

無我的教誨與菩薩的承擔：

論二元對立與自我性別的執念

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摘要：

性小眾（LGBTQIA+ persons）的公民權利已經成為全球性議題。某些一神教派對性小眾的恐懼和打壓，大家時有耳聞。對比之下，西方國家的居士普遍認為佛教是涵容一切性／別的宗教。然而，佛教國家中的性小眾知道，慈悲對待一切有情眾生的佛家理想，未必等同於性／別涵納，正如受佛家父權體制禁錮的女眾知道，佛家無我的概念未必能與性／別二元的解構劃上等號。此外，鑽研文本的學者樂於指出佛教典籍中的確有反對性小眾的說法。而在台灣舉行反同公投前的幾個月，我們也看到一些佛教徒加入這股反同的潮流。佛法真的容許、甚至支持反對性小眾的觀點和活動嗎？

舉世聞名的佛教女性主義學者與行者麗塔·葛羅思（Rita M. Gross）曾在〈佛法與性別〉一文中指出，「儘管佛教徒大多不認為有恆存的自我，但他們的態度和行為卻顯示他們相信性別實有。」更明確地說，大多數佛教徒的態度和行為顯示出他們相信二元性／別是真實存在的，因

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而對於自我性／別相當執著。堅守二元性／別的人，會難以容忍任何模糊或跨越性／別界線的舉動。本文主張，不論是從無我的哲學觀點出發，或是從發菩薩大願救度一切有情的修行層面來看，佛家教誨並不支持任何以二元為基礎的偏見，遑論對性／別他者的仇恨。事實上，觀音菩薩所展現的，正是泯除二元性／別認同、不起分別心而慈悲攝受一切有情的佛家理想。

關鍵詞：佛教與性小眾、性／別二元、無我、菩薩、觀音

The Teaching of *Anātman* and the Commitment of Bodhisattva: On the Attachment to Binaries and the Gendered Self

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ABSTRACT :

The civil rights of LGBTQIA+ persons have become a global issue. While anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiments and propaganda from certain monotheistic religious denominations have been well known, Buddhism is generally perceived by western practitioners to be inclusive of gender and sexual minorities. LGBTQIA+ persons in Buddhist countries, however, know that the Buddhist ideal of loving-kindness and compassion for *all* sentient beings does not necessarily translate to inclusivity in practice, just as women under the yoke of Buddhist patriarchy know that the central Buddhist teaching of *anātman* does not necessarily translate to deconstruction of the gender binary. Moreover, textual scholars are eager to point out that there are anti-LGBTQIA+ judgments in Buddhist texts, and in the months leading up

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to the voting on anti-LGBTQIA+ referenda in Taiwan we see some Buddhists hopping on the anti-LGBTQIA+ bandwagon. Do Buddhist teachings condone or even support anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiments and activities?

In “Dharma and Gender,” world-renowned Buddhist-feminist scholar-practitioner Rita M. Gross points out, “while most Buddhist do not believe in the existence of a permanent, abiding self, their attitudes and actions nevertheless indicate that they do believe in the real existence of gender.” More specifically, the attitudes and actions of most Buddhists indicate that they consider the gender binary “real” and are stubbornly attached to their gendered self. Insofar as the gender binary is firmly upheld, any blurring or transgression of the binary becomes problematic. This paper argues that, whether in philosophical views such as *anātman*, or in spiritual practices such as taking the bodhisattva vow of liberating all sentient beings, Buddhist teachings do not lend themselves to any binary-based prejudice, much less hatred, against the gendered or sexual others. In fact, the example of Bodhisattva Guanyin manifests the Buddhist ideals of eliminating attachment to binary gender identity and of being compassionate and affirming to all sentient beings without discrimination.

Key words: Buddhism and LGBTQIA+, gender binary, *anātman* (no-Self),
Bodhisattva, Avalokiteśvara

Background: Buddhism's Ambivalence toward LGBTQIA+ Issues?

The civil rights of LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and more) persons have become a global issue. While anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiments and propaganda from certain wings of monotheistic religions have been well known, Buddhism is generally perceived, especially by its western practitioners, to be inclusive of gender and sexual minorities. In a 2015 Pew Research Center report, Buddhism is categorized as having “no clear position” on same-sex marriage.¹ On the one hand, contributors to the two volumes of *Queer Dharma*,² mostly white men in North America, state that they are drawn to Buddhism because, by comparison to other major religions found in the West, Buddhism is not homophobic. Ann Gleig’s ethnographical research also found that queer converts consider Buddhism to be “not as inherently ‘sexually moralistic’ as Christianity.”³ That perception can easily be backed up by a number of teachings and practices found in Buddhist communities. For instances,

¹ David Masci and Michael Lipka, “Where Christian Churches, Other Religions Stand on Gay Marriage,” Fact Tank: News in the Numbers, Pew Research Center, December 21, 2015 (<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/03/18/where-christian-churches-stand-on-gay-marriage/>), accessed September 23, 2019).

² Winston Leyland, ed., *Queer Dharma: Voices of Gay Buddhists*, Vol. 1 (San Francisco, CA: Gay Sunshine Press, 1998); Winston Leyland, ed. *Queer Dharma: Voices of Gay Buddhists*, Vol. 2 (San Francisco, CA: Gay Sunshine Press, 2000).

³ Ann Gleig, “Queering Buddhism or Buddhist De-Queering? Reflecting Differences Amongst Western LGBTQ Buddhists and the Limits of Liberal Convert Buddhism,” *Theology & Sexuality* 18(3) (2012): 208-209.

Robert Aitken, American Zen teacher, encouraged practitioners to get in touch with their sexuality, and a few other American Buddhist lay teachers have held same-sex marriage ceremonies.⁴ In fact, lay priests in Japan⁵ as well as in the West have officiated same-sex Buddhist weddings since as early as 40 years ago.⁶ In addition, one can easily locate many “Queer Dharma” communities⁷ with a quick search on the Internet, which indicates Buddhist acceptance of people with non-normative gender identities and sexual orientations. On the other hand, written discourses on issues concerning LGBTQIA+ people, whether by Buddhist studies scholars or Buddhist teachers, are few, despite the fact that several Buddhist monastic and lay teachers have gotten more outspoken in advocating for LGBTQIA+ rights in recent years, such as Taiwanese Bhikṣuṇī Chao-Hwei 釋昭慧, British Therāvada *bhikkhu* Ajahn Brahm, Australian Therāvada *bhikkhu*

⁴ Roger Corless, “Coming Out in the Sangha: Queer Community in American Buddhism,” in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, eds. Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 256.

⁵ Mikako Kubo, “Gay Wedding Ceremonies Seen Gaining Wider Acceptance,” *The Japan Times*, April 6, 2015 (<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/04/06/national/social-issues/gay-wedding-ceremonies-seen-gaining-wider-acceptance/#.VTGFJiFVikp>, accessed September 24, 2019).

⁶ Jeff Wilson, “‘All Beings Are Equally Embraced By Amida Buddha’: Jodo Shinshu Buddhism and Same-Sex Marriage in the United States,” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 13 (2012): 37.

⁷ Gleig, “Queering Buddhism or Buddhist De-Queering?” pp.198-214; Corless, “Coming Out in the Sangha”; Paul David Numrich, “The Problem with Sex According to Buddhism,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 48(1) (Spring 2009): 62-73.

Ajahn Sujato, Bhutanese *rinpoche* Dzongsar Khyentse, Tibetan *rinpoche*s the Seventeenth Karmapa and Gyalwang Drukpa, African-American Zen teacher Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, and Filipina Vipassana teacher La Sarmiento. Perhaps LGBTQIA+ issues are not considered “issues” from the “may all beings be at ease” Buddhist perspective—could it be that, when acceptance of diverse people is done in practice and benevolence toward “all beings” is avowed in theory, there is not much need to write about any particular group?

