
Charles Darwin University

Australian LGBTQIA+ Buddhists

Kerry, Stephen

Published: 23/10/2021

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Kerry, S. (2021). *Australian LGBTQIA+ Buddhists*. 1-27. Paper presented at 1st International Queer Buddhist Conference

, Virtual.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

1st International Queer Buddhist Conference

October 23-24, 2021

Author

Dr Stephen Kerry
College of Indigenous Futures, Education and Arts
Charles Darwin University
Darwin, Northern Territory Australia
Land of the Larrakia people.
stephen.kerry@cdu.edu.au

Biography

Dr Stephen Kerry is a lecturer in sociology at Charles Darwin University (Australia). Dr Kerry identifies as genderqueer, non-binary, and uses the pronouns they/them/their. Their areas of research are gender studies and queer theory and their intersection with health, religion, news media, and popular culture. Dr Kerry was awarded a PhD in 2006, the project documented the social identities and relationships of Australians born intersex or with variant sex characteristics. In the 2010s, their research focused on the health needs of trans and non-binary people living in Australia's Northern Territory, this included trans and non-binary Aboriginal Australians, also known as sistergirls and brotherboys. Dr Kerry also investigates the representation of intersex and trans individuals (e.g. Caster Semenya, Kathleen Worrall, and Cate McGregor) in the news media and the representation of queers in popular culture (e.g. *Star Trek*). They are also currently documenting the reaction of straight cismen (aka fanboys) to the increased representation of women (queers and people of colour) in science fiction. Dr Kerry is a Zen Buddhist in the Diamond Sangha tradition, in 2019 they underwent their Jukai ceremony and was assigned the Dharma name Cool Monkey (涼猿). They are a fan of science fiction (an Acafan), volunteer as a counsellor, study Chinese, and dabble in Chinese calligraphy and haiku. They live in Melbourne (the land of the Wurundjeri people) with two cats.

Title: Australian LGBTQIA+ Buddhists

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present some preliminary findings of an ongoing research project into the lives of Australian LGBTQIA+ Buddhists. The project consists of an online survey (completed in 2020) and in-depth interviews (occurring now). Of the 82 people who participated in the online survey, more than half indicated they were reluctant to reveal their LGBTQIA+ identities to their Buddhist communities. Some participants reveal that they have been told by peers, family members, and members of their Buddhist sangha's that their LGBTQIA+ identities are not in keeping with the Buddha's teachings. To date, sixteen people have been interviewed and all have had positive experiences when it comes to their identities as LGBTQIA+ people within Buddhist communities. Yet, a few have expressed concerns that 'coming out' as LGBTQIA+ people may risk their access to rituals (e.g. ordination) within their Buddhist communities.

Keywords

Buddhism, LGBTQIA+, Australia

Introduction

Weng and Halafoff (2020) suggest the dearth of representation of Buddhism and Buddhists in Australian media “may mean that they are perhaps not seen as being as well-established in Australian society as yet” (p. 343). Tweed (2008) suggests “the prevailing image of Buddhist practice has been the solitary meditator, eyes half closed, sitting in the lotus position”, he goes on to add that “this image does not accurately reflect the religious life of most Buddhists around the world or across the centuries” (p. 91). As a result, little is known about Buddhism in mainstream Australian culture (Halafoff, Fitzpatrick, & Lam, 2012). In the author’s lived experienced as a Zen Buddhist, it is quite common for many people to have little to no understanding of Buddhism. This extends to the relationship between Buddhism and sex, gender, and sexuality and the perception that Buddhism is more accepting of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, and asexual (LGBTQIA+) people (Coleman, 2001; Whitney, 2000). The reality, however, is more diverse. This paper reports for the first time the results of an ongoing project where Australian LGBTQIA+ Buddhists are being asked to reflect on their lives as LGBTQIA+ Buddhists.

Literature

According to Cabezón (1992, p. vii) writing at the end of the twentieth century, there was little in the way of scholarship pertaining to the intersection of sex, gender, sexuality, and Buddhism. Coleman (2001) claims what “is now emerging in the industrialized nations of the West” is a *new Buddhism*, one that is “fundamentally different from anything that has gone before” (p. 3). Coleman (2001) goes on to say that when Buddhism came to the west, and came up against a different cultural milieu, based on equality and egalitarianism, “most teachers simply ignored the more sexist elements of the [Eastern] tradition” (p. 144). Speaking specifically of the status of women, Coleman (2001) further argues that this “does not mean that women have actually

