Destroying the Binary: Transgenderism in Buddhism
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If doctrines and medical texts of Buddhism show a relationship between the third gender and a bodhisattvas being that achieves nirvana, why is there discrimination towards transgenderism and how can we explore it to understand it?

Buddhism is a religion that seeks peace and an escape from rebirth of suffering for every being, regardless of their biological sex. Despite Buddhism's origins in a patriarchal society like most religions, it offers both men and women the ability to achieve enlightenment, viewing them as equal like in the Lotus Sutra, one of Buddhism's most important literature pieces. Not much is written or known about the third transgendered being though in regards to how they are accepted within Buddhism and their abilities to achieve nirvana. Being transgendered is a seemingly taboo identity and invites controversy in many societies, but key scriptures of Mahayana Buddhism such as the Lotus Sutra and Vimalakirti Sutra demonstrate that the third gender is far from problematic in achieving nirvana. Therefore, this research paper will strive to look at why the third gender is discriminated against in Buddhism despite its relationship to scriptures and achieving enlightenment. First it will focus on Buddhist sutras and then extend into medical texts that are relevant within Buddhist origins and finish by leading into how the transgender being is accepted socially in the sangha. By looking at both doctrines and medical texts one will be able to see the relevancy of the body both scripturally and medically and thus begin to understand it culturally within modern day religious law and societal acceptance.

In answering the question of discrimination between genders within Buddhism it is also critical to understand its end goal and how it impacts the notions of gender. The end goal in Buddhism is to escape samsara, the cycle of rebirth by ridding of attachment. The means to do so

however depend on what is in the mind. Meditation is one method that is utilized to train the mind in order to achieve nirvana. Meditation teaches the practitioner to observe a situation for what it is as opposed to reacting through their attachment with their physical body and desires. Without meditation the mind is considered a drunken monkey or wild elephant that needs stability and control (Lopez 2001, 49). Within meditation there is no physical or emotional being, to have one is to be attached. Therefore, the gender of a person should not matter in their means to achieve enlightenment as it is an attachment to the physical state of the body. Nirvana is a state that transcends the body and all its worldly attachments including the person's physical being. Thus, gender should never be viewed at as a barrier to achieving spiritual goals, within both Mahayana and Theravada strands of Buddhism women and men are deemed as equals. Alas, it has not been seen without impact throughout the years and sangha's, most likely due to the changing times and cultures of where each strand of Buddhism is located.

Buddhist Doctrines

Two key texts to Mahayana Buddhism are the Lotus Sutra and Vimalakirti Sutra. Both cover various topics but together they share teachings on equality of gender and raise questions as to how it is perceived. By using gender transformations of female into male and vice versa, both Mahayana sutras strive to set straight the misunderstandings of gender that there is, especially with regards to how women are viewed in society. However, the doctrines appear to raise more questions than answers.

Among the most important messages that Buddhist doctrines within the Lotus Sutra offers on gender is the Buddha's instruction that one should not make distinctions between man or women, that all phenomena are empty (Peach 2002, 51). This message is taken from Peaceful Practices of chapter fourteen in the Lotus Sutra and liberates those from thinking that one must

be of a certain gender, caste, or aptitude to achieve the goal of enlightenment in Buddhism. The Buddha preaches for equality here among every being as everyone can achieve nirvana, but other writings within the Lotus Sutra do not necessarily abide in harmony with it.