LGBTQIA+ persons in conservative Buddhist countries, however, know that the Buddhist ideal of loving-kindness and compassion for *all* sentient beings does not necessarily translate to inclusivity of gender and sexual minorities, just as women under the yoke of Buddhist patriarchy know that the central Buddhist teaching of no-Self (Pāli: *anattā*; Sanskrit: *anātman*) does not necessarily translate to the deconstruction of, and freedom from, the rigid gender binary in real life. Until recently, when asked about LGBTQIA+ issues, most monastic Buddhist masters either refrained from commenting or sounded heteronormative (if not outright homophobic). Drawing from their understanding of monastic precepts, some would group homosexual acts under “sexual misconduct”⁸—even the face of Buddhist universal compassion, the XIVth Dalai Lama, who eventually said on the *Larry King Now* program in 2014 that it is “OK” for individuals to have

⁸ Corless, “Coming Out in the Sangha”; Numrich, “The Problem with Sex According to Buddhism.”

same-sex relationships as long as they do not hurt anybody,⁹ used to say that homosexual acts are wrong because inappropriate orifices are used.¹⁰

Separate Teachings for Monastic and Lay Sexual Conduct

Some other monastic masters would concede that homosexual acts are “sexual misconduct” only for celibate monastics, for whom *any form of sex* is a violation of precepts because monastics are supposed to be dedicated to the complete uprooting of all forms of craving, including sexual desire of any kind.¹¹ As a matter of fact, refraining from sex is the most important requirement of Buddhist monastic life: “The most obvious and central difference between a monk or nun and a layperson,” Peter Harvey observes, “is the former’s commitment to celibacy: total avoidance of sexual intercourse.”¹² “Indeed,” Amy Paris Langenberg further notes, “the placement of a rule saying that monks and nuns shall be defeated (*pārājika*) should they engage in sexual intercourse, at the very top of the code of

⁹ Henry Austin, “Dalai Lama Voices Support for Gay Marriage,” *NBCNews.com*, March 7, 2014 (<http://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/dalai-lama-voices-support-gay-marriage-n46906> , accessed September 24, 2019).

¹⁰ Dalai Lama, *Beyond Dogma: Dialogues and Discourses* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1996), 47.

¹¹ Liz Wilson, “Buddhist Views on Gender and Desire,” in *Sexuality and the World’s Religions*, eds. David W. Machacek and Melissa M. Wilcox (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2003), 164; Numrich, “The Problem with Sex According to Buddhism.”

¹² Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations Values and Issues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 89.

monastic conduct (*prātimokṣa*), suggests that celibacy is the Rubicon separating those who have fully committed themselves to the monastic way of practising the Buddha's teachings from" lay people.¹³

For Buddhist monastics who live closely together in same-sex orders that share nearly everything, it is understandable that some of the stipulators of the *vinaya* (Buddhist monastic behavioral code) would feel the need to make clear that the monastic precept about "no sexual conduct" includes no homosexual conduct.¹⁴ In fact, "the prohibitive stance taken by Buddhist monastic law seems to release a viral proliferation of sexual behaviours, if not in historical reality, at least in the discursive space of the *Vinaya*. There, sex is quantified and measured and specified in all of its variety."¹⁵ The prohibitions against homosexual acts in the *vinaya* "are not given any special (homophobic) metaphysical, philosophical, or doctrinal support," and homosexual acts are seen as problematic because they are "expressions of uncontrollable desire (*trṣṇa*, *upadana*) on the part of persons who vow to control their desires."¹⁶ Given the symbiotic relationship between monastic and lay communities, "[t]he *vinaya* code is vigilant in ensuring that the ethical conduct of monks and nuns remains beyond the reproach of the

¹³ Amy Paris Langenberg, "Buddhism and Sexuality," *The Oxford Handbook of Buddhist Ethics*, eds. Daniel Cozort and James Mark Shields (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018): 569.

¹⁴ Michael J. Sweet, "Buddhism," in *Homosexuality and Religion: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Jeffrey S. Siker (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2007), 76.

¹⁵ Langenberg, "Buddhism and Sexuality," 574-575.

¹⁶ Corless, "Coming Out in the Sangha."

laity.”¹⁷ That is, to make sure that monastics were in control of their desires and worthy of lay support, the *vinaya* code prohibits all sexual acts, which are all considered expressions of uncontrollable desire; homosexual acts are included in the prohibitions because they are also sexual acts, not because they are in any way inherently wrong or more reprehensible than heterosexual acts.

Some textual scholars are eager to point to those monastic precepts in the *vinaya* and their commentaries to prove that there are indeed anti-LGBTQIA+ judgments in Buddhist texts, neglecting the fact that, in whichever sub-tradition of Buddhism, the *vinaya* is intended only for monastics and has no bearing on lay life. Moreover, to this date many monastics still insist that lay people should not study the *vinaya* because it is inappropriate for lay people to know about the rules by which monastics are governed when the lay people themselves are not bound by the same rules.¹⁸

¹⁷ Numrich, “The Problem with Sex According to Buddhism,” 66

¹⁸ Once by chance I was drafted to translate for an internationally-known Buddhist monastic, who was scheduled to give two talks to a certain Buddhist community, first a public talk open to all “four assemblies” and then the other open only to monastics as the topic was the *vinaya*. After the public talk, several monastics in the community approached me to ask if I would stay to translate the second talk (to the monastics), saying that the designated monastic translator did not possess my level of knowledge or skills. When I replied that it was not up to me, they proceeded to ask the monastic in charge. Several minutes later, they came to tell me, with much disappointment, that it was judged inappropriate for me, a lay person, to be in the room for a talk about the *vinaya* even if my role was restricted to a translator only and prohibited from commenting. They pointed out to the monastic in charge that there are plenty *vinaya* scholars out there who are lay

Whether due to exclusion or due to lack of interest, Buddhist lay people by and large do not know much about the *vinaya*, much less the commentaries on them. That is, what was written by elite male monastics does not translate to the living tradition of the lay majority, who only know and strive to live by a few overarching principles such as generosity, non-harming, and compassion.

Lay people's sexuality is simply not a topic with which Buddhist monastics concern themselves (with very few exceptions¹⁹), and so, when being asked to comment on lay people's sexuality, their frame of reference is their monastic discipline combined with the culture in which they live. As Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche puts it, "human beings can only think in terms of culture,"²⁰ and monastics are no exception. José Ignacio Cabezón summarizes it well: "The principal question for Buddhism has not been one of heterosexuality vs. homosexuality but one of sexuality vs. celibacy. ... because of the essential neutrality of the Buddhist tradition in this regard, it has adapted to particular sociocultural norms..."²¹ As the cultures in which

persons and it was futile and unrealistic to prohibit lay people from learning the *vinaya*, but the judgment from the higher-up stood.

¹⁹ Langenberg, "Buddhism and Sexuality," 584-585.

²⁰ *Lion's Roar*, "Watch: Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche Urges Respect for LGBTQ people." February 6, 2015 (<http://www.lionsroar.com/watch-dzongsar-khyentse-rinpoche-urges-respect-LGBTQ-people/>, accessed September 24, 2019).

²¹ José Ignacio Cabezón, "Buddhism and Homosexuality," in *Queer Dharma: Voices of Gay Buddhists, Vol. 1*, ed. Winston Leyland (San Francisco, CA: Gay Sunshine Press, 1998), 30.

Buddhist traditions exist have mostly been heteronormative and androcentric, Buddhist monastics' attitude toward gender and sexual minorities are likely to be heteronormative and androcentric as well. Langenberg remarks, "explicit prohibitions against homosexuality for (generically male) laypeople in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism [as evinced by the Dalai Lama's earlier comments] is more of an accident of the ethical borrowing and reshuffling of *Vinaya* principles evident in scholastic texts on lay sexual ethics than the product of a deeply theorized abomination of male homosexuality."²²

One particular example of monastics referencing their monastic discipline in combination with their culture would probably horrify those who want to justify binary gender norms and make Buddhism anti-LGBTQIA+: Reflecting an androcentric and heteronormative perspective that holds the penetration of a female as the "gold standard" for sex,²³ the monastic code regarding sexual misconduct in effect renders Buddhism "the only instance of a world religion treating homosexual acts more favorably than heterosexual ones."²⁴ As Leonard Zwilling observes, in the *vinaya*, "offenses committed with a *paṇḍaka* require less severe punishment than

²² Langenberg, "Buddhism and Sexuality," 586.

