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“Genderneutral buddhism: an interview with Bay Hagebeek”

Gender and gender identity are hot topics, also within the field of buddhism. As with many other institutions, Buddhism is a male-dominated establishment, in which other groups often have to struggle for some recognition. René (from Bodhitv) spoke about all this with Bay Hagebeek (45).

"Court: time for recognition third gender", recently headlined the website of the national Dutch news website NOS. The news followed after a verdict from the court in the province of Limburg, in which was stated that there should be a possibility to register a third, neutral gender, next to 'female' or 'male'.

Bay is coach and owner of the ZinVolledig company, where Bay coaches people in the field of addiction, gender, life questions and identity. In addition, Bay facilitates the meditation group Dharma Punx NijmegenArnhem (www.dharmapunxna.org), a sangha based on the tradition of the buddhapunkers of Against the Stream (ATS) in the US. Bay was first called Barbara, but decided to change name at the end of 2017.

When did you decide to change your name?

In the ATS facilitator training that I attended in 2017, much attention was paid to diversity, opposites, inclusion and also to gender diversity. The concept of gender, as in gender identity, touched me. I had never thought about this before. I found out when I was seventeen that I was attracted to women and I came out of the closet as a 'lesbian'. Unconsciously I then thought the identity of a lesbian woman was 'my' identity, based on the image I had of that 'lesbian'.

During the training of ATS I recognized for myself that I do not really feel like a woman at all and never experienced it so strongly. "But what am I?", I thought. I do not feel like a 100% man either. I'm in between, still searching and I call that 'non-binary' now. I realize that this is 'transgender'. I do not know yet where my process leads me and that's fine. Dealing with change characterizes life and also Buddhist practice.

During this process I also found out that when people called me Barbara, I felt: "Hey, I'm not this, this is no longer true". So I went looking for a name that was neutral but that still fitted my the first letter of my birthname. I was already often called B. and so I came to Bay, a neutral name.

How did ATS pay attention to gender?

In the training a lot of attention was paid to diversity. ATS has also tried to put together the group of facilitators as diverse as possible. That was not entirely successful in my group, which for more than half of the seventeen participants consisted of 'white cis-men'. The rest of the group identified themselves as women, queer or non-binary. But there was a considerable emphasis on diversity throughout the training.

Diversity and inclusion are important themes for Joanna Hardy, who is now the leading teacher at ATS in Los Angeles. JoAnna identifies as a person of colour, that's how they call it there, and a woman. In the United States discussions go about 'black and white' a lot. When I started there, I was curious how it would go with all these topics. It turned out to be very connecting between the participants and it caused many 'breakthroughs'. It gave me a lot of input for my own development in the field of gender.

And how did they work with the theme 'gender' in the facilitator group?

As a facilitator you have to deal with the connection with yourself and your relationship with others. The assignments consisted of making meditations and dharmataalks. For example, during the last part of the training, I made a series about the four heart practices. For this I wrote dharmataalks and meditations on coming-out, identity and authenticity and how to approach these matters with kindness and compassion. This is because it is interesting to look from the point of view of the dharma to what identity actually is and how much you hold on to your identity as a human being. You'll see that you can let go of some aspects of your identity that are important to you, or at least loosen something, so that your identity does not bother you, cages you. I also noticed that process in myself, and so the design of the meditations and lectures became an autobiographical project.

What does such a meditation look like?

One of the meditations I have written is a metta practice based on the interconnection between you and the rest of the world: you can not avoid that. You can not exist without everything around you. You can also see the suffering - or the friction, or the stress - that you experience yourself in the light of the suffering of others. So this is a shared suffering, you can give yourself the space to deal with this. But also: you can stand up for yourself. You do not have to act as a "good Buddhist" and say "I do not value anything that has to do with identity ". Because please take your identity seriously. The only question is how you can deal with that in a more loose way. A sense of identity also ensures that you get to know and set your boundaries and that you can indicate your limits. Because if you act like an identity-less and boundless person then that is not what the Buddha meant by enlightenment or freedom.

How do you think people 'suffer' from their gender identity?

It is good to be aware of the distinction between gender - your sex / gender and gender identity - the inner conviction that you have a certain gender. Many people feel fine with their bodies and with the gender they are assigned at birth. For example: you have a dick, so you are a man, and you are okay with that. You may doubt sometimes but in general it is fine, and you fulfill your sexual or social role without too much inner friction.

But there are also many people who do not feel that way. Like me. I was 'just' lesbian and had certain ideas about it that I thought belonged to this, but those 'ideas' turned out to be different in reality. I now know that sexual orientation is something different than gender identity, and that solved a lot of confusion.

Suffering can also be simply related to the way you are addressed. When people started calling me 'madam' more and more often in recent years, I noticed: "Okay, this goes in a way that I do not like at all". It took a while before I realized why I didn't want to be called "madam", 'she' or 'ladies'.