The Lotus Sutra offers varying images on gender, sometimes giving mixed messages and implying a hierarchy between the sexes. The story of the dragon princess is one where a young girl changes into a man in the space of an instant and achieves nirvana. This baffles readers as they are led to believe that it is impossible for women to obtain their spiritual goal as a woman's body is defiled and soiled, that it isn't a vessel for law (Peach 2002, 55). This brings to light the questions that many have about a woman being able to achieve nirvana the same as a male. As the dragon princess is able to achieve enlightenment she puts to rest questions of defilement and inequality towards women as well as the five obstacles and three obedience's every women faces within Buddhism. The five obstacles appear to be restricted to women yet both woman and man can face the hindrances of sensory desire, sloth, doubt, ill- will, and worry. The three obedience's however are restricted to women as they are to commandments to either obey a father, a husband, or their male child when they are older. The nature of her achievement is what captivates attention, although she demonstrates the Buddha's teaching of equality and ability for everyone to achieve nirvana, she does so in a male body. She becomes a transgendered being by being able to possess both male and female biological aspects. The dragon girl's enlightenment shows a struggle for the basic human rights to be recognized regardless of gender (Ikeda 2001). This story encourages awareness to equality for every being, to look beyond distinctions of gender and class. Even though the society and culture that pay heed to the Lotus Sutra may be patriarchal influenced, the Lotus Sutra tries to teach that no matter the physical being of a person-male, female, or transgendered, all are equal in trying to achieve nirvana.

The dragon princess is a demonstration of a transgendered being within the Lotus Sutra that is revered and looked upon as a lesson, but she is also a topic of question. Although the Lotus Sutra tries to promote every being's ability to achieve nirvana through her example, she must first change gender into a male body, implying a hierarchy of gender. Again, the male is seen as the prevailing gender in being the only one able to achieve enlightenment; those in a female body appear to be disqualified. Thus, this story within the Lotus Sutra offers mixed messages on acceptance of gender by using a transgendered being, making it difficult to translate for a society and religious law to understand.

The Vimalakirti Sutra is similar in its approach to teaching equality of beings both male and female. Within the sutra is a teaching about a goddess turning Sariputra into a woman by exchanging bodies momentarily to teach him that to acquire a body is like magic, for just as though he appears to be a woman he is not really a woman (Lopez 2001, 163). This teaching also opens up the possibilities for transgenderism as beings that do not necessarily understand their bodies and how they got them. They may not psychologically relate to how they are biologically. Within modern day North America, the sense of confused gender identity is becoming a prevalent issue that plagues schools in various senses, but especially within what washroom is appropriate for a transgender being to use. Here, transgendered beings have mixed feelings on what to use as they cannot relate to their physiology, their biological organs differ from what they identify with socially. These instances stir the binary distinctions between male and female spaces based on social identity. They also hope to promote tolerance and acceptance of the person as it doesn't matter what their sex or identity is, but that they be respected and treated equally. Such examples offer justification to the Buddha saying that just as you are, you may not appear to be that all beings are not really men or women (Peach 2002, 66). The main point of this

teaching is what brings together both Sariputra and third gendered beings, that regardless of gender and sex what matters is what is in the mind. This epiphany not only promotes equality among all male, female, and transgendered, but also shows the relevancy associated with what is in the mind and how it impacts one's spiritual journey to nirvana.

Both the Lotus Sutra and Vimalakirti Sutra both offer valuable lessons of equality towards all beings, but in doing so complicate the matter with transgendered beings. Transformations that tend to move in the male direction such as the dragon girls in the Lotus Sutra further instill a gender hierarchy of male over female, especially with mention of the uncleanliness of a female body and being reborn as a man-the uncleanliness related to the female physiology of a menstrual cycle monthly. However, as it is a transgender being that achieves nirvana it would make sense for transgendered beings to be held with upmost respect as they are able to possess both qualities of male and female. The stories that are held in the Vimalakirti Sutra are a little different and speak of transformation into a female body, but it is the body of a female god. Although it is a god body and is purer than a mortal body, this still suggests implications towards the female gender that by being a regular woman one will encounter obstacles to enlightenment. These stories ironically reinforce male privilege while trying to teach equality through third gendered beings, ultimately raising more questions around gender then answers.

A Third Gender in Medical History

Before delving into the medical literature surrounding Buddhism note the importance of the words sex and gender. The terms sex and gender are often used interchangeably to discuss the transgender being in Buddhism, although in certain cases sex will refer to one's reproductive organs and gender will refer to the social role a being takes on. Generally, there will be reference

to the biological body in discussing the third sex as one cannot fault the body for its sexual organs, but one may try to fault one for their sexual orientation. To have a sexual orientation is to allow for a sense of desire and attachment to another being based on attraction that is outside of one's own body. The religious life of Buddhism does not allow for outside sources of attachment to the world as it promotes a focus on the mind and transcendence of the material world. This sense of attachment is much easier to rid of as it is based on desires outside the physical body that one's mind is trapped within.