²³ Janet Gyatso, "Sex," in *Critical Terms for the Study of Buddhism*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 280.

²⁴ Randy Conner and Stephen Donaldson, "Buddhism," in *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality*, ed. Wayne Dynes, Vol. 1 (New York: Garland, 1990), 169. See also Leonard Zwilling, "Homosexuality as Seen in Indian Buddhist Texts," in *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*, ed. José Ignacio Cabezón (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), 209; Langenberg, "Buddhism and Sexuality," 573.

those involving a woman, although more than if they were committed with a socially normative man. Mutual masturbation among nuns...is considered a relatively minor offense.”²⁵ Considering that *paṇḍaka* was an ambiguous term that groups together impotent men, voyeur men, men who depend on artificial means to reach sexual satisfaction, homosexual men, hermaphrodites, and any man who failed to fulfill the normative male role (whether biologically or socially), and given the centrality of celibacy in the Buddhist monastic codes, the androcentric and heteronormative definition of sex as penetration of a female is in effect ranking sexual acts between males as more offensive than sexual acts between females, and heterosexual acts more offensive than homosexual acts. When such heteronormative and androcentric thinking is applied to lay sexual ethics, “because the assumed subject of these ethical teachings for laypeople is a heterosexual married man, same-sex female sexual contact falls completely outside of their scope and is thus not explicitly prohibited.”²⁶

For the most part in Buddhist history, nevertheless, monastics tend to regard lay Buddhists’ sexual life as their individual business and maintain silence when it comes to same-sex relations²⁷ since, again, monastic

²⁵ Zwillig, “Homosexuality as Seen in Indian Buddhist Texts,” 207. See also Liz Wilson, “Buddhist Views on Gender and Desire”; Numrich, “The Problem with Sex According to Buddhism.”

²⁶ Langenberg, “Buddhism and Sexuality,” 586.

²⁷ Conner and Donaldson, “Buddhism,” 169; Peter A. Jackson, “Thai Research on Male Homosexuality and Transgenderism and the Cultural Limits of Foucaultian Analysis,” *Journal of the History of Homosexuality* 8 (1997): 52-85; Harvey, *An*

precepts do not apply to lay practitioners. The silence may sound akin to the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy in the U.S. military but in fact is very different because, in the Buddhist system of spiritual practice, no one has the power or authority to “excommunicate” a lay person—a monastic may be expelled from a monastic order for violating the *vinaya*, but a monastic master has no power to deny a lay person their identity as a Buddhist. Lay people’s sexual behavior (or gender identity, for that matter) is simply outside of the purview of monastics. Therefore, there has not been much anti-homosexual discourse in Buddhism, and there has not been any attempt by Buddhist religious authority to forcibly “correct” the sexual orientation of a lay person.²⁸ Bhikkhu Sujato states that, “In all the thousands of discourses [in the Pāli canon], not a single one regarded homosexuality as a significant issue.”²⁹ As for living practices, Michael J. Sweet observes,

for ordinary lay Buddhists the precept against sexual misconduct, like that forbidding the use of alcohol and other intoxicants, has never been considered central to Buddhist ethical life, in the way

Introduction to Buddhist Ethics, 434; Liz Wilson, “Buddhist Views on Gender and Desire,” 161-162; Bhikkhu Sujato, “Why Buddhists Should Support Marriage Equality,” *Wildmind: Buddhist Meditation*, June 9, 2012 (<https://www.wildmind.org/blogs/on-practice/why-buddhists-should-support-marriage-equality> , accessed September 24,2019).

²⁸ Numrich, “The Problem with Sex According to Buddhism”; Cabezón, “Buddhism and Homosexuality,” 30.

²⁹ Sujato, “Why Buddhists Should Support Marriage Equality.” See also Conner and Donaldson, “Buddhism,” 168-171.

*that the injunctions against violence and theft have been. Just as alcohol consumption is found throughout the Buddhist world, so have Buddhists felt free to engage in many forms of noncoercive sexual expressions without censure by religious authorities. Among the varieties of nonmonogamous sex, same-sex sexual relations have never been singled out for special opprobrium by any Buddhist society.*³⁰

However, in the months leading up to the voting on the anti-LGBTQIA+ referenda in Taiwan, some Buddhist practitioners hopped on the anti-LGBTQIA+ bandwagon by grafting some simplistic and heteronormative misunderstanding of the Daoist ideas of *yin* and *yang* onto Buddhism and believing that non-binary gender identities or non-heterosexual preferences are “against nature.” As such, the question remains: Do central Buddhist teachings—the teachings that apply to monastics and lay people alike—condone or even support such anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiments?

No-Self as a Critique to the Sex/Gender Binary

Interestingly, while queer-friendly discourses may vary based on differences in culture and religious tradition, anti-LGBTQIA+ discourses cross-culturally are hinged on the same few talking points: for the sake of the continuation of human species, humans must reproduce; human reproduction

³⁰ Sweet, “Buddhism,” 76.

requires male and female, whose anatomical differences dictate their roles not only in reproduction but in society—the presumed binary of biological sexes anticipates the daily performance of two and only two socio-cultural genders,³¹ which differ and contrast with each other in capabilities, temperaments, expressions, and self-identities. Binary sex/gender roles are “natural,” and so any transgression of the boundary between the binary is “against nature” and detrimental to the human society and human continuation.

Central Buddhist teachings are non-essentialist and provide sharp critiques to the attachment to such sex/gender binary couched in natural-law language. Buddhists of all traditions have heard that one of the central teachings of the Buddha is no-Self, and most Buddhists seem to be familiar with the analysis of five aggregates and how the analytical framework relates to no-Self: a person is impermanent and subject to change because she or he is constituted of material forms (Pāli/Sanskrit: *rūpa*), sensations (Pāli/Sanskrit: *vedanā*), perceptions (Pāli: *saññā*; Sanskrit: *samjñā*), volitional constructions (Pāli: *saṅkhāra*; Sanskrit: *samskāra*), and consciousness (Pāli: *viññāṇa*; Sanskrit: *vijñāṇa*).

What is noteworthy is that in the ancient Indian perspective (whether it is orthodox teaching of Brāhmanism, or the so-called “heterodox” teachings

³¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 10th Anniversary Edition (New York and London: Routledge, 1999); Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993). For a short synopsis of Butler’s thought in these two books, see Chris Klassen, *Religion and Popular Culture: A Cultural Studies Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 78-81.

of Buddhism and Jainism) there are six senses, and the term *rūpa* refers to both the sense organs and their respective sense-objects. The mind is treated as one of the sense organs alongside eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body. Serving as the objects of these six sense organs, also termed “internal sense bases,” are the six “external sense bases”³²: that which can be seen, that which can be heard, that which can be smelled, that which can be tasted, that which can be touched and felt, and that which can be processed by the mind. The words “external” and “internal” here obviously do not indicate absolute demarcation, for they are expediently used only for the purpose of explaining the function of senses, which only occur when, in Gier and Kjellberg’s words, “the inner flows into the outer and the outer flows into the inner.”³³

With the mind being considered a sense organ, virtually all phenomena in the world can be considered the “external sense bases” for the mind insofar as they can all be processed in one way or another by the mind. Sounds, for example, are objects for the ears, and yet the difference between music and noise may be an object for the mind. In the Pāli *Abhidhamma*, six kinds of objects are considered mental objects: sensitive matter, subtle matter, consciousness, mental factors, *nibbāna*, and concepts. While the consciousnesses of the other five sense organs pertain only to the present, the

³² *Samyutta Nikāya*, IV.7-15 (*Salāyatanasamyutta*), and V.426 (*Saccasamyutta*).

