

Buddhism Pure and Simple

by Hsing Yun (Translated by Tom Graham)

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reviewed by Walter L. Williams: Professor of Anthropology and Gender Studies at the University of Southern California. He has published several books, most notably *The Spirit and the Flesh* and *Overcoming Heterosexism and Homophobia*. He is former president of ONE Institute International Gay and Lesbian Archives, and founding Editor of the *International Gay and Lesbian Review*.

In my studies of religious attitudes toward same-sex love, I have found the most gay-positive religions to be shamanism (see my book *The Spirit and the Flesh*), Goddess worship (especially positive for women who love women), and Buddhism.

Alone among the current most prominent world religions, Buddhism does not worship a capricious God who sets rules which must be followed. Though Buddha is certainly venerated, he is presented as a teacher rather than a deity. The emphasis in Buddhism is on the Buddha's teachings, and other Buddhist Sutras, which are presented as a guide rather than a series of commandments. The goal of Buddhism is for people to live the most happy and fulfilled life as possible.

Master Hsing Yun, a Chinese monk who is the leader of the world's largest Chinese Buddhist association, has written many books on Buddhist ethics. This book, which is translated into English by San Diegan Tom Graham, is the latest attempt by the Master to summarize Buddhism for a general readership. He writes this book as a commentary on the Sutra of the Eight Realizations of Great Beings.

This Sutra, which is one of the earliest Buddhist teachings to be translated from Indian Sanskrit into Chinese, is one of the basic texts of Mahayana Buddhism. Tradition has it that this Sutra originated from a question by one of the Buddha's wisest disciples. He asked:

"Oh Buddha, those of us who are monks know that ... we must be selfless with each other. We also know that we must treat all other sentient beings with compassion and kindness. Oh Buddha, how are people who are not monks to behave?... Please tell us how lay people are to become enlightened and how they should behave if they want to achieve nirvana" (p.14).

Buddha's answer, which is the core of the Sutra, emphasized the importance of constructing an enlightened life in this world, rather than waiting for salvation after death. Buddha's goal for his followers was for them to discover the truth of their own lives, to reach an enlightened state and thus to become a Buddha themselves. This idea of an inner light, that each person must find within themselves, allows for every individual to decide what is right for their own life.

The first realization in the Sutra of Eight Realizations is that nothing is permanent. Therefore, we should not allow ourselves to become overly attached to any one particular thing, because the nature of the world is impermanence.

The second realization is that greed is the cause of suffering. Master Hsing Yun writes:

"Realize that excessive desire causes suffering. Healthy desires include reasonable hunger, a balanced pursuit of shelter and clothing, reasonable social activity, temperate sexuality, and a balanced pursuit of hobbies or other amusements. Excessive desire means going beyond these parameters.... Most of us know where our limits are. When we exceed them, we cause suffering. Reasonable desires do not preoccupy us, and they are not distracting or extreme. If we do not fulfill them, we do not feel that they cannot wait a little longer. Excessive desires strain our health, impair our concentration, and often cause us to become angry or envious" (p.52).

The emphasis in Buddhist teachings is thus not to avoid all desires, but to keep them in balance. The fulfilled life is to follow what Buddha called "The Middle Way," between the extremes of denial and overindulgence. This applies to sexuality as well as other desires. Buddhist ethics do not see homosexuality as a "sin."

Indeed, the closest things to sin in Buddhism are the three base emotions of greed, anger and ignorance. A good Buddhist tries to minimize those emotions, and instead to develop habits of temperance, happiness, kindness to others, education and creativity.

Another major realization in the Sutra is that the five desires, for wealth, sex, fame, food and sleep, can be harmful if they become the center of our life. That is why we need philosophies that help us avoid becoming entangled in them.

"Each of the five desires can be understood as an exaggeration of a normal and valuable human need. The desire for wealth is an exaggeration of the normal desire to have a safe home and an adequate income. The desire for sex is an exaggeration of the normal urge to have a loving partner.... Desire is not wrong if it is kept in proportion. When it is allowed to grow into a fire or transform into a poison, however, it will always lead to suffering" (p.106).

Evil is thus not in a sexual desire per se, but only when it becomes so excessive that it unbalances one's life in whole. Buddhist ethics do not concentrate on the evilness of sex, which so preoccupies Christian ethics, but on the goodness of bringing happiness into the world. Not only gay people, but the enemies of equal rights for gay people should read the following quote from an interview with Master Hsing Yun:

"The basic meaning of morality is this—do not harm or violate other sentient beings in any way. Do not interfere with them. Do not trouble them. Do not cause them to feel fear or worry.... Be in a position to actively reach out and help others. If you have not learned to restrain yourself, however, you may cause harm when you think that you are bringing help" (p.131).

Asked to give an example of this lack of restraint, the Master replied:

"Whenever people try to confine or limit other people without having a good reason for doing so, they are violating them. This is especially true when force or intimidation is used. For example, in America there are still people who use force to prevent others from getting an abortion. No one should get an abortion without good reason, but the decision of whether to do so or not should be made by the people who are most closely involved.

"Some stranger who adamantly declares that abortion is wrong is just speaking words. He is not the one who is going to have to raise the child. The woman who is pregnant is the one who should have the most say in the matter. She should consult her conscience and decide what she thinks is right. The conscience is a magnificent guide; it will rarely lead you astray. The Buddha emphasized the importance of understanding our intentions in all that we do.... Buddhism is a religion of self-awareness. This is another reason why it is wrong to force others to do what we think is right. We should encourage others to look at themselves; that is enough" (pp.131-132).

"Patience teaches us to tolerate others and to leave them alone, to not interfere with their happiness because of some belief that we have about what is right or wrong. Morality should teach us to be restrained in our behavior; it is not a guidebook for interfering in the lives of others. People who cling to rigid moral rules are no different from people who cling to wealth or fame or sensual pleasure. Buddhism is a religion that teaches the elevation of consciousness by understanding the truth. It does not teach us to cling to a single system of understanding, or a limited set of moral injunctions" (pp.132-133).

"We want to make everybody feel welcome. We want everyone to feel hope. If we cannot give hope, why would anyone want to be a Buddhist?... Our goal is to help people, not to confine them (p.135).

Asked about the morality of people living together in sexual relationships outside of marriage, Master Hsing Yun replied:

"Marriage is an institution that reflects the values of the society that supports it. If the people of a society no longer believe that it is important to be married, then there is no reason why they cannot change the institution of marriage. Marriage is a custom. Customs can always be changed. We can find the same core point in this question as we have in others—the ultimate truth of the matter is that individuals can and should decide for themselves what is right. As long as they are not violating others or breaking the laws of the society in which they are living, then they are free to do what they believe is right. It is not for me or anyone else to tell them that they must get married if they want to live together. That is their choice and their choice alone.

"The same analysis can be applied to homosexuality. People often ask me what I think about homosexuality. They wonder, is it right, is it wrong? The answer is, it is neither right nor wrong. It is just something that people do. If people are not harming each other, their private lives are their own business; we should be tolerant of them and not reject them.

"However, it will still take some time for the world to fully accept homosexuality. All of us must learn to tolerate the behavior of others. Just as we hope to expand our minds to include all of the universe, so we should also seek to expand our minds to include all of the many forms of human behavior.

"Tolerance is a form of generosity and it is a form of wisdom. There is nothing anywhere in the Dharma [Buddhist scriptures] that should ever lead anyone to become intolerant. Our goal as Buddhists is to learn to accept all kinds of people and to help all kinds of people discover the wisdom of the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha" (pp.137-138).