

*A Buddhist Perspective on Homosexuality: Rough Script for the Rubin Talk*

June 2, 2010

Jeffrey Hopkins

(projection needs: these two charts, a wheel of cyclic existence, an ithyphallic male deity, a yab yum)

**First Context: moral consequences**

As Carl Jung said, “We are witnessing today some terrifying examples of the Superman’s aloofness from moral principles.” Henry Kissinger, the titans of Wall Street, even gay-friendly gay-helpful George Soros.

My concern is with moral consequences.

Plain of razors.

According to Buddhist scholars, there was an Indian teacher of Nihilism known as the sage Lokachakṣhu. He is said to have composed a hundred thousand Nihilist texts or, more likely, to have composed the text called *The One Hundred Thousand*. He lusted to lie with his daughter and so explained to her that other lives do not exist, the point being that she did not need to be concerned about moral retribution, karmic retribution. Not that Buddhists claim that all moral Nihilists are beset by lust, for as Jam-yang-shay-pa says, Br̥haspati set forth Nihilist tenets from claiming to help – “You have only one life, so live it to the fullest.” We all explain away at least some of our fancies, such as a second piece of cake, though it is hard to rationalize shark fin soup.

John Lennon and Yoko Ono took out a one-page ad in the NY Times exalting relationships, and based on this a friend of mine rationalized to the Dalai Lama that he should get married, calling it a choice of living in a relationship rather than as a monastic, as if monastics somehow lead relationless lives. The Dalai Lama responded in Tibetan, “We’ll watch the entertainment/show.”

Another version is to rationalize lust as a superior form of Buddhist practice, calling it the high practice of Tantra. However, like Gedun Chopel, I deeply admire those who truly keep any level of monastic vows, and so I have tried to keep from glorifying my accommodation to my afflictive emotions. I have tried not to ignore or to twist Buddhist doctrines to suit my own desires. So, call me to task if you think I do.

My approach: using common terms so that the topic is not lost in the abstractions of formalistic or unfamiliar language.

Latin and Greek based English terms that arose from aping the hocus pocus of religion. (masturbation = hand defilement, hand dishonoring; “abuse yourself,” “touch yourself”).

I prefer terms like dick and the like.

This is a hot topic, evoking immediate responses, sometimes because of lack of comprehension (such as not understanding the Kinsey spectrum), or because of repressed impulses or because of conflict with one’s own chosen and even what should be admirable lifestyle. A homosexual, faithful, single-partner friend considers that even though I do not smoke, drink, or take drugs, I live a life of debauchery because I sometimes visit gay saunas; I have no answer for this, except to bring it up in a public talk!

### **Second Context: the mind of clear light is behind all consciousness**

Hold up the two books.

(put up yab-yum and ithyphallic/stone-dick male deity)

I make the point in these books that Tibetan Buddhism is sex-friendly; mind of clear light is behind all consciousness, affective and cognitive.

### **Third Context: the ten nonvirtues as a principal ethical rubric**

I have noticed that when reporters ask the Dalai Lama about homosexuality, the response usually involves the discussion of the ten nonvirtues as presented in Tsong-kha-pa’s *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, but the format of the interview seldom, or never, allows for an in-depth discussion. So when I was asked to speak here on this topic, I jumped at the chance because I wanted to give some context to this particular topic—the prohibitions put forth in the section on sexual misconduct, the third of the ten nonvirtues. So, let’s look at that section in detail—what Tsong-kha-pa says, his sources, and also what another author Gam-po-pa (*sgam po pa sod nam rin chen*, 1079-1153), often called the founder of the Ka-gyu order of Tibetan Buddhism, says.