³³ Nicholas F. Gier and Paul Kjellberg, “Buddhism and the Freedom of the Will: Pali and Mahayanist Responses,” in *Freedom and Determinism*, eds. Joseph Keim Campbell, Michael O’Rourke, and David Shier (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2004), 282.

mind-consciousness can cognize an object of the past, the present, or the future.³⁴ Thus considered, “external sense bases” encompass not only concrete objects with physical dimensions, but also abstract entities without physical dimensions, such as languages, philosophies, histories, social conventions, cultural norms, political institutions, and the sentiments involved in interpersonal relationships in the past, present, and future. Considering that both mind and mind-objects are included in the Pāli/Sanskrit word *rūpa*, it is better rendered “material and socio-cultural forms” or “material and symbolic forces” than simply “material forms,” given that the word *rūpa* actually encompasses both the abstract and the concrete, the mental and the physical, the internal and the external, while the word “material” in quotidian English usage does not usually include mind or mind-objects.

Buddhists generally seem to be familiar with the notion that there are six sense organs in Buddhist teachings, mind being considered one of them.³⁵ Few, however, seem to grasp how much is encompassed within the term

³⁴ See Mahāthera Nārada, ed. and trans., *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma: Pāli Text, Translation and Explanatory Guide of the Abhidhammattha Sangaha of Ācariya Anuruddha*, 1st BPS Pariyatti edition, translation revised by Bhikkhu Bodhi, introduction and explanatory guide by U Rewata Dhamma and Bhikkhu Bodhi, Abhidhamma tables by U Silānanda (Onalaska, WA: Pariyatti Press, 2000), 135-137.

³⁵ However, I have met Buddhists who frequently chant the *Heart Sūtra* and thus presumably are aware that “eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind” appear together, but are still hazy about the idea that Buddhist teachings accept that there are six senses.

rūpa, especially when it comes to the sense-objects for the mind. This lack of understanding may have resulted from the common but rather misleading rendering of the term *rūpa* as “material forms”³⁶ on the one hand, and the unfamiliarity with ancient Indian thought on the other. If the scope of the aggregate *rūpa* were properly understood, there would be no justification for failing to apply the analyses of five-aggregates and no-Self to the construction of binary gender identities. After all, what, if not sense-objects for the mind, are the social conventions that strongly suggest, expect, prescribe, support, impose, and reinforce gender identities and gendered behaviors through gendered colors, toys, chores, career ambitions, postures, uses of language, etc.?

In “Dharma and Gender,” world-renowned Buddhist-feminist scholar-practitioner Rita M. Gross points out that there is something curiously illogical in many Buddhists’ understanding and acceptance of the central Buddhist teaching of no-Self: “while most Buddhist do not believe in the existence of a permanent, abiding self, their attitudes and actions nevertheless indicate that they do believe in the real existence of gender.”³⁷ People often appeal to the idea that the Buddhist Dhamma/Dharma transcends gender, thereby either dismissing gender justice as a petty *samsāric* concern that is irrelevant to the ultimate Buddhist goal of

³⁶ The translation in Chinese, *se* 色, can potentially be even more misleading than “material forms” as *se* literally means “color” in modern Chinese usage.

³⁷ Rita M. Gross, “The Dharma of Gender,” *Contemporary Buddhism* 5, no. 1 (May 2004): 4.

nibbāna/nirvāna and “unfettered mind,”³⁸ or willfully ignoring and defensively denying the persistent gender discrimination, gender stereotypes, and rigid assignment of binary gender roles in both of the voluminous traditional Buddhist texts and the day-to-day operation of Buddhist institutions.³⁹

With regard to gender discrimination and gender stereotypes in traditional Buddhist texts, Alan Sponberg points out that, despite the “soteriological inclusiveness” (i.e., everyone can reach *nibbāna/nirvāna*) in early Buddhism, “institutional androcentrism” and “ascetic misogyny” are also noticeable strands in traditional Buddhist texts.⁴⁰ In terms of day-to-day operation of Buddhist institutions, it is in fact quite common for Buddhist communities to divide needed labor and volunteer work along gender lines and, in effect, reinforce stereotypical binary gender attributes. The central teaching of no-Self, i.e., the lack of eternal, unchanging, self-existing essence, is invoked from time to time in response to various kinds of contentions, but it is rarely remembered when conventional binary gender roles are described, expected, and even imposed. Susanne Mroziak notes, for example, that in South Asian Buddhist traditions virtues are still strongly associated with the male body, despite the talk about the “ultimate” irrelevance of bodily distinctions.⁴¹ Similar attitudes can be found in East

³⁸ Gross, “The Dharma of Gender,” 3.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁰ Alan Sponberg, “Attitudes toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism,” in *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*, ed. José Ignacio Cabezón (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), 3-36.

⁴¹ Susanne Mroziak, “Materialization of Virtue: Buddhist Discourses on Bodies,” in

Asian Buddhist traditions as well. Scott Pacey observes that the three most influential Buddhist masters in Taiwan, despite their different interpretations of “Buddhism for the Human World,” are quite similar in that they take stereotypical binary gender attributes for granted and expect laywomen to fulfill their traditional feminine roles as wives and mothers, and only as wives and mothers, not as Dhamma/Dharma teachers or exemplary practitioners for all Buddhists.⁴²

Theoretically, the Buddhist Dhamma/Dharma transcends gender. In everyday life, however, it often seems it is gender that transcends the Dhamma/Dharma, for the Dhamma/Dharma is supposed to cover every aspect of Reality/Existence but somehow is hardly ever applied to the gender binary. Karma Lekshe Tsomo observes that in modern Buddhism when the issue of gender inequality arises, “The most common attitude is to ignore the problem altogether, dismiss it, deny it, and trivialize it.”⁴³ This reluctance to acknowledging the existence of gender stereotypes and androcentrism within the Buddhist traditions, Gross rightly notes, “is a more destructive and dangerous form of opposition to gender equality than outright opposition to

Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler, eds. Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006): 34-35.

⁴² Scott Pacey, “A Buddhism for the Human World: Interpretations of *Renjian Fojiao* in Contemporary Taiwan,” *Asian Studies Review* 29 (March 2005): 70-71.

⁴³ Karma Lekshe Tsomo, “Family, Monastery, and Gender Justice: Reenvisioning Buddhist Institutions,” in *Buddhist Women and Social Justice: Ideals, Challenges, and Achievements*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004), 9-10.

egalitarian reforms,”⁴⁴ for it precludes the possibility of reform by making it impossible to even bring up the topic.

The attitudes and actions of most Buddhists indicate that they consider gender “real” and are stubbornly attached to their gendered self. Specifically, and pertaining to the discussion of LGBTQIA+ issues, the gender that most Buddhists are attached to is binary and a product of compulsory heterosexuality that prescribes rigid dual sex/gender roles for the purposes of reproduction. That is, because reproduction has been upheld as an inviolable value by most cultures and because human reproduction needs male and female beings, all humans are then anticipated to fit into one of the two categories, biologically, socially, and culturally. Insofar as the gender binary is firmly upheld, any blurring of the boundary between the binary becomes problematic.

Reproduction—Not a Central Concern in Buddhism

However, Buddhism is not a fertility religion or a pronatalist religion,

⁴⁴ Rita M. Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 117; Gross, “The Dharma of Gender,” 11. Similar concerns are shown in Mrozik, “Materialization of Virtue,” 35; Tsomo, “Family, Monastery, and Gender Justice,” 2; Sara McClintock, “Gendered Bodies of Illusion: Finding a Somatic Method in the Ontic Madness of Emptiness,” in *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*, eds. Roger R. Jackson and John J. Makransky (Richmond, UK: Curzon Press, 2000), 261; Bernard Faure, *The Power of Denial: Buddhism, Purity, and Gender* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 119-142.

and “no particular significance is attributed to procreation in Buddhism.”⁴⁵ Celibate monasticism has been the ideal of Buddhist practices⁴⁶ as the ultimate goal is complete eradication of egocentric desires, including (in fact, especially) the desire for self-perpetuation through reproduction.⁴⁷ Rita M. Gross expounds,

*In the Buddhist vision, one does not need to reproduce biologically to fulfill the acme of one's responsibilities to the interdependent web of mother sentient beings, or to realize the most exalted possibilities of human life. In fact, though the arguments, in their traditional form, elevate celibacy over the householder life-style, rather than childlessness over biological reproduction, a great deal of Buddhist tradition suggests that biological reproduction may interfere with helping the world or realizing one's highest potential.*⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Shoyo Taniguchi, “Biomedical Ethics from a Buddhist Perspective,” *Pacific World* 3 (Fall 1987): 75-83.