Some people say: "What are you doing now, saying you're non-binary, identifying as non-binary?" But there are and were always people who identify outside the 'man-woman' boxes. And overall all those people experience physical or social dysphoria. That means that you experience suffering because you are approached in a way that does not match how you feel. In this case you are approached as the sex that has been assigned to you at birth. And if you find out that you don't fit within the man-woman's binary system, then you will automatically look at what else is possible, to be able to understand yourself in the first place.

And how do you want to be addressed?

In English, "they / them" is an official pronoun for people who do not want to be addressed with them. But the Dutch version of this, 'hen / hun' (=Dutch), is quite difficult for me, so I usually say that my pronoun is my name. I also often say 'die' (=Dutch) when I talk about people who want to be addressed neutrally. During sports I now remind people friendly when the group is addressed with

"hey ladies". Then I ask if we can make "hey people" or something like that. Some people find that super annoying, but if I do not stand up for myself, this means that I spend the rest of my life in a closet that others keep me in.

Buddhism, like so many things in the world, is a male-dominated establishment. Have you ever encountered that in the practice?

Yes. I started to meditate because, like so many people, I wanted to cope with stuff. I started meditating with Irène Bakker, I had seen her on TV, I liked her, she was a very down-to-earth woman and that appealed to me. But in the end it was a bit too much zen for me. When I discovered ATS, it appealed to me, also because I came from the punk scene. But there were always a lot of men there. And the teacher was usually also a man, which I found very vulnerable at the time. I had some bad experiences with men in the past. And so I asked myself, "What the hell am I supposed to find here? That I am kind of listening to someone, and it is also a man too; does this not abuse my credulity?" In the end, after a lot of talking with both male and female teachers, I realized that I always have to follow my own path, and that is of course what the buddhist practice is all about, and then that went better.

You actually take your own experiences with you to a sangha, and if that is negative experiences with men in the past you may not be able to trust every man one hundred percent. And if they are in the majority, it is easy to feel unrepresented.

Yes, because you hesitate to talk about your own vulnerabilities. Also because it sometimes seems as if other people who seem to 'look' like each other, in your eyes have a kind of bond that you do not belong to. And especially for newcomers in buddhism openness is very important. Most people who come to meditate with Dharma Punx NijmegenArnhem say afterwards: "Gee, you talk out in the open here on several topics, how cool".

But sometimes it's not going that smooth. I suggested some time ago in our sangha that we would share our pronoun next to our name. Some people thought that was strange, they said, for example: "I am just a 'he', that is obvious clear to everyone, right?!" We then talk about this kinds of things openly. I take such a critical remark seriously and try to find a solution that works well for everyone, because otherwise such an initiative will pass it's goal. Now we mention our name and anyone who wants it or feels the need can add their own pronoun.

Do you also have gender experiences as a facilitator?

I once did a workshop with a man as a co-facilitator. When the workshop was over, I said to him in a cynical tone: "Luckily I had you with me". He did not understand my cynicism, but we did the workshop together and afterwards everyone came to him with questions and compliments. That cringes.

But isn't it nice that there are male and female facilitators at retreats?

Yes, of course, very much! Realistic: No female ATS teacher has come to the Netherlands for a retreat. So now I try to bring more female teachers from all kinds of lineages to the Netherlands. Mary Stancavage (ATS) comes to the Netherlands in November, for a meditation daylong. It would be nice if Joanna Hardy did come also to lead a retreat in the Netherlands.

How can Buddhist philosophy / practice contribute to a positive change in all these things?

I think the term 'enlightenment' is important, I translate it as 'freedom'. I also say that enlightenment goes beyond gender and that the 'Buddha' who attained enlightenment, although the historical figure was a man, appeared as gender-transcending, actually as 'non-binary'. It became the life task of the person Buddha to make it clear that everyone can experience freedom and there are no boxes within that practice. I am not a text purist, so I can not immediately mention specific suttas in which

the Buddha indicates this. But recently I came across a quote that the American Buddhist practitioner, and also a transgender person, Finn Enke found in the Lotus Sutra:

"Guanshiyin (also called Avalokiteshvara, bodhisattva of compassion) will appear in the body of a buddha." Buddha then lists more than thirty different bodily manifestations of Guanshiyin, who manifests according to what is needed: male, female, old, varied by class, station, occupation, divine, human, nonhuman. "

I liked to read this, because here I recognize myself. But there is still a long way to go. There is still a lot of work to be done.

More information

Article by transgender person Finn Enke: <https://www.lionsroar.com/where-i-make-sense/>

Lecture 'Defenses down: diversity, inclusion and the transformation of suffering', by Bay Hagebeek and Stephen Dansinger: <https://dharmapunxna.org/defenses-down/>

Interview with Bay Hagebeek by Misha Beliën: <https://bodhitv.nl/videos/compassievol-verzet/>