Liberation from prejudices thru pursuing detail.  
 (put up chart on Buddhist ten nonvirtues)

*Buddhist Ten Nonvirtues*

three physical nonvirtues	1. killing 2. stealing 3. sexual misconduct
four verbal nonvirtues	4. lying 5. divisive talk 6. harsh speech 7. senseless chatter
three mental nonvirtues	8. covetousness 9. harmful intent 10. wrong views

(also put up chart on Ten Commandments) (from Wiki)

Division of the Ten Commandments by religion/denomination				
Commandment	Jewish (Talmudic)	Anglican, Reformed, and other Christian	Orthodox	Catholic, Lutheran
I am the Lord your God	1	preface	1	1
You shall have no other gods before me	2	1	2	
You shall not make for yourself an idol		2		
You shall not make wrongful use of the name of your God	3	3	3	2
Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy	4	4	4	3
Honor your father and mother	5	5	5	4
You shall not murder	6	6	6	5
You shall not commit adultery	7	7	7	6
You shall not steal	8	8	8	7
You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor	9	9	9	8

You shall not covet your neighbor's wife	10	10	10	9
You shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor				10

My only point is that there are some similarities and *many* differences.

The choice to use “covetousness” for the Buddhist version is not taken from the Biblical; the Buddhist concern is with someone else’s property.

(take down chart on Ten Commandments)

*Some salient topics related with the ten nonvirtues*

Quoted from Dalai Lama’s *Becoming Enlightened*:

Among the three physical nonvirtues, killing is weightier than stealing, which in turn is weightier than sexual misconduct.

Among the four verbal nonvirtues, lying is weightier than divisive talk, which is weightier than harsh speech, which is weightier than senseless chatter.

Among the three mental nonvirtues wrong views are weightier than harmful intent, which is weightier than covetousness.

The same order of weightiness holds also for the ten opposite virtues, refraining from killing and so forth.

In addition, many factors influence the weight of virtuous and nonvirtuous actions:

- the intensity of your motivation
- habituation over a long time
- whether the action harms or helps people or groups that contribute to society
- how keen you have been with regard to those actions throughout your life.

Also, actions become weightier depending on how they are done. For example, killing is weightier if:

- you delight in it
- encourage others to do it
- perform the deed after much reflection and preparation
- do it repeatedly
- accomplish it through torture
- make the victim perform unfit deeds

- or do it when the victim is weak, in pain, poor, or piteously wailing.

#### **Fourth Context: ethical living while accommodating to and ameliorating the three poisons**

(put up wheel of cyclic existence)

We need to notice that the three poisons in the middle of the 12 links of dependent-arising are not the same as the three mental nonvirtues.

#### **Fifth Context: the details of sexual misconduct**

##### ***1. Buying sex from a sex-trader is permitted***

This section in Tsong-kha-pa's *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* is written solely from a male perspective.

About those whom males are prohibited from engaging in sex Tsong-kha-pa lists three categories:

Those not to be engaged are women that are not objects of intercourse, all men and the nonnormative.<sup>a</sup>

About the first excluded category, “women that are not objects of intercourse,” Tsong-kha-pa cites a brief passage from Asaṅga's *Compendium of Ascertainments*. Asaṅga refers to but does not cite sūtra passages that list “one's mother and so forth, those protected by mothers, and so forth.”<sup>b</sup> (This is the only reference to sūtra in the section on sexual misconduct.) Tsong-kha-pa also cites a more detailed source as providing the meaning of Asaṅga's sentence, this being the first or second century Ashvaghōṣha's *Indicating the Ten Virtuous Paths of Action*. Ashvaghōṣha expansively explains that this restriction against “women that are not objects of intercourse” refers to:

- others' wives
- renunciate women

---

<sup>a</sup> The term *ma ning* (*paṇḍaka*) has a wide meaning of non-normal sexuality covering a spectrum ranging from the impotent, to the homosexual, to those whose sex switches back and forth, as well as androgyny. The term *paṇḍaka* (*ma ning*) is usually translated as “eunuch,” but Leonard Zwilling in “Homosexuality as Seen in Indian Buddhist Texts” (in *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*, edited by José Ignacio Cabezón [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992], 203-214) has shown that the term has a wider meaning.