⁴⁶ Sujato, “Why Buddhists Should Support Marriage Equality.”

⁴⁷ Rita M. Gross, “Buddhist Resources for Issues of Population, Consumption, and the Environment,” in *Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds*, eds. Mary Evelyn Tucker and Duncan Ryūken Williams (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 291-311; William R. LaFleur, “Sex, Rhetoric, and Ontology: Fecundism as an Ethical Problem,” in *Religion and Sexuality in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, eds. Stephen Ellingson and M. Christian Green (London: Routledge, 2003), 51-82.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 301. See also Langenberg, “Buddhism and Sexuality,” 572-573, 576-577;

While Buddhist teachings do not fault sexual desires on the part of people who are not pursuing *nibbāna/nirvāna*,⁴⁹ the anticipation of the

Gyatso, “Sex,” 280.

⁴⁹ In Buddhist understanding, Taiwanese Bhikṣuṇī Chao-Hwei points out, love and sex, whether heterosexual or homosexual, are the expressions of blind animal instincts, and blind animal instincts are neither holy nor sinful. In fact, there is no “sin” in Buddhism as understood in some religions; the fundamental problem, in Buddhist understanding, “lies in ignorance, *avidya* [Pali:*avijja*], false views and a lack of wisdom. These do not flaw human nature.” Instinctual sensual attachment based on fundamental self-attachment binds one to *samsāra*, the endless cycle of birth, death, rebirth, and re-death, but attachment to one’s own needs also serves as the foundation for understanding the needs of others. Therefore, instinctual desires are morally neutral. Sexual desire, like other instinctual desires, is a manifestation of the fundamental self-attachment and body-attachment that all sentient beings have. See Shih Chao-Hwei, *Fojiao Guifan Lunlixue* 佛教規範倫理學 (Buddhist Normative Ethics) (Taipei, Taiwan: Fajie 法界, 2003), 300-301, 254; Shih Chao-Hwei, “‘Tongzhi’ qibi chengfu zui’e? 「同志」豈必承負罪軛? (Why Must LGBTQ Bear the Stigma?)” *Hongshi Shuangyuekan* 弘誓雙月刊 (Great Vows Bi-Monthly) 83 (2006) (<http://hongshi.org.tw/writings.aspx?code=A2A35E55C42B4B2E3D64CCB01E451784> , accessed September 24, 2019); Shih Chao-Hwei, “Cong Fofa guandian kan ‘Qing’ yu ‘Yu’, II 從佛法觀點看「情」與「欲」(下) (Viewing Affection and Desire from a Buddhist Perspective, Part Two),” *Hongshi Shuangyuekan* 弘誓雙月刊 (GrVows Bi-Monthly) 122 (2013) (<http://www.hongshi.org.tw/writings.aspx?code=076455D2C028E5E012926A5AE0BAC92E> , accessed September 24, 2019); Anselm Grün and Shih Chao-Hwei, 2013. *Ni Xin Shenmo? Jiduzongjiao yu Fojiao de Shengming Duihua* 你信什麼? 基督宗教與佛教的生命對話 (What Do You Believe? A Dialogue about Life between Christianity and Buddhism) (Taipei, Taiwan: Nanyubei Wenhua 南與北文化 (South and North Cultural Publishing, 2013), 179-180; Walpola Rahula,

gender binary that is rooted in the presumption that everyone needs to and should reproduce is not in accord with the ultimate goal of Buddhist practices. More important, the analyses of five aggregates and no-Self, fully understood, would deconstruct the presumed binary genders in the same way they deconstruct other aspects of personal identity. In other words, the non-essentialist teachings of Buddhism serve to undo dualistic thinking, including the male/female, masculine/feminine, and heterosexual/homosexual binaries, which is exactly why LGBTQIA+ converts in the West find Buddhism “queer-friendly.”⁵⁰ And if central Buddhist teachings do not lend support to attachment to the reproduction-driven compulsory heterosexuality or the gender binary, how could they possibly support binary-based anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiments? Buddhist teachings do not lend support to attachment to the reproduction-driven compulsory heterosexuality or the gender binary, how could they possibly support binary-based anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiments?

What the Buddha Taught (New York: Grove, 1959), 3; Morgan, “Buddhism,” 92; Karma Lekshe Tsomo, ed., *Sākyadhītā: Daughters of the Buddha* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 1988), 56; Shih Chao-Hwei, *Fojiao Lunlixue* 佛教倫理學 (Buddhist Ethics) (Taipei, Taiwan: Fajie 法界, 1995), 145; Amy Paris Langenberg, “Sex and Sexuality in Buddhism: A Tetralemma,” *Religion Compass* 9/9 (2015): 277-286. Ajahn Sujato notes that the Suttas “freely acknowledge that sex is for pleasure, and they never make a problem out of that.” Sujato, “Why Buddhists Should Support Marriage Equality.”

⁵⁰ Gleig, “Queering Buddhism or Buddhist De-Queering?” 198-199.

Bodhisattva Guanyin as Exemplar of Empathy to Diverse Beings

In whichever branch of Buddhism, the core Buddhist teachings are to understand that egocentric thinking is suffering-inducing, to practice universal compassion, and to devote oneself to the cessation of suffering for self and others, or at least the alleviation of it. The teaching of no-Self, which is preserved and taught in all Buddhist traditions, itself is a potent critique of the attachment to the sex/gender binary. Mahāyāna Buddhism takes the critique one step further with the Bodhisattva Ideal that simultaneously affirms and transcends the embodied experience of diverse beings. Most notable and most popular among the great Bodhisattvas in the Mahāyāna tradition is Avalokiteśvara (अवलोकितेश्वर; Ch. Quanyīn/Kuan-yin 觀音; Jp. Kannon; Kr. Kwan Um; Vt. Quan Am; Tbt. Chenrezig), the Bodhisattva of Compassion *par excellence* whose name in Chinese literally means the “Perceiver of the Cries of the World.”

The seemingly abstract teaching of no-Self has profound implications for interpersonal relationships and behaviors. Peter Harvey explains that the teaching of no-Self “undermines the attachment to self—that ‘I’ am a positive, self-identical entity that should be gratified, and should be able to brush aside others if they get in ‘my’ way—which is the basis of lack of respect for others.”⁵¹ Peggy Morgan notes that, in Buddhist understanding, spiritual attainment is correlated with non-attachment to one’s ego-self, which is manifested in kindness and respect to all beings: “[t]he more

⁵¹ Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, 36;

enlightened people are, the more they treat all beings (not just human beings) as equals without separate egos, and with the same love and respect they naturally show to their children, parents or themselves.”⁵² Zenju Manuel states that she experiences spiritual liberation “as freedom from projections of superiority and inferiority among sentient beings”⁵³ and recognizes that “to walk the path of compassion and wisdom is to carry no harmful distinctions within our personal lives or between ourselves and others.”⁵⁴ Ajahn Brahm argues that Buddhism would not judge people’s differences to be better or worse, and would just see different people to be equally worthy of compassion.⁵⁵ Ajahn Sujato applies this line of thinking to all people who may be minoritized in one way or another: “People are people, regardless of their gender, colour, nationality, or sexual orientation. The Buddha taught ‘for one who feels.’ That’s the only requirement for Buddhist practice: one who feels.”⁵⁶

In Mahāyāna understanding, Bodhisattvas are beings who have enough wisdom to have eradicated the self-attachment and at the same time are

⁵² Peggy Morgan, “Buddhism,” in *Ethical Issues in Six Religious Traditions*, 2nd ed., eds. Peggy Morgan and Clive A. Lawton (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 101.

