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# My Buddha Is Pink: Buddhism from an LGBTQI Perspective

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RICHARD HARROLD, *My Buddha Is Pink: Buddhism from an LGBTQI perspective*. Nepean, ON: Sumeru Press Inc., 2019. 144 pp. CAN \$24.95 (pb). ISBN 978-1-896559-49-0

*My Buddha Is Pink* is a playful romp through the basics of early Buddhist thought, based on Richard Harrold's blog of the same name (2009-2014). The book is structured using these foundational tenets: Part I introduces The Four Noble Truths and Five Precepts, Part II tackles The Noble Eightfold Path (looking at each limb in turn), and Part III explores meditative practice for beginners. This title will be most relevant to gay men interested in Buddhism developing a personal ethic for navigating sexual relationships. It should be seen as an introduction to Buddhist practice written by and for a gay man rather than an introduction to Buddhism and LGBTQ+ topics. Subjects we might expect to find in a book about Buddhism, sex, sexuality, and gender receive short summaries: for example, the meaning and valency of the term *paṇḍaka* is touched on briefly (136-8).

The pillar of *My Buddha Is Pink*, and the subject of its opening words is that LGBTQ+ people are predisposed to Buddhist modes of enquiry (5). Harrold imparts the empowering message that LGBTQ+ people are naturally inclined to questioning personal identity, s/Self-concept, and social dynamics. Throughout the book, Harrold frequently references LGBTQ+ popular culture in what appears to be skill-in-means to explain Buddhist teachings in familiar terms. One example is the chapter entitled "Four Noble Truths for Gays" (23-7) and its explanation of *dukkha*, with skilful tonal shifts such as "smegma stench is stressful [. . .] Christina Aguilera is stressful [. . .] waiting for your HIV test results is stressful" (25-6). Harrold's application of Buddhist teachings to LGBTQ+ life is kink-knowledgeable, inclusive of diverse relationship structures (e.g., polyamory), and supportive of sexual health and wellbeing. For example, he accepts non-

monogamy while acknowledging the potential *dukkha* caused by hook-up culture (133). In a discussion of right livelihood, Harrold mentions the difficulty of finding employment at LGBTQ+ businesses without indirect links to the alcohol and tobacco industries, which profit off people with mental health issues (65). Notable mention goes to his comments on making peace with unsupportive responses to coming out, with a realist slant which is valuable to Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike (60).

There is a strong sense that this book was written with the noble intention of helping fellow LGBTQ+ people exploring Buddhist practice. Harrold argues that the suffering stemming from systemic oppression differs from the suffering within one's own power to mitigate through self-soothing and moral conduct (23). Many books on LGBTQ+ experiences and Buddhism are hesitant to make such a distinction; Harrold's direct address is commendable.

This book is written in a clear, engaging style for a non-academic LGBTQ+ readership interested in Buddhism. My understanding is that the author is a white North American gay man. People of a similar background will best receive the book. This is expected for a publication about the intersection of religious identity and marginalized experience. For instance, *My Buddha Is Pink* is unlikely to speak to the lived experiences of gay Asian American Buddhists. This quality is neutral; the book is about Buddhism from an "LGBTQI perspective," not from plural LGBTQ+ perspectives. What I do take issue with is when a book implies consideration of multiple LGBTQ+ identities in its introduction but does not deliver this breadth (8). This matter is pertinent when considering a readership who has historically faced exclusion from religious communities and might find poor representation in the very place they sought refuge.

Significantly, some language used in *My Buddha Is Pink* is not trans-inclusive. Examples include when Harrold speaks of a "woman's right to abortion" (35-6) and "same-sex sex, e.g., men having sex with men" (37). I

recognise that LGBTQ+ graduate students of my generation often focus on discourse about inclusive and “up-to-date” language. Sometimes this leads to excessive criticism of the community elders responsible for building the spaces and the vocabulary we use today. With this context in mind, I mention the issue of non-inclusive language in my review not to be punctilious but to help trans readers make an informed decision about consulting this book.

Engagement with primary sources is elementary, which is audience-appropriate. Digestible explanations are prioritised. This is seen in the discussion of the third precept in Chapters 6 and 7 (37-8; 43-5). Though Harrold explores several interpretations of the precept as it stands, this key dilemma warrants wider readings of Buddhist passages on sexual activity.<sup>1</sup> Harrold acknowledges the presence of internal contradictions across Buddhist texts (41). Still, *My Buddha Is Pink* does not offer an intertextual approach, at least not beyond the *Nikāyas*.