achieved full equality in the new Buddhism” (p. 145). When it comes to the lives of ‘gay and lesbian’ Buddhists, Coleman (2001) states “there is not much in the way of quantitative data”, conceding himself that he didn’t ask his participants about their sexual orientation (p. 162). This is despite the fact that he states: “Buddhism has had a particularly strong appeal among gays and lesbians searching for a spiritual path” (p. 162). What is also missing in the literature is an understanding of the ‘appeal’ of Buddhism to all under the LGBTQIA+ rainbow. In the early 2000s, there were attempts to *queer* Buddhism. Corless (2004) argues that “it is not only the Buddha Nature of queers that is queer, but the Buddha Nature in itself is queer” (p. 240). Here, Corless (2004) is evoking the destabilising work that queer does from within the context of queer theory, which emerged out of the deconstructionist projects of postmodernism and third wave feminism in the early 1990s. Queer becomes a verb, a ‘queering’ (Hall, 2003, p. 14; Kirsch, 2000, p. 33) and queer is a ‘gender fuck’ (Whittle, 2005, p. xx). However, according to Yip and Smith (2010) attempts to queer Buddhism “have opened up spaces mainly for white and middle-class gay men who want to get involved in Buddhism” (p. 137). They go on to say: “others like lesbians, bisexual women, trans and intersex people have found it more difficult to take up these spaces and have been less visible as a result” (p. 137). More troubling, in their research, Yip and Smith (2010), found that LGBTQIA+ Buddhists, through “their understanding of Buddhist teachings of a lack of a fixed, essential self led them to de-emphasise their [LGBTQIA] identities” (p. 115). Moreover, these teachings of the ‘no-self’ “led them to place more stress on their identities as ‘human beings’” (p. 116). This is troubling, because it can be argued that Buddhism further silences and hides LGBTQIA+ people, ironically one of the early criticisms of queer theory (Jagose, 1996).

Yet, there is some evidence that suggests that some LGBTQIA+ people engage with Buddhism to help them understand themselves as LGBTQIA+ people. For example, in the author’s (Kerry,

2008, 2009) own research into the lives of intersex Australians two participants identified as Buddhists and they used Buddhism to help them reconcile their diverse sex characteristics. Pat stated that “it is Buddhism’s eastern influence of ordering the world in ‘multiplicities, rather than binary systems’ which enabled Pat to apply these views to the self and ‘see that I represent the world as it is, and not the rigid system the West has constructed, which after all is a manmade illusion’” (Kerry, 2009, p. 282). Manders and Marston’s (2019) edited an anthology of trans and sex/gender diverse narratives titled *Transcending: Trans Buddhist Voices* and in the preface, by Catriona Reed, she writes: “Like so many others, I have misunderstood and misused teaching about suffering and about ‘non-self’ to disavow my existence” (p. xxv). On the one hand it is possible that LGBTQIA+ Buddhists use Buddhism to help them understand their LGBTQIA+ identities, but, on the other hand, Buddhism can disavow one’s existence. In the current project, LGBTQIA+ Buddhist Australians discuss the interrelationship between their LGBTQIA+ identities and Buddhism.

Methodology

The research began in February 2020 when the author invited members of the LGBTQIA+ Buddhist community to join them in forming an advisory group. In addition to the author, the advisory group consisted of Bhante Akālika Bhikkhu (a gay ordained Buddhist monk in the Theravada forest tradition who runs a Sydney-based LGBTQIA+ Buddhist group known as Rainbodhi) and Michelle McNamara (a Melbourne-based transgender woman in the Triratna tradition who published a chapter in *Transcending: Trans Buddhist Voices*, mentioned above). The advisory group met online and discussed the first stage of the project: online survey. Our conversations and subsequent emails resulted in a total of 68 questions categorised within five broad themes: demographic information, Buddhist identity, Buddhist practice, health, and Buddhism and LGBTQIA+ People. The online survey was hosted by Survey Monkey and

remained open between April and October 2020, during which 82 participants completed the survey. Following the success of the online survey the author developed stage two of the project: in-depth interviews. In early 2021, it became clear that these interviews will be limited to over-the-phone interviews due to travel restrictions in place because of COVID-19. Between February and July 2021 (at the time of writing) the author had interviewed sixteen people, however, the window for this stage remains open until 2022.

Online Survey Results

In the seven months the online survey was open, it attracted 111 responses. Twenty of these were ineligible to participate as the online survey was limited to Australian citizens or permanent residents. A further eight respondents were discarded as they didn't complete enough of the questions to be analysed. As a result, a total of 82 participants' responses were analysed, however, as the online survey progressed there was a slight drop-out rate, from 82 to 81 in both the *Buddhist Identity* and *Buddhist Practice* sections, 73 in *Health* section, and 69 in *Buddhism and LGBTQIA+ People* section.

Demographic Information

Most participants identify their gender as either woman (35, 43%) or man (38, 46%), several use multiple terms such as P62 (pansexual woman/transwoman)¹ (Table 1). A few people use the terms 'trans*' (6)², 'non-binary' (5), and 'genderqueer' (4). Some participants identify as 'gay' (31, 38%), while fewer identify as lesbian (19, 23%), bisexual (14, 17%), and either pansexual or polyamorous (13, 16%). Fewer still are those who identify as straight (8), queer (3), and asexual (3). An equal number of participants (36, 44%) say they are single and in some

¹ Henceforth, when an individual participant is referred to their alpha-numerical designation will be used followed by their sexual orientation and gender identity.