<sup>b</sup> Asaṅga's half-brother Vasubandhu gives a similar presentation in chapter four of his *Treasury of Manifest Knowledge* (74a-b, Pruden, 651-652).

- those protected by their family or the like (Tsong-kha-pa adds that this includes those who choose to protect themselves)
- relatives
- and a sex-trader (*smad 'tshong*) paid for by another.

About a sex-trader paid for by another, Tsong-kha-pa adds:

The statement that it is sexual misconduct to have sex with a sex-trader for whom another has paid shows that there is no sexual misconduct in hiring a sex-trader yourself. The Great Elder [Atisha] also taught similarly.

## ***2. Recreational sex is permitted***

That a sex-trader may be hired establishes that the practice of the ten virtues and avoidance of the ten nonvirtues allows for recreational sex. Since there is no conflict between the prohibitions of the ten nonvirtues and recreational sex, allowable sex for lay persons is not just for procreation. Tsong-kha-pa's mention that Atisha (982-1054) taught this way is significant because Tsong-kha-pa even adopted the format<sup>a</sup> that Atisha through his *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* was the author of the teachings in his own *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path*.

Later, about the amount of sexual activity Tsong-kha-pa adds an unsourced statement, "The amount is to do it up to five times," meaning no more than five times a day. Since a little later, Tsong-kha-pa adds that Atisha "takes daytime also to be an inappropriate time," intercourse is allowed up to five times a day (or night if one follows Atisha) with persons including sex-traders but excluding those mentioned above.<sup>b</sup> Gam-po-pa similarly says, "An inappropriate amount is doing it more than five times." Tsong-kha-pa also quotes Ashvaghōṣha about inappropriate times as including if she is menstruating, is pregnant, is nursing, has an infant around, is not interested, is in pain, is unhappy, and so forth, or is observing a one-day vow. (Hooray for Ashvaghōṣha.)

## ***3. For Tsong-kha-pa sex with other men is not permitted and self-sex is not permitted***

About "men," the second excluded category, Tsong-kha-pa says, "Men is to be taken as both oneself and others." At first reading it struck me as redundant to

---

<sup>a</sup> *Great Treatise*, vol. 1, 35.

<sup>b</sup> 66.5.

specify that “men” includes oneself given that this section of the text is directed solely at males, but as Nāgārjuna says after listing many wonderful qualities he wishes for *all* embodied beings:<sup>a</sup>

May I also be adorned completely  
With those and all other good qualities,  
Be freed from all defects,  
And have superior love for all sentient beings.

Tsong-kha-pa is making it clear that “men” does not just refer to other men but includes self-sex. Self-sex is prohibited.

He cites no source for the inclusion of men among prohibited sex objects and says no more about the topic; however, I searched his main Tibetan source, the *Stages of the Teaching* by the 11<sup>th</sup> century Ka-dam-pa master Dro-lung-pa Lo-drö-jung-nay<sup>b</sup> and found “all men and the nonnormative,” the second and third items in the list, with the exact reading Tsong-kha-pa uses. About Dro-lung-pa’s *Stages of the Teaching*, Tsong-kha-pa himself says near the end of his *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path* that this text is foundational to his work:<sup>c</sup>

...taking as a foundation the innards of the Stages of the Path by the spiritual father and son, the Great Translator [Ngog Lo-dan-she-rab<sup>d</sup>] and Dro-lung-pa, I have gathered together the key points from many Stages of the Path.

Dro-lung-pa himself says no more than “all men and the nonnormative,” but lest we be led by his and Tsong-kha-pa’s lack of attribution of Indian sources into thinking that the prohibition against homosexual sex may be just a Tibetan concern, it is intriguing to notice that the Chinese edition of Vasubandhu’s *Autocommentary on the “Treasury of Manifest Knowledge”* (the *Kandō-bon Kusharon*) by the eminent Japanese scholar-monk Kyokuga Saeki in 1869 from which La Vallée Poussin made his remarkable translation into French contains this annotation:<sup>e</sup>

---

<sup>a</sup> *Precious Garland of Advice for the King*, Stanza 477.