Harrold encourages his readers to use access to Insight and to encounter *suttas* directly, unmediated by commentaries. He writes, “For example, instead of reading what some other writer says about the *Heart Sutra*, read the sutra yourself” (85). Language should not be a barrier to participation; I appreciate that many prospective practitioners are not in a position to study Buddhist languages. While I value affirmations of agency and self-study, I would encourage budding Buddhists to read widely and attentively to understand a text’s cultural reference points and problematised renderings. Critical editions are not restrictive to understanding but offer expansive viewpoints.

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<sup>1</sup> For a nuanced discussion of Pāli material on gender, sex and sexuality with respect to legal material, I recommend Brenna Grace Artinger’s article “On Pāli Vinaya Conceptions of Sex and Precedents for Transgender Ordination,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* vol. 28 (2021): 295-338. Accessed March 24th, 2022. [https://blogs.dickinson.edu/budhistethics/files/2021/12/Artinger\\_21\\_FD.pdf](https://blogs.dickinson.edu/budhistethics/files/2021/12/Artinger_21_FD.pdf).

Relatedly, Harrold argues that people studying Buddhism in the West can sometimes “over-intellectualise” (102-3), yet he drifts to the other extreme through oversimplifications such as “All Buddhism requires of you is to be fully aware of what you are doing right now” (101). It is ironic indeed when writers criticise assertions of what Buddhism “is” only to try to convince us of what Buddhism actually “is.” Finding a balance between accessible writing and appropriate nuance is tricky, but not impossible. With introductory books such as this one, which assume no prior knowledge of Buddhism, readers should be particularly cautious of punchy prose that implies homogeneity between, or within, Buddhist traditions.

From the outset, Harrold declares his desire to “avoid some of the more mystical and magical attributes that are bestowed upon Buddhism and stick to the core teachings attributed to the Buddha” (8). This dismissal of unspecified “mystical” aspects of Buddhism seems contrary to the author’s subsequent account of being drawn to Buddhist practice through participating in a Vesak ritual (141-2). It is complicated further by the comment “The Buddha generally didn’t have a lot of positive things to say about rites and rituals [except as a means to mindfulness]” (20). This seems to adopt the stance that “Buddhism = what the Buddha taught” instead of looking to the living tradition in all its diversity. Harrold mentions the dearth of information we have about Siddhārtha Gautama as an historical figure and the impossibility of verifying attributions to the Buddha (41-2; 129), yet his intention to “stick to the core teachings” leverages the Buddha’s sayings as the ultimate authority. A commitment to lively authorial voice sometimes comes across as flippant, such as the remark that Dhamma study can be arduous because of “all that blah-blah-blah in the Tipitika [sic]” (20). We are left without a clear picture of how Harrold navigates Buddhist scripture or his recommended criteria for evaluating statements relating to LGBTQ+ identity.

The strongest parts of this book were Harrold's anecdotes, such as how Buddhist practice brought him comfort in the face of bereavement and serious illness (110-11). The switch to introspection from otherwise upbeat discussion made these accounts especially powerful. I would have liked to see an explanation about why he opted for the Thai forest tradition since LGBTQ+ readers might have valued practical advice on finding an affiliation.<sup>2</sup> Harrold is a natural raconteur. *My Buddha Is Pink* will strike a chord with gay men who relate to the author's lived experience. Another noteworthy feature is Harrold's acknowledgement of the communal responsibility for systemic suffering (23). At the same time, this book is less likely to appeal to LGBTQ+ readers who are marginalized. Pertinently, Part III lacked trauma-informed approaches to meditation. Readers who experience dissociation should steer clear of Harrold's suggestions, which pivot on self-taught, unsupervised mindfulness of the body and breath. I would recommend this book as a memoir but not as a manual. There are many introductions to Buddhism, and I am not convinced by the instructive aspects of *My Buddha Is Pink*. It is Richard Harrold's confessional writing that offers a unique contribution.

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<sup>2</sup> Harrold addresses his affiliation in an interview with *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Tricycle, "My Buddha Is Pink: Q & A with blogger Richard Harrold," Tricycle.org, December 15th, 2011. Accessed March 24th, 2022. <https://tricycle.org/trikedaily/my-buddha-pink-q-blogger-richard-harrold>.