² Participant numbers of 10 or below will not be calculated as a percentage.

form of relationship (Table 2). Relationship forms include a relationship with one person (12, 15%), de facto (12, 15%), or married³ (11, 13%). One-third of participants (28, 34%) live with partner(s), fewer live alone (20, 24%) and with pets (19, 23%). Eight participants live with family of origin, seven live with children, and six live with either chosen family or unrelated friends. Five participants live in a monastic community.

Gender	Men 38, 46%	Women 35, 43%	Trans* 6	Non-binary 5	Genderqueer 4
Sexuality	Gay 31, 38%	Lesbian 19, 23%	Bisexual 14, 17%	Pansexual/Polyamorous 13, 16%	
	Straight 8	Queer 3	Asexual 3		

Table 1 Gender and Sexuality (n = 82)

Single	36, 44%			
Relationship	36, 44%			
	One person 12, 15%	De facto 12, 15%	Married 11, 13%	
Living	Partner(s) 28, 34%	Alone 20, 24%	Pets 19, 23%	
Arrangement	Family of origin 8	Children 7	Chosen family 6	Monastic 5

Table 2 Relationships (n = 82)

The age range of participants is skewed toward the over 35s. Thirteen participants (16%) are under the age of 35, almost half (39, 48%) are aged between 35 and 55, and 30 (37%) are aged 55 or over. The ethnicity of participants is skewed also, participants are predominantly white/Caucasian/European (59, 73%) (Table 4). Other ethnicities include South-East Asian (10), East Asian (4), South Asian (4), Hispanic/Latinx (3), and one mixed-race Indigenous Australian. More than half (45, 55%) state they were born in Australia, 12 (15%) were born in the United Kingdom or Europe, 12 (15%) were born in Asia, five in North America, and four in Africa/Middle East. Most participants (60, 73%) speak only English at home, 14 (17%) speak an Asian language (e.g. Mandarin, Vietnamese), six speak a European language (e.g. French, Spanish), one person speaks Afrikaans.

³ Australia passed marriage equality legislation in 2017, three years before the survey.

Under 35	13, 16%
35 - 54	39, 48%
55 and over	30, 37%

Table 3 Age (n = 82)

Ethnicity	White/Caucasian/European 59, 73%	South-East Asian 10	South Asian 4
	Hispanic/Latinx 3	Mixed-race Indigenous Australian 1	
Birth Country	Australia 45, 55%	UK/Europe 12 15%	Asia 12, 15%
	North America 5	Africa/Middle East 4	
Language	English only 60, 73%	Asian 14, 17%	European 6
			Afrikaans 1

Table 4 Ethnicity, Country of Birth, Language at home (n = 82)

The state or territory of residence is another skewed result, with almost half of participants (38, 46%) living in New South Wales (Table 5). Thirteen (16%) live in Queensland, 12 (15%) in Victoria, eight in Western Australia, two in the Australian Capital Territory and three each in South Australia, Tasmania, and the Northern Territory. As is expected, almost three-quarters (56, 68%) of participants live in a capital city, 10 live in a remote area (with fewer than 10,000 people), eight live in a non-capital city (with more than 100,00 people) and seven live in a regional town (of between 10,000 and 100,000 people).

State/Territory	NSW 38, 46%	Qld 13, 16%	Vic 12, 15%	WA 8
	SA 3	Tas 3	NT 3	ACT 2
Location	Capital City 56, 68%	Remote 10	Non-capital 8	Regional 7

Table 5 Australian Residence (n = 82)

Most participants (67, 82%) possess a university education and, of these, more than half (43, 65%) have a postgraduate qualification (e.g. graduate certificate, masters, PhD) (Table 6). Of all participants, 12 (15%) have a TAFE/College qualification (e.g. certificate, diploma), two have completed Senior Secondary (years 11-12) and one has completed Junior Secondary (years 7-10). Slightly more participants are employed (45, 55%) than are out of the work force (37, 45%). Most of the participants who are employed work full-time (31, 69%), eight are casual or freelance, and six work part-time. Of those out of the work force 17 (21%) are retired, nine are unemployed, three are monastics, and two are on a disability pension.

Education	University 67, 82%	postgraduate qualification 43, 65%		
	TAFE/College 12, 15%	Senior 2	Junior 1	
Employment	Employed	Full-time 31, 69%	Casual 8	Part-time 6
Out of Workforce	Retired 17, 21%	Unemployed 9	Monastic 3	Disability 2

Table 6 Education and Employment (n = 82)

Buddhist Identity

Participants were asked to recall their response to the ‘religion’ question in the 2016 Australian Census (Table 7). Most participants (60, 74%) stated Buddhism as their ‘religion’, 15 (19%) indicate they have ‘no religion’, and three people do not remember. Other religions participants list are Catholicism, Judaism, and shamanic/New Age. Participants were also invited to reflect on their response if they were asked the same question at the time of completing the online survey. The majority (70, 86%) state that their response would be the same. Of the 12 (15%) who would now give a different answer, six would state Buddhism. P71 (gay man) adds pagan to his⁴ Buddhist identity, P61 (pansexual transwoman/non-binary) would change their response from ‘no religion’ to “compassionism”, and P24 (straight woman) clarifies that “I’m a Buddhist as moral choice but not religious choice”. When asked what religion participants were raised, half (45, 55%) indicate some form of Christianity. Of those, 25 (56%) were raised as Catholics, 13 (29%) Church of England, and six were raised Uniting Church/Presbyterian/Methodist. Other religions mentioned include Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Quaker. A few participants indicate they were raised in mixed religion households.