Within the medical discourse of Buddhism third genders are recognized discriminatorily and they are recognized as having a relationship to the being of a bodhisattva. Jane Gyatso's book on medicinal history within an early modern Tibet encompasses Buddhist teachings of how to view the human body. Coincidentally, Tibet is under a majority of the Mahayana sect of Buddhism, the same sect from which the Lotus Sutra and Vimalakirti Sutra and their stories of transgenderism originate from. Gyatso's book shows the reader the third sex via its discrimination in religious communities as well as its relationship to enlightenment.

Medical literature describes the third sex from its infancy in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism. It is recognized that the third sex is not simply one more category, but within the third sex one can be without sexual organs, have both sexual organs, or change back and forth between the differing sexual organs monthly (Gyatso 2015, 326). The third sex is the representation of a being that is everything that is not singularly male or female. Terms for this transgendered being vary cross-culturally, but the popular Tibetan term that will be used for the sakes of this paper is *ma ning*, meaning one who is not either man or woman and has no opposite (Gyatso 2015, 325). The term brings into awareness how this third gender does not conform to a society or have the ability to have an opposite as male and female do, which is where it gives

itself a negative profile in religious ideals of cultivation. Essentially from birth those who are transgendered do not have any choice in the matter as it is a physical property of their body that they cannot change, yet this physical trademark has the potential to shape one's life negatively, especially in the religious sense.

The third sex has records of being discriminated against in early Indian Mahayana Buddhism, pertaining to both sexual orientation and sexual organs. Being a *ma ning* is to be a transgendered being both biologically and socially. To be a *ma ning* would disqualify one from being able to receive monastic ordination and due to this rule those who were ordained were physically examined (Gyatso 2015, 327). An example of discrimination like this is hard to accept when recalling important Mahayana sutras that demonstrate enlightenment from transgendered beings. Furthermore, discrimination from the monastic communities brings into question what the goal is behind ordination and how it relates to the physical body. Ideally, as a newly ordained monk one will be closer to achieving nirvana, but if the Buddha himself demonstrates that nirvana depends on the mind and dharma then there should not be a problem being a third sex. Regardless discrimination continues and in other sutras there are warnings against offering donations and preaching the Dharma to the third sex (Gyatso 2015, 327). Such preaching implies the third gender does not hold the capacity to meditate or fulfill other religious practices, simply because of their biological organs. Where certain aspects of Buddhist soteriology teach that both male and female sexes and genders are equal, discrimination from contradicting sutras demonstrates anxiety within religious Buddhist communities of how to treat transgendered beings. The idealistic equality of genders and sexes for achieving nirvana is not always practiced within the social sphere, making for a very gray area of how to understand transgender beings within Buddhism.

Within Tibetan medical physiologies the *ma ning* third gender is used alongside pulse, inhalation, yogic channels, winds, and digestive juices that each being has. Whether or not there is a direct relation or metaphorical relation between these biological sexes and bodily aspects is open to interpretation, but even so with a metaphorical interpretation there is still a relationship between the third sex and these properties. Among these properties pulse is the most critical and relates ones being to many other social implications. Furthermore, pulses can vary among people and change from male to female pulse or female to *ma ning* pulse, etc,. When the pulses are described the *ma ning* pulse is seen as related to that of a bodhisattvas, but when discussion of such is brought forth to academic attention it is brushed away as it is a complicated manner, especially as pulses can change (Gyatso 2015, 331). It is a bodhisattva that achieves enlightenment, and to suggest that there is a relationship that makes the term bodhisattva pulse and *ma ning* pulse interchangeable it is to elevate the position of a *ma ning.* The relationship of pulse has the potential to get rid of the stigma transgender beings face religiously, based on their physiology.

