mission to Japan are full of rants about the ubiquity of pederastic passion among the Buddhist clergy. What particularly riled the missionaries was the widespread acceptance these practices met with among the general populace. Father Francis Cabral noted in a letter written in 1596 that 'abominations of the flesh' and 'vicious habits' were 'regarded in Japan as quite honourable; men of standing entrust their sons to the bonzes to be instructed in such things, and at the same time to serve their lust'.⁷ Another Jesuit commented that 'this evil' was 'so public' that the people 'are neither depressed nor horrified'⁸ suggesting that same-sex love among the clergy was not considered remarkable.

The organisation of Buddhist monasteries into sexually-segregated communities, often set in the remote countryside or mountains, encouraged the development of a specific style of homoeroticism revolving around young acolytes or *chigo*. The youngest acolytes, called *kasshiki* could be as little as five years old and were not required to shave their hair like monks but wore it 'shoulder length and modishly'.⁹ They decorated their faces with powder and 'dressed in finely wrought silken robes and vividly colored variegated under robes.' Colcutt points out the problems caused by boy-love in Zen monasteries of the Muromachi period (1333–1568), commenting that 'The presence of large numbers of children in the monastery could adversely affect standards of discipline.' The result was that 'gorgeously arrayed youths became the centre of admiration in lavish monastic ceremonies that were far in spirit from the simple, direct search for self advocated by the early Ch'an [Zen] masters'. Monastic legislators fought the same losing battle as the shogunate did with the kabuki theatres, when it attempted to limit the ostentatious dress on stage. Regulations repeatedly warn against the use of [111] certain fabrics and colours but they seem to have been implemented with some reluctance, if at all.

The homoerotic environment of Buddhist monasteries actually inspired a literary genre, *Chigo monogatari* (Tales about acolytes), which took as its theme the love between acolytes (*chigo*) and their spiritual guides. These homoerotic relationships were 'firmly grounded in the familiar structures of monastic life'¹⁰ and were meant to appeal to their Buddhist audience. A common theme of these tales is the transformation of a Buddhist deity, usually Kannon (Sanskrit Avalokiteśvara), Jizō (Skt. Kṣitigarbha) or Monjushiri (Sanskrit Mañjuśrī),¹¹ into a beautiful young acolyte. The acolyte then uses his physical charms to endear himself to an older monk and thereby lead him to Enlightenment. In the fourteenth-century *Chigo Kannon engi*, Kannon takes the form of a beautiful novice to become the lover of a monk who is longing for companionship in his old age. After a few years of close companionship, however, the acolyte dies, leaving the monk desolate. Kannon then appears to the monk, reveals that he and the acolyte were one and the same and delivers a discourse on impermanence. Childs comments that:

The homosexual relationship between the monk and the novice implied in this tale expresses both Kannon's compassion and his accommodation to the needs of a situation. Kannon has appeared to the old man to teach him about human transience and the futility of earthly pleasures. This goal is accomplished, because, as the monk's lover, Kannon has become fully integrated into his life.¹²

Guth (1987) has argued that the homoerotic appreciation of beautiful young acolytes also came to influence the way these bodhisattvas were depicted in statues and paintings, there being an increasing trend which represented Kannon, Mañjuśrī, Jizō as well as historical personages such as Kūkai and Shātoku Taishi (an imperial prince closely connected with the introduction of Buddhism to Japan) as 'divine boys', closely modelled on the young and beautiful acolytes resident in the monasteries.

Japanese Buddhism responded to the homoerotic environment created by a large number of monks living together with youths and boys in a very different way to Christianity which tended to respond to expressions of [112] homoeroticism within monastic communities with vehement paranoia, characterising sodomy as the worst of sexual sins, even worse than incest.¹³ Consider, for example, the tone of this passage from Peter Damian's *Book of Gomorrah*, written in 1049:

In our region a certain abominable and most shameful vice has developed... The befouling cancer of sodomy is, in fact, spreading so through the clergy or rather like a savage beast, is raging with such shameless abandon through the flock of Christ that for many of them it

would be more salutary to be burdened with service to the world, than, under the pretext of religion, to be enslaved so easily under the iron rule of satanic tyranny.¹⁴

Buddhism's flexibility with regard to sexuality, as in other aspects of human nature, derives from the doctrine of *hōben* (Sanskrit *upāya*) or 'skilful means' wherein actions are not judged in and of themselves but in terms of their motivation and outcome. Hence, even sexual attraction, which in early Buddhism is considered a defilement, can be used as a means to communicate the Buddhist truth or Dharma. Given Buddhism's prioritisation of intention and consequence over the act itself it was possible for monks (for whom sexual engagement with women was forbidden) to justify (or perhaps rationalize) their sexual engagement with youths in terms of creating a deeper or more lasting spiritual bond.