Census 2016	Buddhist 60, 74%	No religion 15, 19%	Don’t remember 3	
Religion now	Same 70, 86%	Change 12, 15%	Buddhism 6	
Religion as child	Christianity 45, 55%	Catholic 25, 56%	C of E 13, 29%	Uniting 6

Table 7 Buddhist Identity (n = 81)

⁴ All participants were asked to state their pronouns and they are used when referred to that person.

Half (40, 49%) of participants self-describe themselves as ‘religious’, whereas 23 (28%) say they do not and 18 (22%) are unsure (Table 8). Thirty (37%) participants elaborated on their response with a written comment, many stating, as does P69 (gay man), “I don’t see Buddhism as a religion”. Participants were also asked about the importance of Buddhism in their lives, Buddhist identity, and their preferences for terms such as ‘practitioner of Buddhism’. However, the response rate to these three questions is comparatively low (23, 58, and 23 respectively). Of the 23 who responded to the importance of Buddhism in their lives question 11 (48%) say it is ‘somewhat important’ and 10 say it is ‘very important’. Most participants (19, 83%) who responded to this question say that the phrase ‘practitioner of Buddhism’ is important to them. P20 (gay man) adds “although I don’t identify as a Buddhist, I practice Buddhist meditation every day and find Buddhist philosophy to significantly resonate with me”. He also raised the issue of clarity with this question, he adds “don’t relate to the narrowness of questions”. Of the 58 who responded to the question regarding the importance of Buddhist identity, 35 (60%) say that it is ‘very important’, 14 (24%) say it is ‘somewhat important’, and nine participants say it is ‘not too important’ or ‘not at all important’. P62 (pansexual woman/transwoman) adds “the Buddha is in my heart, and that’s the way I will live until I die”. Of the 60 people who responded to the question, 22 (37%) participants have been practicing Buddhism for more than 20 years, 12 (20%) have been practicing Buddhism between 11 and 20 years, nine between 6 and 10 years and nine also were raised as Buddhists as children, and six have been practicing fewer than 5 years. While half of the participants follow the Theravada tradition (37, 46%), there are almost equal number who follow Tibetan/Himalayan/Vajrayana (22, 27%), Mahayana (21, 26%), Vipassana/Insight (20, 25%), and Zen/Chan (18, 22%) (Table 9).

Religious (n = 81)	Yes 40, 49%	No 23, 28%	Unsure 18, 22%
Buddhist Identity (n = 58)	Very important 35, 60%	Somewhat important 14, 24%	
Practicing (n = 60)	>20y 22, 37%	11-20y 12, 20%	Since childhood 9
	6-10y 6	< 5y 6	

Table 8 Importance of Buddhist Identity (n variable)

Theravada	37, 46%
Tibetan/Himalayan/Vajrayana	22, 27%
Mahayana	21, 26%
Vipassana/Insight	20, 25%
Zen/Chan	18, 22%

Table 9 Buddhist Traditions (n = 81)

Buddhist Practice: Groups, Retreats, and Home

Most participants (65, 80%) currently attend or engage with a Buddhist group, centre or temple (GCT) (Table 10). Participants were invited to add which of these GCT they attend, however, their names will not be published. However, the author’s analysis of these responses reveals that at least one Buddhist GCT from each of Australia’s states and mainland territories is listed, in some cases more than one person from the same GCT participated in the survey. Those participants who didn’t attend or engage with a Buddhist GCT were invited to say why and 14 of the 16 responded. Three say there is no opportunity where they live, for example, P2 (bisexual/pansexual/polyamorous woman) adds there is a “lack of opportunity in a regional town”. Two participants don’t feel welcome in their local Buddhist GCT, for example, P68 (straight/polyamorous transwoman) adds “I still felt ostracised for identifying as trans publicly in that domain”. Two others don’t need a public space to practice Buddhism, for example P1 (lesbian woman) adds “I don’t follow it as a religion, but more as a life philosophy”. Most (66, 89%) of the 74 participants who responded to the question about whether they have an at-home Buddhist practice said yes. The most practiced are sitting meditation (62, 94%), listening to talks/watching videos (57, 86%), and reading Buddhist books (56, 85%) (Table 10). Almost as many (60, 77%) participants have attended a Buddhist retreat (Table 10). As with the question regarding GCT participants were invited to add which of these retreats they have attended, but their names will not be published. However, the author can reveal that participants attend many Buddhist retreats in many traditions across Australia and internationally. Those participants

who haven't attended a Buddhist retreat were invited to say why and 17 of the 18 responded, seven were 'not interested', two people cite financial reasons, and three cite family commitments.