<sup>b</sup> Geshe Drolungpa Lodroe Jungne (*dge bshes gro lung pa blo gros 'byung gnas*), *The Great Book on the Steps of the Teaching* (Trijang Labrang: Mundgod, Karnataka, India, 122.18): *skyes pa thams cad dang/ ma ning*.

<sup>c</sup> See also *Great Treatise*, 1102.

<sup>d</sup> *rngog blo ldan shes rab*, 1059-1109.

<sup>e</sup> As cited by Poussin and translated by Pruden, vol. 2, 739, as an annotation to Chapter Four, stanza 74a-b, note 328.

According to the Mahāyāna (i.e., the Yogācāra) quoted by Saeki, there are six prohibitions: 1. *aviṣaya, agamya*: males, and women such as one's mother, etc.;

Here, “males” are even put first, the source supposedly being Yogācāra texts, which likely are Indian, given the Sanskrit terms. More research is needed, but in any case it seems that there may be more behind Dro-lung-pa's and Tsong-kha-pa's view than initially is apparent.

About their concern with sex with the nonnormative, however, I have not found a source related with the ten nonvirtues, though the nonnormative are indeed an issue in other contexts such as in lists of those who are not capable of newly generating the concentrative and formless absorptions.<sup>a</sup>

#### ***4. For Gam-po-pa the prohibition against sex with men is limited to mouth and anus***

We find a different take on “men and the nonnormative” in the presentation on the ten nonvirtues by Gam-po-pa. Also a follower of Atisha, he speaks of “men and the nonnormative” only in the context of a category called the unsuitable (*rigs pa ma yin pa*):

The unsuitable is to do it with striking. Otherwise, it is to do it in the mouth or the anus<sup>b</sup> of a male or a nonnormative.<sup>c</sup>

The prohibition is against oral and anal sex with males and nonnormatives, not against sex with males and nonnormatives in general.

#### ***5. Tsong-kha-pa limits sex with a woman to the vagina***

There is a similar difference between Tsong-kha-pa and Gam-po-pa regarding the allowable body part for heterosexual sex. For Tsong-kha-pa the only body part for sex with a woman is the vagina: “Inappropriate body parts are body parts other than the door to the womb.” He cites Ashvaghōṣha:

What are inappropriate body parts?

The mouth, the anus, the calves or

---

<sup>a</sup> See Leah Judith Zahler, *Study and Practice of Meditation: Tibetan Interpretations of the Concentrations and Formless Absorptions* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 2009), 36-38.

<sup>b</sup> *bshang lam*, literally, path of defecation.

<sup>c</sup> *pho'am ma ning*.

Thighs pressed together, and the hand in motion.

However, if Ashvaghoṣha meant to exclude all parts of the female body except the vagina, he could easily have used language similar to Tsong-kha-pa's succinct exclusion. Yet, why the calves or thighs pressed together would be excluded if other body parts are included is a mystery. Tsong-kha-pa finds confirmation from Atisha who says:

“Inappropriate body parts” are the mouth, the anus, the front or rear holes of a boy or girl, and one's own hand.

Yet does Atisha mean to suggest that sex with boys and girls is permissible except for the vagina, anus, and mouth?

Again, looking at Tsong-kha-pa's chief Tibetan source, we find that Dro-lung-pa,<sup>a</sup> student of Atisha, cites a long passage from the *Sūtra on Mindful Establishment* on the ten nonvirtues that includes, “Lustful sexual misconduct is copulation in the nonbirthplace (*skye gnas ma yin pa*) of one's own or another's wife (*chung ma*).” (It is also noteworthy that the continuation of the annotation by Kyokuga Saeki, the Japanese scholar-monk cited above, speaks of the only appropriate body part as the vagina, “2. *amārga anaṅga*: only the *yonimārga*,” perhaps suggesting another Indian source.)