Other than acolytes in training to be monks, there were many other young boys in Buddhist monasteries because they served as schools for the children of the elite. Frederic comments that: 'These children were cherished by the monks and priests, to whom they served as pages. Their clothes were sumptuous, they had their eyebrows shaved and were made up like women. They were the pride of the monasteries which often boasted of possessing the prettiest and most talented pages in the district'.¹⁵ However, homoerotically admiring a beautiful page boy from a distance is rather different from taking him off to one's bedroom. To what extent, then, did the 'homoerotic' atmosphere I have suggested existed in male monastic environments actually result in homosexual behaviour? Leupp¹⁶ reads the very large number of references in literary and artistic sources which depict actual sexual relations [113] between monks and acolytes as reflecting their widespread practice. As evidence, he cites a vow containing five resolutions, which was made in 1237 at the Todaiji temple in Nara by a 36-year-old monk:

Item: I will remain secluded at Kasaki Temple until reaching age forty-one.

Item: Having already fucked ninety-five males, I will not behave wantonly with more than one hundred.

Item: I will not keep and cherish any boys except Ryuo-Maru.

Item: I will not keep older boys in my own bedroom.

Item: Among the older and middle boys, I will not keep and cherish any as their *nenja* [adult role in pederastic relationship].

Unfortunately, Leupp does not contextualise the vow or discuss it in relation to other vows kept on record by the temple. However, even if exceptional (95 sex partners by the age of 36 does seem quite a lot, especially for a monk), the tone of the vow seems to be one of moderation rather than renunciation. For example, the monk still allows himself five more lovers (before reaching number 100) and this is in addition to the relationship which he still maintains with Ryuo-Maru. He also adds a rider after the vow: it applies to this life only and not to the next!

The famous *Chigo no sōshi* or Acolyte scroll is also often cited in this context.¹⁷ This is a series of five tales with illustrations produced some time in the fourteenth century and kept in the Shingon Daigo-ji temple. It depicts in graphic detail how a young acolyte had a servant prepare his bottom with various unguents and lubricants so as to assist his aged abbot in achieving penetration. I have seen a (censored) modern reproduction of the whole of this scroll in the British Library with a translation into modern Japanese and it seems to me more the product of a pornographic imagination than a description of an actual occurrence. At one stage, the servant becomes so excited by his job that he pleads with the acolyte to let him first have a go; a request to which the acolyte

graciously agrees. It is unlikely that in a society like Japan, which is fiercely aware of status differentials, that a higher status man would allow himself to be penetrated by a man of lower status in such a [114] manner. However, this scroll is preserved by a Buddhist institution as a 'national treasure' and I find it unlikely that the Vatican would find a place for a similar work in its vaults. This suggests that sex did not occupy the same place in the mind scape of Japanese Buddhists as it did in Christian consciousness throughout the west. The result was a different kind of interiority, one which did not judge actions as inherently right or wrong but insisted, instead, upon their situationality and intentionality. This cultural gap is clearly illustrated by the many encounters in the sixteenth century recorded between Jesuit missionaries and Japanese monks who were criticised for their addiction to the 'unmentionable vice'. A sexual ethic which demonized homosexuality as evil and depraved *per se* was not intelligible in the terms available to Japanese of the premodern period; as Faure comments '[homosexuality] was not an object of social reprobation and repression as in Europe, where it had been strongly condemned by the Church since Aquinas and was punishable at the stake'.¹⁸

The lighthearted manner in which sexual infractions of the Vinaya were treated by some monks is evident in the surviving diaries of priests, the most famous of which, translated into English as *Essays in Idleness* is Kenkō's *Tsurezuregusa*, written in the fourteenth century.¹⁹ Kenkō routinely describes priestly goings on: partying, drunkenness, pursuit of boys and women, without any moral evaluation. He does not have a moralistic agenda which utilises these stories to bring the protagonists to a bad end and they stand in stark contrast to the French medieval fabliaux tales about monastic sexual license which usually results in the priests being horribly castrated.²⁰ Rather, he treats the priestly misbehaviour somewhat humorously, as in the story of 'The Acolyte at Omuro'.²¹ Here, 'a ravishing acolyte' is invited out by a group of priests on a picnic. Intending to impress him with their magical powers, they hide a basket of food in the forest which they will then pretend to conjure up. Unfortunately, a peasant watches the priests bury the food and steals the hamper. Upon their return, the priests, searching for the food in vain 'presently fell to quarrelling most unpleasantly, and returned in a rage to the temple'. Kenkō's comment on this incident is simply that 'any excessively ingenious scheme is sure to end in a fiasco'. [115]