	Yes	No
Buddhist Group (n = 81)	65, 80%	16, 20%
At home Practice (n = 74)	66, 89%	8
Buddhist Retreat (n = 81)	60, 77%	21, 26%

Table 10 Buddhist Groups, at home practice, and Retreats (n variable)

Participants were asked to think of up to three retreats and reflect on how inclusive they are regarding LGBTQIA+ people. A total of 142 retreats were rated by participants (Table 11). Similar numbers of participants rated Buddhist retreats as 'neutral' (57, 40%) and 'very inclusive' (53, 37%) of LGBTQIA+ people, fewer rated Buddhist retreats as 'somewhat inclusive' (24, 17%), eight as 'not inclusive' and a participant rated one Buddhist retreat as 'actively excluding'. Several participants add comments regarding the perception that issues of sex, gender, and sexual don't emerge in the retreat setting. For example, P76 (gay man) says "the question of sexual/gender identity never arises". However, others spoke of the gender segregation at Buddhist retreats. For example, P31 (gay/polyamorous man) "they only had two separate shared bedrooms (male vs female), which to me, was rather limiting". Similarly, P6 (gay/queer man) adds "they segregated sexes and put me in a dorm room with other guys and it was really hard".

Neutral	57, 40%
Very inclusive	53, 37%
Somewhat inclusive	24, 17%
Not inclusive	8
Actively excluding	1

Table 11 Buddhist Retreats' LGBTQIA+ Inclusivity (n = 142)

Health

Participants were asked to self-rate their own physical and mental health. Of the 73 responses to these questions, 21 (29%) rate their physical health as ‘very good’, 20 (27%) ‘good’, 15 (21%) as ‘excellent’, 13 (18%) as ‘fair’, and four as ‘poor’ (Table 12). Similarly, 23 (32%) rate their mental health as ‘good’, 19 (26%) as ‘very good’, 15 (21%) each rate their mental health as ‘excellent’ and ‘fair’ and one rates it as ‘poor’ (Table 12). The participants were invited to undertake the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) test. Of the 73 responses, 56 (77%) ‘are likely to be well’, seven each are ‘likely to have a mild mental disorder’ and are ‘likely to have moderate mental disorder’, and six are ‘likely to have a severe mental disorder’ (Table 13).

	Physical Health	Mental Health
Excellent	15, 21%	15, 21%
Very good	21, 29%	19, 26%
Good	20, 27%	23, 32%
Fair	13, 18%	15, 21%
Poor	4	1

Table 12 Physical and Mental Health (n = 73)

Likely to have a severe mental disorder	6
Likely to have moderate mental disorder	7
Likely to have a mild mental disorder’	7
Likely to be well	56, 77%

Table 13 K10 (n = 73)

In 2017, Australia passed marriage equality laws following a lengthy public debate. This public debate had a negative impact on LGBTQIA+ Australians (National LGBTI Health Alliance & Australia Institute, 2017; Verrelli, White, Harvey, & Pulciani, 2019). Thus, participants were asked: “What impact did the public debates surrounding marriage equality (aka gay marriage) have on your mental health?” Participants were provided a sliding scale to indicate this impact, zero being negative impact, 50 being neutral, and 100 being positive impact. The average score for 73 participants who responded to this question is 37, that is, a negative impact (Table 14).

At the time of the online survey, Australia’s Federal Liberal/National⁵ Coalition Government was planning on making changes to the law to allow religious organisations greater freedoms when it comes to discrimination (especially against LGBTQIA+ people). Thus, a similar scale was provided for participants to indicate what impact this debate is having on them. The average score for 73 participants who responded to this question is 33, that is, a negative impact (Table 14).

	Negative Impact	Neutral Impact	Positive Impact	Average
Marriage Equality	35	26	12	37
Federal Religious Bill	39	31	3	33

Table 14 Impact of Current Issues (n = 73)

In response to the COVID-19 emergency, participants were asked: “What impact has the COVID-19 pandemic had on your responses today?” Almost half (30, 41%) indicated that it had no impact on their answers, 24 (33%) say it had ‘some impact’, 15 (21%) ‘a significant impact’, and four were ‘unsure’ (Table 15). Participants were also invited to elaborate on their answers and 24 did. Several spoke directly of the impact of COVID-19, some were very distressed by the ‘lockdown’, for example, P1 (lesbian woman) adds “we have been in stage four lockdown for about 6 or 8 weeks. I don’t even know how long anymore! [...] the tight restraints have been getting harder to stay in and stay hopeful for the future”. For some, there is acceptance, for example P22 (straight/asexual woman) adds “In the first few weeks of the pandemic my answers would have reflected slight uncertainty, nervousness and depression. Now at week 10? This is no longer the case and I’m accepting of what is happening in the world”.