⁵³ Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, *The Way of Tenderness: Awakening through Race, Sexuality, and Gender* (Boston, MA: Wisdom, 2015), 78.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁵⁵ Ajahn Brahm, “Gay Marriage, Why Not?” March 16, 2012 (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GOPcbFhCEj0> , accessed September 24, 2019).

⁵⁶ Sujato, “Why Buddhists Should Support Marriage Equality.”

driven by profound kindness and compassion to all beings so that they voluntarily stay in *samsāra* to help and teach *all* sentient beings, all those who feel. In other words, the overarching characteristics of all Bodhisattvas are wisdom and compassion. Avalokiteśvara, in particular, is known for immense compassion because it is believed that the “Perceiver of the Cries of the World” will come, in the physical forms that are needed, to the rescue of people who cry out the Bodhisattva’s name. As such, Avalokiteśvara is not only widely and frequently invoked by Mahāyānists but is also known by Therāvādins, partly because Mahāyāna did spread to the modern-day Therāvada countries and partly because of the travels and communications among contemporary Buddhists. Avalokiteśvara’s influence can also be seen in the western queer Buddhist circles, as a few white male gay writers portray him as the “gay archetype”: an alluring, youthful gay man.⁵⁷ The “gay archetype” representation of Avalokiteśvara can be easily dismissed by more conservative Buddhists as a misappropriation of Buddhism and “not dharmic,” and it has a very limited application to lesbians, bisexuals, transgender persons, and the intersex. More important, in my view, it misses the point of Avalokiteśvara being able to change into many forms, which can be tremendously comforting and inspiring to people of minoritized identities.

The textbook interpretation of Avalokiteśvara’s taking different forms focuses on the Bodhisattva’s motivation and ability: out of immense compassion for all sentient beings, the marvelous Bodhisattva

⁵⁷ Corless, “Coming Out in the Sangha,” 263; Toby Johnson, *Gay Spirituality: The Role of Gay Identity in the Transformation of Human Consciousness* (Maple Shade, NJ: Lethe, 2004).

Avalokiteśvara displays various forms in response to the needs of the people to be rescued. The various forms are typically glossed as a result of the Bodhisattva's skillful means (*upāya*) without any discussion on the significance of the specific forms that the Bodhisattva is said to take. What can the ability of transformation mean to ordinary people who are very much confined to one physical form in their concrete everyday life? What can it mean to conceptualize Avalokiteśvara taking many different forms, some familiar and some unfamiliar, some human and some mythical?

Implications of Thirty-Three Forms and Mythical/Multimorphic Beings

Different *sūtras*, and in fact different versions of the same *sūtra*, mention the numerous forms that Avalokiteśvara takes. Take the *Lotus Sūtra* (Sanskrit: **सद्धर्मपुण्डरीकसूत्र** *Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra*), for example. The most popular version used by Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, and Japanese Buddhists, *Miaofǎ liénhúa jīng* 妙法蓮華經,⁵⁸ was translated to Chinese by Kumārajīva (Chinese name: Jīmōlúoshí 鳩摩羅什 [344-413, or 350-409]) in 406 C.E. In Chapter 25 of Kumārajīva's translation, the Buddha says that, in response to different needs of living beings, Avalokiteśvara immediately manifests in one of 33 forms in order to liberate them. (*Taishō* 9: 57a-b.) Chun-Fang Yü 于君方 points out that those forms mentioned "had relevance to a religious universe intelligible only to people living in ancient India,"⁵⁹

⁵⁸ *Taishō*, vol. 9, no. 262.

⁵⁹ Chün-Fang Yü, *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteśvara* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 45.

and “the number thirty-three is meaningful only in the Vedic and Hindu context.”⁶⁰ However, the number 33 was not meaningful enough for all Indian Buddhist writers to adopt, nor did the various forms become a standardized trope: an earlier (286 C.E.) translation of the *Lotus Sūtra* by Dharmarakṣa (Chinese name: Zhúfǎhù 竺法護 [ca. 230-?]), entitled *Zhèngfǎhuá jīng* 正法華經,⁶¹ lists only seventeen forms, and Hendrik Kern’s English translation from a Nepalese manuscript lists only sixteen forms.⁶² In volume six of the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra* (Sanskrit: श्रृङ्गम सूत्र; Chinese: 大佛頂如來密因修證了義諸菩薩萬行首楞嚴經),⁶³ the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara take 32 forms in answering to the needs and dispositions of different sentient beings. (*Taishō* 19: 128b-129a.)

What is the significance of the variance of the forms listed? Both of the shorter lists contain mostly non-human forms, and neither of the shorter lists contains explicitly female forms. If the Buddha, bodhisattva, and *pratyekabuddha* (solitary buddha) are considered transcending humanity and thus non-human, then Dharmarakṣa’s translation lists only eight human forms, and only three forms listed in the Nepalese manuscript are human. If these two shorter lists are compared with that in Kumārajīva’s translation or in the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra*, it seems that the authors of the two longer lists

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 26;

⁶¹ *Taishō* 9:129b-c.

⁶² Hendrik Kern, trans., *The Lotus Sūtra: Saddharma Pundarīka Sūtra or the Lotus of the True Law* (Surrey, BC: Eremitical, 2011), 287-288.

⁶³ *Taishō*, vol. 19, no. 945.

deliberately put in more human forms, particularly female human forms: 16 of the 33 forms listed in Kumārajīva's translation are human, seven of which are explicitly female: *bhikṣuṇī* (fully-ordained female Buddhist monastic), *upāsikā* (lay woman follower of the Buddha), wife of an elder, wife of a householder, wife of a chief minister, wife of a brāhmin, and young girl. In the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra*, 13 of the 32 forms are human, four of which are explicitly female: *bhikṣuṇī*, *upāsikā*, female master or wife of a king, and young girl (and there are clearly females among the form of "ordinary humans"). The proliferation of human forms that are *not* adult male elites is noteworthy because, considering that they were educated to read and write, the authors of *sūtras* were most likely to have been adult male elites. It seems that the authors of Kumārajīva's translation and the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra* no longer saw adult male elites, such as *cakravartin* (wheel-turning monarch) and brāhmin (priest), to be representative of the entirety of humankind, even though the list of female human forms in Kumārajīva's translation still betrays an elite male perspective: four of the seven forms are the wives of high-status men (both "elder" and "householder" in ancient Indian usage were status terms; they did not refer to any old or non-monastic persons). The expanded lists of human forms to include male and female, adult and children, and elite and commoner seemed to suggest that the authors were becoming more sensitive to biological and social differences and were recognizing the diversity of experiences and needs based on sex, age, and social status.

But why is there such a large number of mythical beings? It is worth

repeating that the mythical forms clearly did not become a standardized repertoire: the non-human forms in the four lists vary, albeit with overlaps. That is, the authors did not just quote from a well-accepted list of mythical beings that everyone believed to exist. Robert DeCaroli observes, “Although some texts attempt to organize these beings by rank or classify them according to their qualities, no two classifications systems are the same, and rarely, if ever, do the narratives conform to these rubrics.”⁶⁴ What does it mean for those ancient Indian male adult elites to include so many forms of mythical beings, even though the types of beings and the definitions of those beings were not conceived in the same way by all ancient Indians?⁶⁵ If the purpose of such a long list was simply to include as many different beings as possible, why were animals, insects, and plants not included?