Although the pursuit of beautiful youths may have been a common pastime for some monks in medieval Japan, the love of boys was also given a more serious metaphysical significance in some texts. The Buddhist-inspired text which provides the most developed metaphysical explanation for male-male love is the seventeenth-century *Shin'yūki* or 'Record of heartfelt friends'.²² Written as a catechism in which a master replies to an acolyte's questions regarding 'the way of youths,' the basic argument of this text is that a youth's beauty is given metaphysical significance when he responds to the love his beauty occasions in an adult man. Unlike in Christianity, where such lust would have been understood as a Satanic prompting, in Japan at this time, that an older man should fall in love with a younger was understood to be due to a positive karmic bond between the two. The key concept here is *nasake*, or 'sympathy,' an important term in Japanese ethics as well as aesthetics. A youth who recognizes the sincerity of an older man's feelings and who, out of sympathy, responds to him irrespective of the man's status or of any benefit he might expect to gain from the liaison, is considered exemplary. The master argues that satisfaction of desire is necessary for emotional health and that the problems experienced by giving in to love are less severe than those which arise through resisting it. This text illustrates the kind of pragmatism evident in other Japanese texts dealing with love between men. It assumes that in homosocial environments older men will be attracted to younger men and that to deny or resist this attraction is futile.

However, it must be remembered that the kind of homoerotic liaisons this text recommends take place in very specific circumstances between an adult man and an adolescent youth in the few years before he reaches manhood. Upon coming of age, any sexual element to the relationship is let go and the bond continues as a close spiritual friendship which is considered to continue beyond the confines of the present life. The metaphysical meaning of the relationship lies in both participants' awareness of the temporality of the affair. Since the youth's beauty lasts only a few years before fading for ever, it is considered vain to establish a relationship based only upon physical attraction. Yet, the role in which physical attraction plays in cementing the bond between the two friends is not denied; it is, in fact, considered a perfectly natural occurrence. Hence, Faure is right in pointing out that sexual [116] relationships between monk and acolyte were not simply about 'sex' but constituted a 'discourse,' as he comments: 'It is in Japanese Buddhism that male love became most visible and came to designate... an ideal of man (and not simply a type of act)'.²³ This is very close to what Foucault, in reference to similar same-sex transgenerational relationships in ancient Greece, terms 'technologies of the self' (*techniques de soi*) which are

Those voluntary and deliberate practices according to which men not only set themselves rules of conduct but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into a work of art [une oeuvre] that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria.²⁴

At an ideological or aesthetic level, then, the relationship between monk and acolyte was subject to a code of conduct or even an asceticism which resists a reading of these relationship as simply (homo)sexual.

As pointed out above, many sons of the samurai were educated in Buddhist monasteries and Buddhist paradigms of intergenerational friendships, often sexual in nature, influenced male-male relations in the homosocial world of the samurai more generally. This was especially true in the Tokugawa period (1600–1857) when the samurai became concentrated in great castle towns like Edo (present-day Tokyo) where there were comparatively few women. That there was a 'positive moral value attached to male-male love relationships among the samurai during this period'²⁵ is clear from the large amount of literature dealing with these relationships. Collections of short stories such as Ihara Saikaku's *Nanshoku ōkagami* (Great mirror of manly love),²⁶ collections of verse and stories like Kitamura Kigin's *Iwatsutsuji* (Wild azeleas)²⁷ and ethical guidebooks for the proper conduct of male love such as *Shin'yūki* (Record of heartfelt friends)²⁸ and *Hagakure* (In the shade of leaves),²⁹ all give a clear picture of the practice of male love as it was *ideally* conceived.³⁰

Similar to the traditional formulation of male-male love in the monasteries where a young acolyte was loved by his preceptor, the romantic picture of male love given in these texts idealizes the love between a youth, termed *wakashu* (a boy prior to his coming-of-age-ceremony who still has unshaven [117] forelocks) and an older lover or *nenja* (literally 'he who remembers or thinks [about his lover]'). The boys are represented as beautiful, graceful and charming whereas the older lovers are fierce, loyal and courageous. The sexual aspect of the relationships is downplayed. Rather, the educational and nurturing aspects of the relationship are highlighted. Schalow comments 'They were not primarily sexual relationships but included education, social backing and emotional support. Together they vowed to uphold samurai ideals. Samurai status was thus strengthened by a well-chosen match'.³¹ Same-sex love between samurai adults and youths was similar to that between monks and acolytes in that the sexual aspect of the relationship was considered to be a temporary phase in an on-going lifetime friendship (indeed, the attraction between two lovers in the present life was often understood to derive from the karmic effect of a

past-life connection). These relationships were not clandestine but openly acknowledged and subject to a strict code of practice. Unlike in ancient Greece, which also supported homoerotic friendships between older and younger men, the sexual aspect of these friendships could be alluded to and did not bring shame upon the younger (sexually passive) partner so long as such relations came to an end with his coming of age.