### **6. *Gam-po-pa prohibits sex with a woman only to sex in the anus and the mouth***

Unlike Tsong-kha-pa, when Gam-po-pa<sup>b</sup> describes inappropriate body parts for sex with one's own wife, he speaks only of doing it in the mouth and in the anus, thereby suggesting that the numerous other ways would be acceptable.

---

<sup>a</sup> 124.6.

<sup>b</sup> 65.21.

## 7. *Oral sexual misconduct is weightier*

Concerning which is more weighty, oral or anal penetration, Tsong-kha-pa, without citing a source, says, “In terms of an inappropriate body part, sexual misconduct that is weighty due to its basis is penetration of the mouth.” His source is found in Dro-lung-pa’s<sup>a</sup> corresponding section on the weightier where he lists the inappropriate body part as the mouth. Gam-po-pa does not have a similar section.

### **Sixth Context: questioning the received tradition**

Some Buddhist homosexuals are concerned that according to the Stages-of-the-Path type of framework their lifestyle excludes them from being considered ethical. BUT we need to consider whose lifestyle is ethical given what is prohibited:

No self-sex, handjob, blowjob, thigh sex, calf sex, or other type including stomach (frontage), chest, back, and so on. JUST vaginal is allowed.

Hardly anyone is leading an ethical lifestyle in terms of this precept, so heteros can take little or no comfort from the allowal of vaginal sex.

Also, given that recreational sex is allowed, does reasonable concern for health leads to allowing almost all, if not all, of the forbidden forms?

The received tradition is being questioned as in the cases of a flat earth and the heart as a proprietary effect usable only by its original user, both positions contradicted by direct perception.

Dharmakīrti’s *Commentary on (Dignāga’s) “Compilation of Valid Cognition”* says:<sup>b</sup>

Through thorough ascertainment of just these [teachings]

---

<sup>a</sup> 127.8.

<sup>b</sup> Chapter 1, stanza 217 (Miyasaka’s III.217, pp. 146-147): *heyopādeyatattvasya sopāyasya prasiddhitah / pradhānārthāvisaṃvādād anumānaṃ paratra vā //*; the bracketed material in the last two lines is drawn from Khay-drub Ge-leg-pal-sang’s commentary, 135b.6. The Dalai Lama cites the last two lines in his *The Buddhism of Tibet and The Key to the Middle Way* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1975; reprint, Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion, 1987), 83.

On adoption [of true cessations] and discarding [true sufferings] as well as [their respective] methods [or causes, that is, true paths and true origins of suffering respectively],

[It is established by inference through the power of the fact that Buddha's word] is non-deceptive with respect to the principal meaning [the four noble truths].

Therefore, [due to similarity] it is to be inferred<sup>a</sup> that [Buddha's word is non-deceptive] also with respect to other [very obscure topics as well].

Dharmakīrti is saying that through scriptural inference based on the logical sign, or reason, that a certain passage teaching very obscure objects of comprehension is devoid of contradiction, it can be concluded that the passage is non-deceptive with respect to what it teaches, just as Buddha's teaching on the four truths is non-deceptive. He cites the teaching on the four noble truths in the context of showing that certain of Buddha's teachings on very obscure topics<sup>b</sup> are also non-deceptive with respect to what they teach because of also being purified by way of three analyses in that (1) what they teach about manifest objects is not contradicted by direct perception, (2) what they teach about slightly obscure objects is not contradicted by usual inference (called inference by the power of the fact),<sup>c</sup> and (3) with respect to very obscure objects, inaccessible to either direct perception or usual inference, there are no internal contradictions within Buddha's teachings on those topics.

A similar passage from Āryadeva's *Four Hundred* says:<sup>d</sup>

Whoever has generated doubt  
Toward what is not obvious in Buddha's word  
Will believe that only Buddha [is omniscient]  
Based on [his profound teaching of] emptiness.

Āryadeva's point is that if Buddha is correct with respect to such a profound topic as emptiness, he must also be correct with respect to less profound but more

---

<sup>a</sup> This is a scriptural inference (*lung gi rjes dpag*).