The *ma ning's* pulse is not that which is male or female, but is a balance between the two sex's pulses of rough and gentle respectively. It is desirable to have yet at the same time it is looked down upon. The social implications Tibetan medicinal documents imply for couples with bodhisattva pulses such as having long lives, being favoured by those above them socially, despised by those beneath, and having trouble producing offspring also offer a distain towards the third gender (Gyatso 2015,330). Thus, because there is a seemingly strong distain for such social implications that the bodhisattva pulses may bring a couple it is related to being a *ma ning* as that would also be undesirable. It creates a complex relationship between the third *ma ning* gender and bodhisattvas. As it is understandable that the sexual organs of a *ma ning* would also

have troubles producing offspring, the relationship between that and a bodhisattvas being and pulse is made stronger and should be elevated beyond the status of male or female.

Those with *ma ning* pulses are again criticized by the religious world based on their relation to bodily fluids. They are seen as having a pulse that corresponds to phlegm and not wind like a male's, they are unable to take vows and not an appropriate vessel for secret mantras, nor do they have the ability to practice Dharma (Gyatso 2015,332). This account of a *ma ning* encourages the idea that is already seen throughout other parts of religious law trying to prohibit the third sex from the necessary means of achieving nirvana, based on its relationship to fluids of the body. However, as mentioned before the pulse can change over time through the body, but so can the mind stream (Gyatso 2015, 335). It is unclear however whether or not this pulse's change is also related to a physical *ma ning's* ability to change sexual organs monthly, causing much debate. Regardless, there is a relation between the pulses known interchangeably as a *ma ning* and a bodhisattva. Although they are the same pulse and related to the same body and fluids only one is viewed as distained while the other is desirable.

Gyatso's book may primarily focus on the physical relations of the third gender with Buddhist religion, but it also accounts for that which is beyond the body. The discussion surrounding pulses opens up the mind to a new way to perceiving gendered sex as well as the implications it has socially. The medical recognition of a third sex offers social awareness towards the transgendered being. It also brings the notion of third gender into the social sphere in a new light, even a positive one through its relationship between *ma ning's* and bodhisattvas that are on their way to achieving enlightenment. Relationships like these encourages one who is aiming for nirvana to look beyond the scope of a person's physical body and promotes equality to all beings regardless of their sexual organs or pulses.

The Modern Day Transgender

Within Buddhist traditions today the third gender extends beyond its medical and religious discourse. Depending on the society different stances on the third gender arise, some being positive while others are negative. However, within the same society views can also contradict each other, especially from a religious standpoint. Thailand in particular is well known for its population of transgendered people. Although they are a minority they are still recognized. A person of this minority is known as a *kathoey*, the Thai word for transgender. There has been a lack of official concern religiously and legally against homosexuality (Sinnott 2002). This allows the transgender population freedom to continue to grow and implies that transgenderism is seen throughout Thai history. Folklore of Thailand has been seen to involve three genders, as well as transgender shamanists (Winter, 2002). Here it is evident that transgenderism has always played a role in Thai culture, that it is not something new and depending on the role of the transgender in stories it is nothing to be ashamed of either. Thus, it is evident that transgender tales extend beyond the medical and religious realms into historical folklore that helps shape Thai culture.

Not all historical tales of transgenderism are so positive in Thai society, for the third gender is seen as a karmic consequence. Traditional accounts of Thai Buddhism propose that homosexuality and transgenderism are to be viewed as a result of a negative previous life full of acts of sexual misconduct (Jackson 1993). The karmic build-up from the previous life has resulted in the punishment of being a social outcast as a transgender in a new life, but there are implications suggesting that we may all have been a *kathoey* at one point. No one knows for sure because no one knows all their past and future lives, only that if they are still living they are stuck in the cycle of samsara. Despite being a *kathoey* as a result of bad karma, some *kathoey's* use the Buddhist teachings of karma to explain their identity and so it allows them to lead a life

where wanting to change sexes is not seen as sinful nor does it affect their future lives (Winter 2002). Therefore, if being a *kathoey* is not seen as sinful and a result of bad karma and it is possible that everyone has been a *kathoey* in their past life; it brings forth the chance for *kathoey's* to become accepted by religious laws and shape future history.