WOMEN IN JAPANESE BUDDHISM

SO FAR, JAPANESE BUDDHISM has been discussed in terms of the leniency with which it dealt with the sexual activities of men. No similar literary tradition exists which details the development of homoerotic friendships between women in Buddhist convents. Unfortunately, despite the extraordinary literary output of aristocratic women in the tenth century, the ascendancy of a male samurai elite from the thirteenth century means that from then on, to a large extent, 'women' exist in the Japanese literary tradition only as they are scripted by male authors and it is impossible to reconstruct a history of female friendship from the material currently available. Rather than working against the Neo-Confucian ideology professed by the new samurai rulers which worked to reduce women to the status of vassals in their own homes (although, from the seventeenth century, women in the ascendant merchant class fared somewhat better), certain [118] Buddhist ideas seem to have contributed to the negative way in which women and female sexuality were viewed in Japan. Unlike Shinto, Buddhism was disinterested in procreation as a social good, and did not validate women as mothers. Also, through the doctrine of karma a rationale was provided for earlier nativist prejudices against pollution caused by contact with blood in menstruation and childbirth.

The Japanese feminist Minamoto Junko (1993) has been a vocal critic of Buddhist attitudes to women. However, her criticisms of Buddhism are rather polemical and do not do justice to the complexities of the interrelationship between certain ideas which have a long history within the Buddhist Canon and the different social environments within which they were communicated. For instance, she claims that there is a 'tradition of the denial of sexuality within Buddhism'³² which resulted, among male practitioners, not only in a fear of 'eros' but also in contempt for women. She states that 'Sakyamuni completely rejected sexuality (i.e., women)'.³³ Her evidence for this position is a number of Pali text where the Buddha speaks of the 'defilement' of women's bodies which are 'filled with urine and excrement.' Minamoto fails to consider that these statements are not doctrinal definitions of women's essential nature but rather contemplative exercises whose purpose is soteriological; they are designed to help men work against the tendency to view the female form as an object for sexual gratification. Needless to say, in an audience addressing women, the Buddha would have stressed the 'defiled' nature of the male body in order to loosen the bonds of erotic attachment that many women feel for the male form. Also, surprisingly for a writer from a society influenced by Mahāyāna Buddhism, Minamoto does not mention female figures such as Kannon whose worship was central to popular religious practice among the common people.³⁴ Running throughout Minamoto's criticism of Japanese Buddhism is the idea that 'sexuality' (a concept which is never subjected to interrogation) is a fundamental and necessary part of human existence and that to be fully human, one must be sexually active so as to 'understand the pain and the pleasure in human life'.³⁵ In failing to bring this assumption into question, Minamoto perpetuates a heteronormative understanding of 'sexuality' which ties sex, particularly for women, to reproduction. [119]

However, it is fair to say that the place of women in Buddhism is problematic and has only recently begun to be theorised. Although Buddhist texts are often regarded as creations of a male monastic elite, thus enshrining male perspectives and prejudices,³⁶ the tradition is vast and contains

both positive and negative representations of women and their potential for spiritual advancement. Sponberg supports this reading in arguing that the Buddhist attitude to women is not ‘ambivalent’ but ‘multivocal’.³⁷ In Japan, it was the case that a general movement toward increasingly rigid social hierarchisation saw women gradually subordinated to men in all social contexts. This, however, was a symptom of the increasing ascendancy of Neo-Confucian discourses deployed by the samurai military caste which often resulted in discourses disparaging women and urging men to be wary in their contact with them (thus reduplicating in the wider society both the homosocial and the homoerotic environment of the monasteries). In this social context seemingly misogynist elements in the Buddhist tradition tended to be highlighted and more egalitarian positions overlooked. As Faure mentions ‘In a strictly hierarchical society in which women occupied the lowest level, homosexuality encouraged misogyny, and conversely’.³⁸ In response to the lowering of women’s status, seemingly misogynist elements within the Buddhist tradition were given increased emphasis and were used to justify and maintain the status quo. One text used to justify the lower status of women, the *Ketsubon kyō* (Bloodbowl sūtra), although its origins are obscure, seems to be an elaboration of Shinto anxieties about pollution expressed in a Buddhist context. The sūtra argues that women are evil because their menstrual blood has polluted both earth and water making these elements impure. It continues ‘[s]ince women, by nature, soil the Gods and Buddhas, they will all fall into the Blood Pond Hell after they die’.³⁹ Women’s natural ‘defilement’ was therefore commonly used in apologia for homosexual sex, as in the *Denbu monogatari* (Tale of a boor),⁴⁰ which, as Faure points out, is more about ‘the merits and demerits of women’ than it is about the advantages of male same-sex love.⁴¹