⁵ In Australian politics the Liberal Party is a socially and economically conservative party, on par with the Republican Party in the USA.

A significant impact	15, 21%
Some impact	24, 33%
No impact	30, 41%
Unsure	4

Table 15 Impact of COVID-19 (n = 73)

Buddhism and LGBTQIA+ People

Sixty-nine participants describe what it was that drew them to Buddhism. Responses include a range of reasons, largely to do with spirituality, compassion, love, a desire to improve oneself. A few participants spoke specifically about the intersection of sex, gender, sexuality and Buddhism. For example, P17 (straight/pansexual woman) writes “gender neutral mostly” and P30 (gay man) writes “neutrality towards gays”. Others write of the attraction of Buddhism when coming from a Christian background, for example, P71 (gay man) writes “being a gay Catholic and feeling rejected. Wanted to walk my spiritual talk” and, similarly, P76 (gay man) writes “when I lost my Christian faith at age 19 I looked for another expression of faith and found a satisfying and reasonable expression of it in the Buddha Dharma”. Participants reflected on Buddhism’s attitude toward LGBTQIA+ people and on a slide scale they indicate whether it is negative (0), neutral (50), or positive (100). On average they rate this attitude as neutral (57) (Table 16). Using a similar scale, participants described the relationship between being an LGBTQIA+ person and being Buddhist, on average this is viewed as positive (68) (Table 16). When asked to reflect on whether their Buddhist GCT was supportive during the marriage equality and religious discrimination bill debates, half (33, 48%) say they were supportive, 20 (60%) of whom say ‘very supportive’ and 13 (19%) say ‘somewhat supportive’ (Table 17). A further 30 (44%) say their Buddhist GCT’s support was ‘neutral’. In support of this, P56 (gay man) adds “there was no conversation for or against. More like it does not concern us one way or another”. Also, P7 (gay/bisexual man) adds “it never arose. However, the group certainly followed the religious discrimination bill carefully and contributed to the debate”. Six participants say their Buddhist GCT are ‘not supportive’.

	Negative	Neutral	Positive	Average
Buddhism's attitude	18	22	29	57
Relationship	8	20	41	68

Table 16 Buddhism's attitude and relationship with LGBTQIA+ (n = 69)

Very supportive	20, 29%
Somewhat supportive	13, 19%
Neutral	30, 44%
Not supportive	6

Table 17 Support During Marriage Equality Debate (n = 69)

A little over half (41, 59%) say that they are 'out' within their Buddhism GCT, 15 (22%) are 'unsure', and 13 (19%) say they are not. For some, the issue of being 'out' is complicated by their identity and lived experiences as an LGBTQIA+ person. For example, P23 (bisexual woman) adds "it's hard to be 'out' as a bisexual person when you're married to someone of the opposite sex I try not to be 'in the closet', that is, I don't act straight, if anyone assumes I am 100% heterosexual I correct that assumption I do that for young people who need to know they're not alone". Similarly, P11 (asexual transwoman) adds "I am currently still presenting male and am out only to a handful of friends". The importance of being 'out' to their Buddhist identity and practice is rated by a little under half (28, 41%) as 'very important', 19 rate it as (28%) 'not too important', 11 (16%), 'not at all important', nine see it as 'somewhat important', and two are 'unsure' (Table 18). Just over half (38, 55%) state they have felt reluctant to disclose their LGBTQIA+ identity within Buddhist GCT, 21 (55%) of these felt reluctant 'sometimes', nine 'often', and eight 'all the time' (Table 19). Over half (41, 60%) of participants felt that LGBTQIA+ issues and people were silence or ignored by their Buddhist GCT, of these, 23 (56%) felt it 'sometimes', 14 (34%) 'often', and four 'all of the time' (Table 20). Eleven (16%) participants have been told that their LGBTQIA+ identity is not in keeping with the Buddha's teachings. Many of these elaborate on their experiences, for example P6 (gay/queer man) adds "told by some people that it's wrong sex conduct" and P50 (lesbian

woman) adds “in the early nineties I was not allowed to join a Tibetan sangha because of my sexuality”. Others stated who have said this to them, such as monastics, Buddhist texts, Buddhist teachers, family members, and lay members of the sangha.

Very important	28, 41%
Somewhat important	9
Not too important	19, 28%
Not at all important	11, 16%
Unsure	2

Table 18 Importance of being ‘out’ (n = 69)

All the time	8
Often	9
Sometimes	21, 30%
Rarely	17, 25%
Never	12, 17%

Table 19 Reluctance to reveal LGBTQIA+ Identity (n = 69)

All the time	4
Often	14, 20%
Sometimes	23, 33%
Rarely	7
Never	5

Table 20 LGBTQIA+ issues and people silenced and ignored (n = 69)

When asked if participants had witnessed discrimination within Buddhist GCT, half (37, 54%) state ‘sexism’, 25 (36%) ‘homophobia’, and 18 (26%) each for ‘misgendering’ and ‘racism’ (Table 21). Conversely, 26 (38%) say they have not witnessed any. Participants were given the opportunity to add other forms of discrimination, and one of these was ‘class’, for example, P1 (lesbian woman) adds “the biggest one that I have been aware of /experienced is classism, and that is obvious in the cost of retreats and annual membership fees. If you are a member you receive a discount on the retreats - if you can’t afford membership fees you pay full price for your retreat”. P23 (bisexual woman) similarly says “I think all western Buddhist groups have unconscious bias on race and class because we are so white and middle class”.