Considering the large number of mythical beings listed and the lack of references to animals, insects, and plants therein, it is possible that the inclusion of at least some of the mythical beings was the authors’ way of signifying the types of human differences that, from their perspective, were too far from the taken-for-granted norm to be considered “human.” Neither animals nor insects nor plants were included because the focal point was still the diversity of *human* experiences, even though the dominant male elites did not consider those “others” to be “human” as they defined it. For example, the *gandharva* is depicted as a kind of male spirit that has superb

⁶⁴ Robert DeCaroli, *Haunting the Buddha: Indian Popular Religions and the Formation of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 10.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

musical skills and feeds on fragrance.⁶⁶ The *yakṣa*, depicted as a sinuous woman, is a class of nature spirit with supernatural powers who, if not propitiated, can wreak vengeance on (normative male) humans.⁶⁷ The *kimnara*, literally “How could this be human?”, is a class of celestial musicians who are depicted either as horse-headed men or as woman-headed birds.⁶⁸ These three may very well reflect stereotypes about gender and sexual minorities from the perspective of cisgender, heterosexual men: the ethereal, effeminate men who are good at arts, the women who are out of men’s reach and yet can potentially hurt the heterosexual men’s feelings and egos, and the people who appear to be men and women but have a certain quality, out of which cisgender men cannot make sense. The *asura* (demigods) is a group that continuously wages wars against the *deva* (gods) out of jealousy in ancient Indian understanding,⁶⁹ and yet for Zoroastrians *Ahura* (cognate to *asura*) is the Lord/God and *deva* is none other than the devil—the designation *asura* might just be referring to the rival ethnic group. The *nāga*, depicted with a human’s head and torso but a cobra’s tail and

⁶⁶ Damien Keown, *Dictionary of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 99; Robert E. Buswell and Donald S. Lopez, Jr., eds., *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 311-312.

⁶⁷ Keown, *Dictionary of Buddhism*, 338; Buswell and Lopez, eds., *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, 1018.

⁶⁸ Keown, *Dictionary of Buddhism*, 142; Buswell and Lopez, eds., *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, 436.

⁶⁹ Keown, *Dictionary of Buddhism*, 23; Buswell and Lopez, eds., *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, 76.

hood and having the ability to masquerade as human,⁷⁰ may very well allude to the Naga tribes in the northeast India and northwest Myanmar. As such, mythical beings might be the dominant elites' ways of representing gender, sexual, and ethnic "others" who were so different from the "norm" that they were depicted as different mythical species.

While it is impossible to know for sure the reason(s) that these mythical beings are included, Avalokiteśvara's transformation still exemplifies two important values when dealing with human diversity: respect (self-respect as well as other-respect) and empathy. To say that Avalokiteśvara takes the forms of all kinds of beings is also to say that the Bodhisattva's infinite wisdom and boundless compassion can be found in people with all identities. Legends about the manifestations of Avalokiteśvara, particularly in the Chinese Mahāyāna tradition, invariably recount that people encountered a person, thought it was just a man or woman of the "other," and realized that they had been helped by Avalokiteśvara only after the act of rescue.⁷¹ These legends convey the Mahāyāna teaching that, whoever one encounters, whether the "other" is perceived to be one's equal or social superior or social inferior, that "other" may very well be an enlightened being performing an identity and thus well deserving respect. Avalokiteśvara's multimorphic manifestation is thus a call for respect for different kinds of people in the

⁷⁰ Buswell and Lopez, eds., *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, 561.

⁷¹ Barbara E. Reed, "The Gender Symbolism of Kuan-yin Bodhisattva," in *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*, eds. José Ignacio Cabezón (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), 165; Liz Wilson, "Buddhist Views on Gender and Desire," 166.

world, even if their difference from oneself is perceived to be so great that they seem almost a different species.

For ethnic, gender, and sexual minorities, “dominant cultural beliefs and values furnish and perpetuate feelings of inadequacy, shame, confusion, and distrust.”⁷² Avalokiteśvara’s act of taking various forms without discrimination is a validation of the embodied existence of ethnic, gender, and sexual differences. The multimorphic manifestation of Avalokiteśvara is thus also a call for minoritized people to respect themselves: no matter how far from the “norm” someone’s identity may be, and no matter if the identity category is constructed by oneself or imposed by others, that identity has no bearing on the spiritual potential of the person; every identity can have the same infinite wisdom and boundless compassion of the great Bodhisattva.

Affirming Yet Transcending Embodied Identities

Sometimes the affirmation of differences can become a straightjacket for gender, sexual, and ethnic minorities, as many queer theorists and cultural theorists have noted. Cultural theorist Rey Chow, for example, points out that for the ethnic academic subject, “[h]er only viable option seems to be that of reproducing a specific version of herself—and her ethnicity—that has, somehow, already been endorsed and approved by the

⁷² Tracy L. Robinson-Wood, *The Convergence of Race, Ethnicity, and Gender: Multiple Identities in Counseling*, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2009), iv.

specialists of her culture.”⁷³ In the west, non-western ethnicities, and in fact all non-mainstream identities such as gender and sexual minorities, are managed “through the disciplinary promulgation of the supposed difference.”⁷⁴ Different identity groups are acknowledged and to some extent allowed, insofar as those groups are internally homogenized and their supposed differences from the dominant group are fossilized. Identity politics frequently conflates and ignores intra-group differences while presupposing and amplifying intergroup ones⁷⁵—“they” are all the same within their groups, but “they” are completely and perpetually different from the dominant “us.” The supposed differences of non-mainstream identity groups are very often misunderstandings, exaggerations, wishful imaginations, or outright caricatures, and yet presumably every single person of a certain identity group shares those traits and *is* those traits, with no possibility of ever getting beyond them. Avalokiteśvara’s ability to transform, going along with the teaching of no-Self, indicates that identity is not a stable, fixed *thing*. To say that the Bodhisattva can transform is also to indicate that identity is performed and can be transcended. A person can transcend the confinements of the supposed differences of any particular identity.

The possibility of transcendence, however, does not at all suggest that

⁷³ Rey Chow, *Ethics after Idealism: Theory—Culture—Ethnicity—Reading* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), 117.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Kimberle Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43(6) (1991): 1242.

marginalized identities *should* be discarded for an identity that is presumably more “normal;” no-Self or transcendence of identity is not about jettisoning one’s embodied identity altogether⁷⁶—at least the *Lotus Sūtra* or the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra* does not say that Avalokiteśvara, after performing various identities, returns to an original form that is an adult male elite. In fact, the evolution of Avalokiteśvara’s iconography in the Buddhist history (from male to female, and from singular to multiple) suggests at least some inchoate understanding that even the identity of an adult male elite needs to be transcended. Whether male or female, upper class or lower class, one’s identity is socially and psychologically constructed and does not correlate with the level of spiritual attainment of which a person is capable.⁷⁷ A person may choose or be forced to identify with a certain identity, but the identity category does not define their nature or essence—there is no fixed nature or essence to be found.

At the same time, this emphasis on the illusory nature of identity can produce the unintended effect of dismissing the everyday sufferings of minoritized people. “Within many Buddhist communities,” Zenju critiques, “discussions of difference gravitate toward a superficial sameness or ‘no self,’ without realistically addressing the suffering that has happened—that is

⁷⁶ Andrew K. T. Yip and Sharon Smith, “Queerness and Sangha: Exploring Buddhist Lives,” in *Queer Spiritual Spaces: Sexuality and Sacred Placed*, eds. Kath Brown and Sally R. Munt (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 111-138. See also Gleig’s discussion in “Queering Buddhism or Buddhist De-Queering?” 204.

⁷⁷ Sponberg, “Attitudes toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism,” 8-10.

happening—among human beings.”⁷⁸ When “no-Self” is emphasized to females but the representations of enlightenment remain overwhelmingly male, it is in effect telling women that whatever sufferings they have experienced as women do not deserve attention from the perspective of (male) enlightened beings because their femaleness is not real. Likewise, when cultural diversity discourses deconstruct identity categories but the dominant identities remain the norms in society, the idea that identities are constructed can function to minimize the sufferings that gender, sexual, and racial minorities have experienced. Along the same line, Mahāyāna Buddhist legends about women instantaneously changing into men, even though pointing to the central Buddhist teaching of no-Self and carrying relevance for female-to-male transgender persons, still produce the effect of dismissing feminine identity and female sexuality.⁷⁹ Zenju Manuel points out that in

⁷⁸ Manuel, *The Way of Tenderness*, 47.