The indigenous understanding of women as polluted because of their role in childbirth does not seem to have been resisted by Buddhist teachers in Japan in any systematic way. Indeed, Japan’s more established Buddhist [120] sects, such as Tendai and Shingon, reinforced the idea that women were polluting by banning them from their sites of worship (this was known as the ‘prohibition of women’ or *nyonin kinsei*). Reformist Buddhist sects such as the Nichiren schools and the Jōdo Shū, however, actively welcomed women as practitioners⁴² and Hōnen (1132–1212) went so far as to criticise the established sects for forbidding women access to their most sacred sites. Individual Zen teachers, too, perhaps upholding the tradition of iconoclasm which characterises the school, also sometimes spoke out against the conventional views on the inferiority of women. Dōgen (1200–1253), for instance, often criticised the view that any male practitioner of the dharma was of higher status than all women practitioners. In his sermon, the *Raihaitokuzui*,⁴³ which is featured in his famous collection, the *Shōbōgenzō*, he mentions a number of Enlightened women teachers in the Ch’an tradition of China, and says that a male disciple who is lucky enough to encounter such a teacher should bow to her in homage, for it is ‘like finding drinking water when you are thirsty’.⁴⁴ Dōgen further attacks the idea of the ‘inferiority’ of women on doctrinal grounds, asking:

What demerit is there in femaleness? What merit is there in maleness? There are bad men and good women. If you wish to hear the Dharma and put an end to pain and turmoil, forget about such things as male and female. As long as delusions have not yet been eliminated, neither men nor women have eliminated them; when they are all eliminated and true reality is experienced, there is no distinction of male and female.⁴⁵

A more controversial position was taken by the Zen monk Ikkyū (1394–1481) who, although at one time the abbot of an influential temple, stripped himself of the regulations that separated the monk

from lay followers and celebrated his involvement with women in the brothel world in a series of poems such as:

A beautiful woman, cloud rain, love's deep river.
Up in the pavilion, the pavilion girl and the old monk sing.
I find inspiration in embraces and kisses; [121]
I don't feel at all that I'm casting my body into flames.⁴⁶

Ikkyū actually saw his life lived in the world sharing common people's experiences as a more authentic expression of the Mahāyāna path than that lived by monks dressed in rich brocades, 'fussing' over interpretation of the scriptures in monasteries. Sex with women (in one poem he speaks of being 'bored with the love of boys') was an important part of Ikkyū's spiritual practice. Arntzen comments that 'sex as the principle "desire" was a kind of touchstone for his realization of the dynamic concept of non-duality that pivots upon the essential unity of the realm of desire and the realm of enlightenment'.⁴⁷ Here is a clear example of the extremes to which the antinomian tendencies of the Mahāyāna could go: if even sex with boys could be a 'skilful means', so too could sex with women.

However, the idiosyncratic approach of monks like Ikkyū who valued interaction (even sexual interaction) with women, was marginal in Japan. More common were the views reproduced in sermon booklets written specifically for female audiences, all of which stressed the extreme problems women faced in gaining Enlightenment because of their 'defiled' nature. Likewise, in Pure Land Buddhism, which like Zen, reached its furthest doctrinal developments in Japan, soteriologically speaking women disappear as all beings reborn into the Pure Land are reborn as male. This led to the common practice in Japan of giving recently deceased women new male names in the expectation that they were to be reborn as male in the Pure Land paradise.

The generally low position of women in Japanese society and the presence of nativist, Buddhist and Confucian discourses all linking them to sex and pollution meant that 'there was never a trace in Japan of the exalted awe and adoration accorded to women in the European tradition of chivalry and courtly love'.⁴⁸ That women were held in low esteem seems to further have encouraged the development of homoerotic traditions in the monasteries where spiritual beings came increasingly to be represented as divine boys.⁴⁹ As Faure points out 'in as much as women meant defilement, by rejecting women – even if for young boys – monks thought that they were rejecting defilement'.⁵⁰ Monks could court *chigo* or young acolytes without the [122] dangers of pollution or childbirth, and in the absence of a discourse which defined same-sex sexuality as effeminising, could maintain their identity and integrity as men. By the time of increased samurai ascendancy from the thirteenth century, there was already a well-established homoerotic tradition in Japanese monasteries in which boys, not women, were constructed as fitting objects for adult male desire, a tradition which was well suited to the masculine ideals of an increasingly militaristic society. Blomberg notes that '[h]omosexual relationships between an older and a younger *bushi* [warrior] who were attached to one another as knight and page, were virtually the rule in feudal Japan',⁵¹ attributing them to the 'very close bonds... commonly found in men's societies in many cultures'.⁵² Not unlike other warrior societies, particularly ancient Greece, in Japan '[t]he love of women [was] regarded as disgraceful and a sign of weakness, whereas the love of men [was] virile and honourable'.⁵³