<sup>b</sup> That is, very obscure objects of comprehension (*shin tu lkog gyur gyi gzhal bya/ gzhal bya shin tu lkog gyur*).

<sup>c</sup> *ngos stobs rjes dpag*.

<sup>d</sup> *bstan bcos bzhi brgya pa zhes bya ba'i tshig le'ur byas pa, catuḥśatakaśāstrakārikā*; P5246, vol. 95; stanza 280 which occurs in Chapter 12; parenthetical additions are from Gyel-tsap's commentary, 90b.3-91a.2; see *Yogic Deeds of Bodhisattvas: Gyel-tsap on Āryadeva's Four Hundred*, commentary by Geshe Sonam Rinchen, translated and edited by Ruth Sonam (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Publications, 1994), 241-242.

obscure topics such as minute details of the cause and effects of actions, as long as what he says is not contradicted by any of the three types of analyses listed above.

The main thrust of these two passages is that the logical verifiability of Buddha's special cognition of the four truths and the verifiability of emptiness become the means of validating his teachings on topics inaccessible to such verification. The principle is that if Buddha is right about such profound topics, he must be right about less profound, even though more inaccessible topics. In this vein, the current Dalai Lama cites these same two passages after saying:<sup>a</sup>

Thus Buddha, the Blessed One, from his own insight taught this dependent-arising as his slogan<sup>b</sup>—showing that because phenomena are dependent-arisings, they have a nature of emptiness, free of the eight extremes of cessation and so forth. If Buddha is thus seen as a reliable being who without error taught definite goodness [liberation and omniscience] along with its means, one will consequently see that the Blessed One was not mistaken even with respect to teaching high status [the pleasures of lives as humans and gods] along with its means.

If Buddha is found to be right in his teaching about the path to achieve liberation from cyclic existence and to achieve the omniscience of Buddhahood, then, of course, he must be right about other, less profound (even if more obscure) topics such as how to achieve a life of high status within cyclic existence.

Tibetan scholars have used this type of reasoning for centuries as justification for accepting cosmological explanations and so forth that are not subject to usual verification but are devoid of contradiction by direct perception, logical inference, and internal contradictions. The tradition has developed a sense of what, within Buddha's teachings on very obscure topics, can be accepted literally. Among these is the teaching of a flat earth, now obviously contradicted by direct perception from satellites, and this has brought into question the whole scope of teachings on very obscure topics, not only cosmological but also ethical, hitherto considered safely verified.

Nāgārjuna's *Precious Garland* (stanza 438a) says, "From giving there arises wealth, from ethics happiness." About this, nowadays the issue is being bridged to some extent by the Dalai Lama's reconsidering the general process of causation of

---

<sup>a</sup> *The Buddhism of Tibet and The Key to the Middle Way*, 83.

<sup>b</sup> The Dalai Lama himself suggested the word "slogan" to translate the Tibetan term *gtam*, which might also be rendered as "principal discourse."

high status through holding that, for instance, this teaching that resources in a future lifetime are produced by generosity and that a happy transmigration is produced by ethics is accessible to usual logical inference based on the correspondence of cause and effect but the exact particulars of a certain type of charity leading to a specific effect at a specific time, etc., is not accessible to usual logical inference.

Dalai Lama: Boston Globe, September 14, 2003

When some gay reporters quizzed the Dalai Lama about his stance on Homosexuality, he voiced the typical Buddhist condemnation of it. Then he paused, reconsidered, and sent centuries of prejudice out the window: “If the two people have taken no vows [of chastity], and neither is harmed,” he said, “why should it not be acceptable?”

**Seventh Context: the comfort of an ethical life**

In conclusion, it seems to me that the prohibitions involved in sexual misconduct need to take better health practices into account, both for the obvious benefits to heterosexual and homosexual physical well-being and for the emotional well-being of both. A further measure of comfort can come from diminishing the conception of inherent existence and from increasing love and compassion, the enduring basis of an ethical life.