



## Buddhism

by Gordon Babst

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An ancient Thai sculpture of the Buddha.

Buddhism dates from the third century B.C.E., and is today one of the world's great religions. It counts over 300 million adherents throughout the world. It is unusual among religions in that it is not focused on a divine entity, nor does it involve preaching or commandments. Buddhism is not a belief system, but a way of seeing so as to live in accordance with reality. Buddhism is also unusual in that it generally expresses neutrality on the issue of homosexuality.

### The Buddha and His Teachings

Buddhism is based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha or "awakened one," who was born in approximately 563 B.C.E. in southern Nepal, and who wandered south into India's Ganges River valley, where he died around 483 B.C.E.

The Buddha developed new teaching based on the Brahmanic or Hindu religion, but directed at overcoming life's tribulations, rather than resigning oneself to them, by contemplation of profane cosmic truth and right conduct, which leads to a *dharma* or enlightenment and rebirth in this world, which is regarded as a place of sorrow and suffering. The Buddha made no claim for divinity, nor did he rely on gods or a theistic metaphysics.

The central teaching in Buddhism is that only the individual can walk the path towards enlightenment, attempting to achieve an inner truth, and, possibly, ultimate truth. The core of Buddhism is The Eightfold Path, consisting of Right Understanding or View and Right Thoughts (which make for the quality Wisdom); Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood (which make for the quality Morality); Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration (which make for the quality Meditation). These constitute the path to *Nirvana*, or transcendence.

Buddhist meditations generally rely on short phrases or *Mantras* based in Buddhist scriptures, or *Sutras*, which are written transmissions based on the teaching of the Buddha himself, passed down through oral tradition for about 200 years after his death.

Central to the tenets of Buddhism is the importance of self-discipline (*sila*). From this perspective, sexual activity of any kind is viewed with some suspicion, since it may distract from the religious life and may aggravate the human tendency to desire worldly goods and satisfactions, which may hinder the attainment of enlightenment. While abstinence and celibacy are privileged in Buddhist thought, same-sex sexual relations are seen as not any better nor any worse than other-sex sexual relations.

Although the Buddha issued no pronouncements of same-sex relationships, homoeroticism appears in some Indian Buddhist literature, especially the *Jataka*, or accounts of the Buddha's former lives. In these texts, the Buddha's relationship with his closest disciple, Ananda, is often presented in surprisingly homoerotic terms.

## Zen Buddhism

Buddhism spread to China in the first century C.E., where one of its most familiar branches, Zen, developed in the fifth century. This branch of Buddhism was introduced into Japan in the sixth century after passing through the Korean peninsula.

Zen Buddhism also spread from India into Tibet in the eighth century, where a line of Tantric masters developed. From this line came the institution of the Dalai Lama in the sixteenth century. The fourteenth Dalai Lama is currently living in exile and is a Nobel Peace Prize winner.

The Buddhist Path of Right Action includes avoiding unchastity, but does not discriminate against any particular sexual acts or genders. However, as with any religion, Buddhism is subject to human interpretation, and so too its take on same-sex relations and intimacy.

On the one hand, the Dalai Lama has suggested that Buddhism counsels against "sexual misconduct," presumably meaning the improper use of the sex organs. On the other hand, the Dalai Lama has suggested that he does not know whether a definitive stand can be taken here, since the Buddha did not teach on this subject, which he certainly would have had same-sex matters hindered one from escaping suffering and achieving enlightenment.

Presumably then, if by engaging in same-sex sexual relationships and intimacy in a measured way, one that frees the person rather than fixates his or her attention on sexual pleasure, for example, a person may approach Nirvana, then same-sex relationships are proper for that person. The same would also be true for heterosexual persons, who also could be either held back or enabled to reach their fullest human potential through their sexuality.

That Buddhism does not condemn homosexuality or distinguish it from heterosexuality has made it attractive to many contemporary Western gay men and lesbians.

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**Gordon A. Babst** is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Chapman University in Orange, California, and is responsible for the curriculum in political philosophy and theory. He is the author of *Liberal Constitutionalism, Marriage, and Sexual Orientation: A Contemporary Case for Dis-Establishment* (2002), and teaches a course on politics in a sexually diverse society. His research interests include issues of religion and politics, and the notion of a liberal-democratic society.