⁷⁹ Lucinda Joy Peach, “Social Responsibility, Sex Change, and Salvation: Gender Justice in the ‘Lotus Sutra,’” *Philosophy East and West* 52(1) (2002): 50-74; Serinity Young, “Female Mutability and Male Anxiety in an Early Buddhist Legend,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 16(1) (2007): 14-39. There are also Pāli texts that recount spontaneous sex change due to the force of *kamma*, and in those texts it seemed people presumed the spontaneous sex change could happen both ways, i.e. both from male to female, and from female to male. See Burkhard [Bee] Scherer, “Gender Transformed and Meta-Gendered Enlightenment: Reading Buddhist Narratives as Paradigms of Inclusiveness,” *Revista de Estudos da Religião* 3 (2006): 65-76 (https://www.pucsp.br/rever/rv3_2006/p_scherer.pdf , accessed September 24, 2019); Carol S. Anderson, “Changing Sex in Pāli Buddhist Monastic Literature,” in *Queering Paradigms VI: Interventions, Ethics, and Glocalities*, ed. Bee Scherer (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2016), 231-251

many predominantly white spiritual communities “people of color are expected to ‘graduate’ from being concerned with issues of race,” but whites are not expected to give up their whiteness.⁸⁰ Similarly, Gleig’s ethnographical study finds that the non-essentialist philosophy of Buddhism can also function to “de-queer” and suggest to queer persons that they should jettison their gender or sexual identities even though heterosexual and cisgender persons are not expected to do the same.⁸¹ As La Sarmiento comments, no-Self is “true in the absolute sense and not so much in the relative or mundane sense” because “[a]ll beings are not treated equally, some have more privileges than others, and many are oppressed by those in power—which in our culture and in Western Buddhism tend to be cisgender, white, straight men.”⁸² The manifestation of Avalokiteśvara in multiple forms represents a corrective to this inadvertent effect of overemphasizing

(https://www.academia.edu/31385777/Anderson_Changing_Sex_Ch_11_QP_6_2_016_.pdf , accessed September 24, 2019); Carol S. Anderson, “Changing Sex or Changing Gender in Pāli Buddhist Literature,” *Scholar & Feminist Online* 14.2 (2017)

(<http://sfonline.barnard.edu/queer-religion/changing-sex-or-changing-gender-in-pali-buddhist-literature/> , accessed September 24, 2019).

⁸⁰ Manuel, *The Way of Tenderness*, 61.

⁸¹ Gleig, “Queering Buddhism or Buddhist De-Queering?”

⁸² Justin Whitaker, “Intersections of Gender, Identity, and Buddhism: An Interview with LGBTQ Meditation Teacher La Sarmiento,” February 23, 2015 (<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/americanbuddhist/2015/02/intersections-of-gender-identity-and-buddhism-an-interview-with-lgbtq-meditation-teacher-la-sarmiento.html> , accessed September 24, 2019).

no-Self without considering the embodied sufferings: different humans experience life differently and thus suffer in different ways, and Avalokiteśvara recognizes various sufferings caused by human differences and takes the forms they needed to help them.

Bodhisattvas are beings of wisdom and compassion. *Real-izing* compassion, Avalokiteśvara's manifestation in different forms affirms the embodied existence of people of minoritized identities. Utilizing wisdom, Avalokiteśvara surpasses the notion of fixed identity and is able to *trans-form*, which exemplifies moving beyond the confinements of any particular identity, whether normative or non-normative, and actively empathizing with others. Ordinary people cannot change their physical forms to become the non-normative others and experience their day-to-day sufferings, but as aspiring bodhisattvas, as practitioners of Mahāyāna are said to be, they can strive to learn the perspectives of the minoritized "others," empathize with their realities and needs, and seek to alleviate their sufferings.

Conclusion: The Buddhist Commitment to Alleviate Suffering

The central Buddhist teaching of no-Self deconstructs the idea of a "natural," abiding self, including the gendered aspect of it that is rooted in the desire for reproduction. As Buddhist teachings do not uphold reproduction as a fundamental value like other world religions do, they cannot be said to support the binary sex/gender system that is conceptualized and imposed on people for the purposes of reproduction. And given that

anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiments and arguments are based on the “naturalness” of binary sexes/genders, Buddhist teachings do not support them, either. The Bodhisattva Ideal in the Mahāyāna tradition further points to the performative nature of identities as well as the necessity of empathizing with and actively helping all suffering “others” in their embodied experiences. For Buddhists, Peggy Morgan states, “the mark of great beings is their capacity to identify with others and their wish to take everyone along the path to Nirvana with them. They are selfless persons, with all awareness of ego and distinctions gone.”⁸³ That is, from a Buddhist point of view, LGBTQIA+ issues are not about “unnatural” or “abnormal” identities or sexual desires⁸⁴ —the “nature” or “norm” in question is invariably constructed out of the egocentric distinctions that the people of the dominant group make. Rather, LGBTQIA+ issues are about the sufferings of “those who feel” caused by egocentric and essentialist labeling of people, and about the Buddhist injunction to move toward the cessation of suffering or, in lieu of complete cessation, at least alleviation of suffering.

Bhikṣuṇī Chao-Hwei, the most systematic among the monastic and lay Buddhist teachers who advocate for LGBTQIA+ rights, observes that the heterosexual majority often judges sexual minorities to be “unnatural” or “abnormal.” However, she remarks, from a Buddhist point of view, the condition of the majority is not necessarily “normal.”⁸⁵ In fact, as shown

⁸³ Morgan, “Buddhism,” 101.

⁸⁴ Liz Wilson, “Buddhist Views on Gender and Desire”; Numrich, “The Problem with Sex According to Buddhism”.

⁸⁵ Chao-Hwei, “Cong Fofa guandian kan ‘Qing’ yu ‘Yu’, II”.

above, the Buddhist traditions are not at all pronatalist and often seem to treat non-reproductive sex as a lesser problem than reproductive sex. The social institutions based on compulsory heterosexuality are not only not necessary “natural” or “normal;” they are, in Bhikṣunī Chao-Hwei’s judgment, committing “bad karma” by oppressing LGBTQIA+ persons, in the same way that male domination is creating bad karma against women, ableism is creating bad karma against the differently abled, slavery is creating bad karma against the enslaved, and anthropocentrism is creating bad karma against non-human species.⁸⁶

Bhikkhu Sujato writes, “For the Buddha, homosexuality was clearly not an issue. Nor was making laws proscribing valid forms of marriage. What was an issue, on the other hand, was compassion. The very essence of compassion is to reach out to those who are suffering, those who are marginalised and persecuted.... As Buddhists we should recognise a clear moral imperative to help wherever we can.”⁸⁷ Similarly, Bhikṣunī Chao-Hwei asserts that being compassionate to, and protective of, minorities who suffer from discriminations is a moral obligation for people who strive for *nirvāna*.⁸⁸ Specifically regarding gender and sexual minorities, she enjoins, “As Buddhists, we should follow the Buddha in protecting beings and should be compassionate and use our power to help LGBTQIA+ persons alleviate suffering and attain happiness.”⁸⁹ Buddhism teaches no-Self and

⁸⁶ Chao-Hwei, “‘Tongzhi’ qibi chengfu zui’e?”.

⁸⁷ Sujato, “Why Buddhists Should Support Marriage Equality.”

⁸⁸ Chao-Hwei, *Fojiao Lunlixue*, 78 and 222.

⁸⁹ Chao-Hwei, “‘Tongzhi’ qibi chengfu zui’e?”.

deconstruction of egocentric attachment that seeks to reproduce itself through compulsory heterosexuality and binary gender norms, and Buddhism teaches compassion toward all suffering others as well as active alleviation of suffering. Anti-LGBTQIA+ thoughts and practices are egocentric on the part of the heterosexual and cisgender majority, harmful to people who do not fit into the binary sex/gender system that aims at reproduction, and callous to minoritized suffering “others”—they have no ground in Buddhism.

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