The acceptance of *kathoey's* in society by non-homosexuals teaches a lesson of compassion. The *kathoey* may not be able to change their fate but for Buddhists to act compassionate to the *kathoey* is to recognize them as a fellow human trapped in the cycle of rebirth. Due to mixed understandings of transgendered beings in Buddhist traditions it is difficult to understand how to act towards them. For instance, the Vinaya does not contain explicit rules or understandings of a third gendered being, nor are Theravada Buddhist scriptures consistent in their judgements of the third gendered being within the sangha (Jackson 1993). The Vinaya is literature that is relied heavily upon by the monastic communities of Buddhism and the branch of Theravada Buddhism encompasses the majority of Thai Buddhists. Becoming aware of this it is no wonder why there is such a mixed attitude towards the third gender within Buddhist communities cross culturally. Where the third gender is seen as a figure of an early Tibetan medical discourse it is more of a modern day identity within Thailand. Furthermore, it is critical to note that there are differences of Mahayana Buddhism in Tibet and a more liberal sect of Theravada Buddhism in Thailand. Regardless of these facts one should recall Buddha himself and think what he would do in the case of a transgender. Throughout the entirety of the Buddha's life one is taught about acts of compassion and the ability everyone has to achieve Buddhahood; for it is what is in the mind that matters and not sexual identity. Thus, compassion and understanding towards these *kathoey's* is what should be taught within the Buddhist tradition as well.

As Buddhists do not have a clear cut doctrinal system that dictates the treatment of transgender beings within the sangha, each authority is left to decide case by case whether or not the transgender being should be allowed entry. It has left much room for disagreement, but in some cases such as the famous Miss Queen Tiffany Jazz in 2009 it has proven to be beneficial. Jazz is a transgendered woman that received breast implants and identified as a woman in society despite still having a penis, but the Thai sangha agreed to ordain her into the monastery so as long as she removed her breasts (Hall 2014). It appears that within this case the Thai sangha is more concerned about Jazz's physical appearance than how she feels to identify sexually. Although Jazz may feel like a woman, because she agreed in a sense to remove the physical feminine attribute of breasts it allowed her acceptance into the sangha with other male monks. This particular situation shows a progression towards accepting transgendered beings within the religious life, and it appears as though one is placed as to where they identify physically rather than socially. Gender identity for the third sex becomes a matter that is solvable with a willingness to be progressive by certain monastic communities and religious authorities.

Scriptural authority on gender is a mixed bag and possible misinterpretation of the few messages that there are on transgender and homosexual beings has led to confusion. Buddhist scriptures of the Pali Canon that include examples of gender-normative homosexuality amongst monks and others are misread time after time as *kathoey's,* transvestites, or transsexuals in Thai society (Jackson 1966). This example here shows that not only can there be misinterpretation of language, but that words have different and varied meanings. The third gender dates back to the Thai concept of *kathoey* and pre-Buddhist myths so in Thai minds *kathoey* generally refers to homosexual (Sinnott 2002). Misinterpretations and the mixture of folklore and old concepts though have made *kathoey* an umbrella term for a combination of genders, promoting confusion.

Misunderstandings of Buddhist scriptures have also led to reflecting Thai notions of non-normative gender and sexuality and not Buddhist ones (Jackson 1966). Continued misinterpretations also demonstrate that Buddhism has not had enough power culturally to correct and show the differences between indigenous sex and gender conceptions of religious and secular thought.

In other cases of scriptural authority there is a hesitancy to continue acceptance of transgendered beings due to a break in sangha lineage. The Vinaya discusses honoured members with high levels of spiritual attainment that are also transgender. There are stories of ordained monks and nuns changing gender, taking on the opposite sexes physical attributes and they are accepted by the Buddha (Jackson 1993). The Buddha clearly accepts a person into the religious community even if they change gender. Even in the patriarchal Thai sangha there is acceptance of transgender beings (Hall 2014). Still Buddha looks beyond patriarchal bounds and at the individual themselves as well as the supernatural.