AFTERWORD

THE HISTORY OF HOMOSEXUALITY in Japanese Buddhism has attracted a certain amount of academic attention in Japan and Japanese bibliographies on the topic including both historical texts and their more recent commentaries are immense.⁵⁴ I know of no other society which has preserved such an extensive historical record of love between men. Modern western schema which seek to divide individuals into 'homosexuals' and 'heterosexuals' seem inapplicable to premodern Japan where an adult man was considered as likely to fall for the charms of an adolescent youth as he was a young woman and where a youth was encouraged to respond 'sympathetically' to the desire his beauty occasioned in an older man. This does not mean, of course, that the modern division of human sexuality into stark 'homo' or 'hetero' options is somehow false; it is simply a different construction, one which cannot be dissolved simply by pointing out how other societies have conceived of 'sexuality' in very different ways. This is what Foucault was suggesting when he argued that 'it is precisely the idea of sex *in itself* that we cannot accept without examination;' i.e., the idea that there is some irreducible essence of 'sex' which exists *inside* the body. This means that with regard to sexual behaviour, we should be very cautious about [123] deploying such terms as 'natural' or 'unnatural' because how we see 'nature' is actually filtered through assumptions embedded in culture.

Japanese culture seems to have held assumptions about sexuality which differ in important ways from those characteristic of Anglo-American societies since the close of the nineteenth century. I have argued that these Japanese expressions of homosexuality were culturally determined by a variety of 'discourses'. Firstly, the Buddhist discourse which separated sex from procreation and secondly, Nativist, Buddhist and Neo-Confucian discourses which identified women as 'polluting' and a potential threat to men. Yet, although women occupied a similarly disadvantaged position within western Christian discourse, no Christian culture developed socially validated and institutionalised homosexual relationships between men. What then, was different about Japan that enabled these relationships to thrive? Japanese misogyny alone cannot be a sufficient explanation, for within Christianity 'women' were subjected to a barrage of insults and recriminations quite as unyielding as anything that Confucianism produced.

To a certain extent, the influence of Buddhism seems clear. As Faure comments, 'Certain sexual habits considered "against nature" by the Christians may have been encouraged by the antinomian teachings of Mahayana'.⁵⁵ Despite painstaking regulations in the Vinaya against any kind of sexual activity on the part of monks, including many forbidding homosexual encounters, Buddhism in Japan developed a very lax attitude towards sexual expression on the part of monks, which has resulted in the curious anomaly that because most monks now marry (and must do so for succession to temple property follows family line),⁵⁶ it is only Japanese nuns who live a celibate lifestyle today.⁵⁷

Yet even the flexibility of Mahāyāna ethics in which actions which may *seem* unethical can be understood as 'skilful means' cannot fully account for the flourishing of homosexual relationships within Japanese culture, for similar expressions of male desire did not proliferate to the same extent in China or in Tibet where Mahāyāna influence was equally as strong. Nor can Shinto's sex-positive teachings be used to explain the development of forms of physical love between men, for Shinto essentially valorized *procreative* sex as a symbol of cosmic fertility: an ideology flatly opposed by Buddhism. [124] My speculation is that Buddhism's disinterest in procreation as a spiritually significant act coupled with a social discourse which not only understood women to be inferior to men but also polluted and potentially polluting, meant that boys, not women, became the bearer of the 'feminine' archetype. In a belief system in which the

self is ultimately empty and is caught up in a round of births where gender identity, like any other 'essential' feature, is transient and illusory, the blurring of gender boundaries is not likely to become a major transgression, a heresy or a sin. The history of homoeroticism in Japanese Buddhism is interesting because it shows that 'gender', like 'sexuality', is not a fixed attribute of biological bodies. Rather, both sex and gender are complex cultural performances which are acted out *with* the body as opposed to 'biological' realities which emerge from *within* it.

To suggest what interest or implications the history of homosexuality in Japanese Buddhism should hold for Buddhist practitioners in the modern west is to enter into the realm of speculation but I would like to offer a few ideas derived from my research into Japanese history and gender theory as well as five years of living in Japan. When compared with many people in modern Japan, the topic of homosexuality does seem particularly troubling for westerners. The reasons are complex, but put simply, for over a thousand years homosexual acts between men were considered to be among the most sinful, according to Saint Aquinas, even worse than mother-son incest (which at least had procreative potential – the only excuse for sex). In the nineteenth century the sinful/virtuous paradigm for categorising sexual acts was overturned by the medical notion of sick/healthy and later the psychological characterisation of desire as perverse/normal. Homosexuality in the west has always been placed on the negative side of these binaries. Although the discourse attempting to 'explain' homosexuality has recently been transformed, the fundamental notion that it is 'problematic' remains. Modern western homophobia, which 'others' same-sex desire onto a small group of 'homosexuals' and asserts that for [125] the majority of 'heterosexuals' homoeroticism is a constitutional impossibility, is the product of a comparatively recent change in the way sexuality has been configured in the west.⁵⁸ Likewise, the idea that certain sexual acts or desires are 'against nature' is only intelligible in a system where 'nature' has been established according to a designer-realist deity's blue-print or design.