Sexism	37, 54%
Homophobia	25, 36%
Misgendering	18, 26%
None	26, 38%

Table 21 Witnessed Discrimination (n = 69)

In-Depth Interview Results

As noted above, the second stage of this project is still ongoing, therefore analysis of in-depth interviews is limited to cursory findings observed by the author. What appears to be a common experience among the sixteen interviewees thus far, is coming to Buddhism to explore a deeper understanding of life. This was a motivation for those who came to Buddhism early or later in life, and also those who were born into a Buddhist family. Those who fit this latter category wanted to explore Buddhism further than was done within the family or community context. These explorations of life, through Buddhism, rarely had anything to do with one's LGBTQIA+ identity or lived experiences. Interviewees emphasised that the motivation was exploring one's humanity, more so than one's gender and/or sexuality. The author asked interviewees about the concept of 'no-self', notably drawing attention to views expressed in the online survey that, for some, there is a tension between the 'no-self' and being LGBTQIA+. Most (if not all) agreed that, for them, there is no tension between the concept of the 'no-self' and being LGBTQIA+. Although the former is a key principle in Buddhism, one must live one's life as an LGBTQIA+ person, just as much as one lives other identities, e.g. parent, child, worker etc., but more so because one still encounters prejudice and discrimination as an LGBTQIA+ person. Another early finding is that interviewees have an overall positive experience of being an LGBTQIA+ person and a Buddhist. Most are 'out' in some manner to their sangha and have never experienced any prejudice or discrimination. When asked about the precept on sex, most (if not all) agreed that this precept isn't about sexual orientation, that is, it is not a prohibition of same-sex or queer sexualities, but sexual practices that may be harmful to oneself or others. There are, however, two exceptions to these overall positive experiences. The first are those

who are members of sex-/gender-segregated Buddhist traditions and those who had undergone or were in the process of undergoing some formalised ritual (e.g. ordination) within their respective Buddhist tradition. In either of these two cases, interviewees didn't necessarily see them as barriers as much as they saw them as opportunities to open a dialogue with their sangha and also themselves. Having said that, some interviewees did indicate that they were reluctant to divulge and/or elaborate on their LGBTQIA+ identities and lived experiences in the context of a formal ritual for fear of being denied access to it.

Discussion

The author utilised the demographic information gathered by two health and wellbeing surveys *Private Lives* (Pitts, Smith, Mitchell, & Patel, 2006) and *Private Lives 2* (Leonard et al., 2012)⁶ to determine if this current cohort of LGBTQIA+ Australians is representative. Although these surveys sometimes utilised different parameters (*Private Lives* (Pitts et al., 2006) split their results into categories of men and women, also they only provided a percentage and not the raw data) some overall conclusions can be made. Notably, this cohort of LGBTQIA+ Australians are less likely to be born in Australia and more likely to live in NSW, to be older, and University educated. This latter finding is also in-keeping with broader research regarding Buddhists. Fifty-one percent of Coleman's participants (2001) had advanced degrees, leading him to suggest "it appears that Buddhism continues to have its strongest appeal to the highly educated and culturally sophisticated" (p. 193). Regarding other key demographic information (i.e. gender, sexuality, ethnicity, relationship status, and living arrangement) this cohort of LGBTQIA+ Australians is equal to Australia's LGBTQIA+ population generally. When comparing the results of the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) test, this cohort fair better on average (15.4) than the *Private Lives 2* (Leonard et al., 2012, p. 35) cohort (19.59)

⁶ At time of writing, the results of *Private Lives 3* had not been published.

and not dissimilar to the national average (14.5) (Slade, Grave & Burgess, 2011 cited in Leonard et al., 2012, p. 35). Of the 73 participants who completed the K10 test, 56 (77%) 'are likely to be well'. However, what is striking, 13 participants have a "moderate" or "severe" mental disorder yet all but one self-describe their mental health as either "fair" or "very good". A few elaborate on their poor mental health as a function of their experiences as an LGBTQIA+ person. For example, P9 (gay man) is HIV positive and they are a child abuse survivor with PTSD, anxiety, and depression. He states he "had to deal with much loss and grief". P11 (asexual transwoman) speaks about how being trans impacted their mental health: "I had to resign from my job due to gender dysphoria. Basically, it was a choice between staying and eventually killing myself, or resign and ... not kill myself". Many participants elaborated on the impact of COVID-19 and the 'lockdown' on their mental health and some participants speak of how their Buddhism helps. P78 (lesbian/bisexual/pansexual woman) says "I am so grateful to have a Buddhist practice during COVID19. I've been very stressed and distressed". Similarly, the adjustments some Buddhist GCT make during the pandemic have been well received. P4 (lesbian woman) says "I am very grateful that the various Buddhist Centre's have established live streaming so accessing teaching is easy. This is helping with my mental health". Research suggests there is a link between religion and good health (Williams & Sternthal, 2007), while this project didn't set out to explore that relationship, the emergence of COVID-19 at the same time as this survey provided a good opportunity for participants to reflect on how their Buddhism helps them through a very stressful time.