These stories never explain how the monk and nun are able to change gender though, often leaving it up to the supernatural as in previous accounts of transgendered beings in Buddhist sutras. Today the change of a transgender being no longer needs the supernatural, but instead uses medical techniques that are not natural. In addition to the different method of changing gender, no authority has been given to monastic orders from the Buddha on judging transgender cases, causing a break in lineage. The accumulation of these factors leads to an understandable hesitancy towards the third gender by sangha's. Clearly each sangha is different and where some rely on the experience of the individual such as Jazz's case, others rely on doctrines or the lack there off. Ultimately however, it is best to rely on what is right and how the Buddha would have acted and that is acceptance and equal rights for all, no matter the gender.

Misuses, misinterpretation, and mistranslation of Buddhist tradition into Thai culture is what leads to its unclear acceptance. Perhaps it is due to already known transgender folklore of Thai culture that makes it an issue. After examining source after source the Thai culture continued to be a prominent one to explore as it kept revealing itself in relation to stories of transgenderism. This however is likely due to its previous myths, willingness of the secular society to accept the *kathoey* being, and misinterpretations of Buddhist teachings. The acceptance of transgenderism in other societies is likely to be understood vastly differently as not every culture is so open about having more than male and female genders. Thai society is one of tolerance to minority groups and is non-homophobic. It makes Thai Buddhism appear to be neutral on cases of homosexuality and third genders while reinforcing its own cultural conception of the *kathoey*. Modern day examples of the third gender may be the most prevalent in Thailand but research needs to be done on transgenderism in places where Mahayana Buddhism is paramount, such as Tibet and India. Such research may also draw together clearer connections between the medical discourse on *ma ning* and the third gender in scriptural, historical, and modern instances. The research done in Thailand on transgenderism is valuable but it also reveals a complex web that is tied to Buddhism through misinterpretations and a progressive society.

Conclusion:

The notion of transgenderism is a complicated manner with regards to Buddhism and differing Asian societies. Transgenderism can be broken down into multiple terms such as *ma ning*, *kathoey*, homosexual, transsexual, transvestite, etc., and each have a life and meaning of its own, sometimes with further distinctions as is seen with *ma ning*. Different translations and misinterpretations have helped explain the mixed views and feelings transgendered people face

but more research is necessary to gain a clearer picture. A look at Buddhist scriptures demonstrates gender transformation is used as a tool to promote equality among genders by using a transgender being, as well as show that gender is but an earthly concept. There is no room for such concepts or attachments to them while trying to achieve nirvana.

It is likely that among the main reasons for celibacy to be practiced by the religious is to rid the idea of differing genders so one may reach enlightenment. The celibacy requirement within the sangha helps to make gender a non-issue and practices transcending earthly attachments such as the physical being. The Buddha has taught that everyone is the same, that physical properties of a person are not to affect their minds capacity for dharma or their ability to achieve nirvana.

However as mentioned transgendered beings are not to be understood so easily and their physical properties lead to discrimination by others. Discrimination of the third sex is seen in some sutras but not others, pointing to discrepancies in Buddhist teachings. As seen in modern day society and hesitant sangha's these discrepancies are causing Buddhism to break apart and confuse those who try to understand how transgenderism is viewed within Buddhism. Without clear distinctions of religious law discrimination and confusion will continue.

Cases like Jazz show hope for progressive changes. The case demonstrates how sangha communities are starting to be progressive but they still raise the question of transgenderism's place in the religious communities. Jazz had to remove her female physical attribute but was still accepted as an ordinate because of her penis. Without breasts Jazz no longer looks like a female on the outside but a male, so in a sense Jazz is no longer transgender. This makes it clear that transgender beings are still being debated about on a case by case basis on how to accept them

within the religious world. With scriptural, medical, and societal influence there is promise for progressive understandings and teachings of transgenderism in the future.

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