Hence, in our cultural context where homosexual desire has for centuries been considered sinful, unnatural and a great evil, the experience of homoerotic desire can be very traumatic for some individuals and severely limit the potential for same-sex friendship. The Danish sociologist Henning Bech, for instance, writes of the anxiety which often accompanies developing intimacy between male friends:

The more one has to assure oneself that one's relationship with another man is not homosexual, the more conscious one becomes that it might be, and the more necessary it becomes to protect oneself against it. The result is that friendship gradually becomes impossible.⁵⁹

The famous Japanese psychologist, Doi Takeo, has commented on the anxieties many westerners (his examples are drawn from American society) have in developing same-sex intimacy. Doi argues that a major difference between western and Japanese society is that in the west, it is relationships between men and women which are most culturally valued, whereas in Japan it is relationships between men and between women which are emphasised. He argues that western men, in particular, have to prove themselves as *men* through their ability to court and interact with women. Relationships with other men are, on the other hand, fraught with anxiety because displaying too much intimacy with another man invites suspicion of homosexuality. He therefore identifies western homophobia as a limiting factor stopping men establishing intimate bonds with other men. Doi⁶⁰ argues that 'homosexual feelings' however, are more prevalent in Japan. He says that he doesn't mean homosexuality in the 'narrow sense' but in the case where 'emotional links between members of the same sex take priority over those with the opposite sex'.⁶¹ These strong emotional

bonds are not so much prevalent among friends (which suggests an equality of relationship) but superiors/inferiors. He mentions teacher and pupil, senior and junior [126] members of organisations, and even parents and children of the same sex. Doi stresses that these desires are quite normal and may continue to be the most important emotional attachments in a person's life, even after marriage. The continuing importance in Japan of vertical homosocial bonds between members of the same sex seems to be a pale reflection in modern times of the common pattern of erotic friendship between junior and senior men which took place throughout much of Japan's history and is related to socialisation patterns in Japanese society which remain much more sex-segregated than those in the west.

I found Doi's comments interesting as both western feminists⁶² and gender theorists⁶³ alike have argued that the 'death' of male friendship in the modern era is closely linked with homophobia. As Doi argues, the prioritisation of opposite-sex relationships and the development of what Japanese feminist Ueno Chizuko has called the western 'couple culture' has resulted in the modern west in the prioritisation of the marital relationship and the consequent eclipse of close friendships between men (and to a lesser extent, between women). Michel Foucault, too, argues that we live in a world in which relationships have become 'impoverished' because of the over-valuation of family relationships:

We live in a relational world that institutions have considerably impoverished. Society and the institutions which frame it have limited the possibility of relationships because a rich relational world would be very complex to manage... In effect, we live in a legal, social and institutional world where the only relations possible are extremely few, extremely simplified, and extremely poor. There is, of course, the fundamental relation of marriage, and the relations of the family, but how many other relations should exist...⁶⁴

Unlike these modern theorists, however, as Buddhists we have Buddhist traditions and approaches to draw upon. Whatever the reasons that have led to the decline of male (and female) friendship in the west, it is clear that as Buddhists we are in the unfortunate position of having to reinvent spiritual friendship in a cultural context where this form of relationship has been lost. One of the great obstacles that we must work against is the homophobia resulting from centuries of Christianity's sex-negativism. This homophobia is not only an obstacle on the psychological level inhibiting men's attempts to develop close and intimate friendships with other men (perhaps less of an issue in women's friendships), but also on a societal level where intimate relationships between members of the same sex are rendered suspect. If the history of homoeroticism in the Buddhist tradition of Japan has any relevance to our lives as western Buddhists today, it is to give us hope that there are other ways of interacting and other criteria for judging friendships than those currently endorsed.

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Notes

¹ Foucault (1990) p.152.

² I use the term 'Anglo-American' to refer to patterns of (homo)sexuality which have characterised English-speaking Anglo-Saxon societies since the end of the nineteenth century. These differ in many ways from other 'western' societies such as those of southern Europe or Latin America. For an overview of these differences see the work of anthropologist Gilbert Herdt, particularly his *Same Sex, Different Cultures: Gays and Lesbians across Cultures*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1997.

³ Cited in Harōtunian (1988) p.298.

⁴ Czaja, (1974) p.177; see also Sanford (1991).

⁵ LaFleur (1992) p.78.

⁶ Boxer (1951) p.69.

⁷ Spence (1985) p.225.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Colcutt (1990).

¹⁰ Childs (1980) p.6.

¹¹ In popular culture, Monjushiri became known as the patron saint of male homosexual love because of the unfortunate resemblance of the latter part of his name to the Japanese word for 'arse' (*shiri*).

¹² Childs (1980) p.18.

¹³ Brundage (1987) p.399.

¹⁴ Cited in Leysler (1995) p.3. The various Christian responses to homosexuality are, in fact, far more nuanced than I suggest here. Recent work by John Boswell: *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980; *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*, New York: Vintage, 1995; and by Mark Johnson, *The Invention of Sodomy in the Christian Tradition*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998, shows that Christian theologians adopted a variety of positions on same-sex love and that these only became universally negative after the various ‘heresy panics’ following on from the twelfth century.

