

Americans have been embracing the practice of Buddhism in increasing numbers during the past several decades. Western queer Buddhists find a sense of acceptance often not found in other spiritual traditions.

However, some Buddhist principles may seem to run counter to sexual identity. *Just Out* talked with four members of Portland's Dharma Rain Zen Center to unravel the intricacies of being queer and being Buddhist.

Keido Kenryu, born Jeffrey Binns in a small Iowa town, has been a Buddhist for eight years. He is in training to be a Buddhist priest in the Zen tradition. He resides at the center, which is his sangha, or spiritual community. Kenryu came out as a gay man at the age of 23, before he turned to Buddhism seeking spiritual fulfillment.

"In our temple," he says, "our sexuality isn't a big deal. It's only part of who I am."

During the five- to 10-year period Kenryu trains for the priesthood, he will be celibate. But not because he's gay. Celibacy is required of all priestly novices.

"I'm in plain sight, but not obvious," he says. "I blend in and do what I need to do. If it's important that my [sexual] orientation is visible, I go from there."

Once he is a priest, if Kenryu seeks a partner he will want him to be a Buddhist. "As a priest," he says, "I would need someone who understood."

Heidi Enji Hoogstra is a polyamorous bisexual woman in an open marriage. Her husband is also a Buddhist. Hoogstra tells how Buddhism helped her acknowledge her true sense of who she is.

"Letting go of myself, I was able to accept the bisexual inclination in me," she says.

While the emphasis in Buddhism tends to be on monogamous relationships as the natural state of being, she says that "people are accepting of who you are."

Hoogstra acknowledges sexuality is not discussed much because of a traditional view that celibacy is the honored choice in a practice emphasizing freedom from attachments. She notes the difference between the Christian commandment "Thou shalt not commit adultery" and the Buddhist precept "Do not misuse sexuality." She says the Dalai Lama "would not be expected to speak with expertise about sexuality because he is a celibate and has always been so."

Indeed, the Dalai Lama wrote in *The Art of Living: A Guide to Contentment, Joy, & Fulfillment*: "Although I speak from my own experience, I feel that no one has the right to impose his or her beliefs on another person. I will not propose to you that my way is best. The decision is up to you."

## THE WAY OF THE QUEER BUDDHIST

Members of the sexual minorities community embrace centuries-old spiritual tradition by Patricia L. MacAodha



Patrick Finneran was drawn to the openness of Buddhism and its focus on discovery, particularly of the true self

"Thanks to Buddhism," Hoogstra says, "I learned to meet people as they really are and to come from whom I really am."

### The Middle Path

What is the measure of a spiritual path? Is its value based on the number of people it can attract, or is spirituality's greatest value reflected by the empowerment of those who practice it? For Patrick Finneran, a part-time counselor, Buddhism leads to recognition of the individual as a grand being, "ultimately non-deficient in our lives."

Finneran was raised Christian in New York City, then belonged to the Unitarian Universalists for 17 years. In the mid-1980s he became a participant in the Waking Peacock sangha, a gay

and lesbian group that practices Tibetan Buddhism. He later moved to Zen Buddhist practice. "My brother says I was a closet Buddhist all along," Finneran laughs.

He was drawn to the Buddhist focus on discovery, particularly of the true self. He sees the Middle Path—a place of balance between extremes—as helpful in developing a positive image of the self.

The openness of Buddhism is what attracted Finneran and is what holds his involvement in Buddhism intact today. "If Buddhism preached only one spiritual path," he says, "I would never be a Buddhist."

The Buddha Dharma scriptures, or sutras, were passed down from founder Siddhartha Gautama in 563 B.C. The practice itself began about 534 B.C. in northeastern India, when the

heir of a royal house slipped away from the palace and his protected life. He saw and old man, a sick man, a dead man and a holy man. Called "the four sights," these experiences changed his life. He left his wife, family and throne at age 29 and became a wandering monk for six years, starving and suffering. At 35, the revelation of the Middle Path led him to understand that embracing extremes does not lead to Enlightenment.

The Buddha, his wisdom (the Buddha Dharma) and the sangha are "the three gems" that provide refuge for the Buddhist. Dharma Rain Zen Center is one such refuge—a community of Buddhist practitioners who come to meditate, listen, discuss and search for the true self.

Joan McKenna is a lay disciple, which is a special level of membership at the center. She says making such a commitment "is about intensifying your practice."

She is not interested in the priesthood but honors the celibate choice some make. Of the Dalai Lama, she says, "His role is to be totally into the Dharma." McKenna points out that he "doesn't explicitly condemn anyone."

Meditation is the practice at the core of active Buddhism. McKenna says meditation "works because you get out of your own way." In the pursuit of "emptiness," she explains, the goal is to clear one's mind.

"The more aware and accepting a person becomes of her or his own inner images and motivations, the more she or he becomes healed," says McKenna. She, like the others, prefers her lovers to be Buddhist. "Sharing spirituality," she says, "is a plus."

In Buddhism, one must be open and honest and honor the choices others make. As Kenryu says: "To step forward, no matter what the details of our lives are, can bring peace to a troubled heart. We find it in acceptance. Then, no matter what the experience, we can be centered in a stable place when the world is crashing down around us." □

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—Heidi Enji Hoogstra

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