¹⁵ Frederic (1972) p.37-8.

¹⁶ Leupp (1995) p.39.

¹⁷ See Watanabe & Iwata (1989) p.41

¹⁸ Faure (1998) p.208.

¹⁹ Transl. Donald Keene (1981).

²⁰ See Bloch (1986).

²¹ Keene (1981) p.47.

²² Translated and discussed by Schalow in Leyland (1998).

²³ Faure (1998) p.215.

²⁴ Foucault (1984) p.10–11.

²⁵ Ikegami (1995) p.209.

²⁶ See Schalow (1990) for an English translation.

²⁷ See Miller (1996) for an English translation by Schalow.

²⁸ See Schalow’s translation in Leyland (1998).

²⁹ See Wilson (1979) for an English translation.

³⁰ In this essay I am describing the *idealised* relationships that existed between older and younger men as they were defined in a few key texts. Japanese popular culture, however, had a very different understanding of them: popular texts often make fun of Buddhist monks and the extraordinary lengths they went to in their pursuit of beautiful boys. Many of the traditional Japanese jokes collected by Levy (1973) are at the expense of Buddhist priests. Take this one for example: ‘A monk falls from a tree while collecting firewood and pierces his rectum on a stump. His acolyte replies “Isn’t that your karma?”’ However, the tone of these popular jokes and tales is generally lighthearted. After all, many townsmen, too, were known to have lost all their sense (and sometimes possessions) in pursuit of beautiful young kabuki actors. A wide selection of such stories can be found in Ihara Saikaku’s *Nanshoku ōkagami* (Great mirror of manly love; translated by Schalow [1990]).

³¹ Schalow (1990) p.27.

³² Minamoto (1993) p.87.

³³ Ibid p.88.

³⁴ Blofeld (1988).

³⁵ Ibid p.111.

³⁶ Paul (1985) p.xxiv.

³⁷ Sponberg (1992) pp.3–4.

³⁸ Faure (1998) p.217.

³⁹ Cited in Minamoto (1993) p.95.

⁴⁰ See Leupp (1995) for an English translation.

⁴¹ Faure (1998) p.236.

⁴² Levering (1998) p.78.

⁴³ It is significant, as Levering (1998, p.78) points out, that large sections of the *Raihaitokuzui* in which Dōgen further criticises conventional views held about women seem to have been omitted from editions of this text which circulated before the eighteenth century.

⁴⁴ Cited in Levering (1998) p.84.

⁴⁵ Cited in Levering (1982) p.31.

⁴⁶ Cited in Arntzen (1986) p.117.

⁴⁷ Ibid p.33.

⁴⁸ Blomberg (1974) p.106.

⁴⁹ Guth (1987).

⁵⁰ Faure (1998) p.213.

⁵¹ Blomberg (1974) p.98.

⁵² Ibid p.97.

⁵³ Blomberg (1976) p.100.

⁵⁴ For a listing of Japanese sources consult Leupp's (1995) bibliography. Despite the immense number of (particularly Tokugawa-period) Japanese works which take male-male love as their main theme or feature it incidentally, modern Japanese society shows little awareness of this cultural inheritance and modern conceptualisations of 'sexuality' approximate in many ways to those prevalent in Anglo-American societies. For a discussion of homosexuality in modern Japan see Mark McLelland: *Male Homosexuality in Modern Japan: Cultural Myths and Social Realities*, Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000; or Mark McLelland: 'Male Homosexuality and Popular Culture in Modern Japan', in *Intersections* issue 3: available on the Net at:

<http://www.sshemurdoch.edu.au/intersections>.

⁵⁵ Faure (1998) p.228.

⁵⁶ In 1872, the Meiji government issued a proclamation allowing Buddhist monks to marry but this act basically gave official sanction to the practice of marriage by Buddhist monks which was already widespread. Buddhist temples in local districts are usually passed on from father to son and run much like a family business with much of their income deriving from funeral and memorial ceremonies. Kim (1995, p.115) mentions that this state of affairs often causes resentment among celibate nuns who, when assisting in ceremonies, are often given instructions by the monk's wife.

⁵⁷ Kim (1995) p.114.

⁵⁸ There is now an immense literature examining the transformations in the way human sexual life has been conceived both over time and across cultures. Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* volume 1, London: Penguin, 1991, is the classic text outlining the development of a realm of experience now familiar to us as 'sexuality' in the nineteenth century. A good overview of diverse 'homosexualities' is given by David Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

⁵⁹ Bech (1997) p.73.

⁶⁰ Doi (1985) pp.134–45.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² See for instance Sedgwick (1990).

⁶³ Dollimore (1991).

⁶⁴ Cited in Halperin (1995) pp.81–2.