Some participants were born and raised Buddhist, for example, P14 (pansexual/polyamorous non-binary) says "I grew up Buddhist and have always found Buddha's teachings a great way to live life". However, most are so-called 'convert Buddhists'. In Coleman's survey of Western Buddhists, he asked participants to state their level of agreement to three statements: "I became

interested in Buddhism because of a desire for spiritual fulfillment; I became interested in Buddhism in order to help me deal with my personal problems; and I became interested in Buddhism because I was attracted by the people I met who were involved with it” (Coleman, 2001, p. 198). He reports that over half ‘strongly agreed’ with the first statement and 22% with the second. These responses are not dissimilar to those of the current cohort; however, this survey didn’t pose the question in the manner of a closed question. Participants were asked: “In a few words, describe what drew you to Buddhism/Buddhist practice” and 69 responded. In very broad terms, the author has identified three main themes regarding what drew LGBTQIA+ Australians to Buddhism: existentialism, a practical guide to living, and knowing oneself. Arguably, the former two correspond to Coleman’s first two statements, however, no participant provided a response like Coleman’s third statement.

The first theme, ‘existentialism’, draws its label from P78 (lesbian/bisexual/pansexual woman) who says that what drew her to Buddhism was “total despair and fear and existential angst”. Others too sought out Buddhism because they wanted to “understand existence and pain” (P44, gay man). This category emphasised a “search for truth” (P75, monastic/celebrate woman) and as P59 (lesbian woman) says: “The teachings (four noble truths, eight-fold path) all pointed towards an accurate description of the human condition which resonated very strongly with me as I was searching for the truth”. Other words participants used were “logic” (P56, gay man and P67, lesbian woman) and “common sense”, “sense”, or “sensible” (P13, non-heteronormative man/me; P58, genderqueer/free gender lesbian; P67, lesbian woman). For example, P1 (lesbian woman) says, the teachings of the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh were “comforting, encouraging, and they *just made sense to me*” (emphasis added). Some reflected on the “absence of a deity” (P58, genderqueer/free gender lesbian) and “atheistic world view” (P33, gay man). P39 (pansexual woman) says Buddhism was “free of limiting structures” and

P72 (gay man) says he was drawn to the “non authoritarian attitude” and elaborates by adding “the Buddha points the way and we have to see for ourselves”. P1 (lesbian woman) holds a similar view about the appeal of being invited to explore Buddhism rather than just following. She says: “you are encouraged to try the teachings out for yourself to see if they ring true for you, rather than just accepting it as right because it is what the Buddha taught”. The second theme the author identifies as to why LGBTQIA+ Australians are drawn to Buddhism is ‘a practical guide to living’. This corresponds to Coleman’s second statement: “I became interested in Buddhism in order to help me deal with my personal problems” (Coleman, 2001, p. 198). Some common words include “practical” (P5, bisexual woman), “practicality” P61 (pansexual transwoman/non-binary), and “skilfulness” (P40, gay man). Most common was using Buddhism to help “calm” (P14, pansexual/polyamorous non-binary), “quiet” (P27, pansexual woman), and “clarity of” (P34, bisexual/polyamorous man) the mind. Others speak of “mental health reasons” (P7, gay/bisexual man), “combat stressors” (P20, gay man) and “helped me deal with my depression and self-control” (P61 pansexual transwoman/non-binary). A similar point to ‘self-control’ was raised by another participant, P55 (lesbian woman), who adds: “Gaining mastery over my thoughts and emotions”. Some sought “compassion” (P35, lesbian woman and P31, gay/polyamorous man). More explicitly, P3 (lesbian transwoman) adds: “After leaving a drug and alcohol detox and rehab (successfully) I needed some direction, and Buddhism offered what I was looking for”. The third and final theme the author identifies among the responses is ‘knowing oneself’. This was expressed in terms of “discovery” (P23, bisexual woman; P55, lesbian woman; and P48, gay man), “knowing my self better” (P20, gay man), “inner drive following my feelings” (P79, bisexual woman), and “feeling like something was missing in my life” (P4, lesbian woman). P39 (pansexual woman) added coming to Buddhism “It felt like home: embracing, kind, reflective, open, honest”. Despite the diversity of responses, only two participants reflected on how they were drawn to Buddhism for a reason

relating to being a LGBTQIA+ person. For example, P17 (straight/pansexual woman) writes “gender neutral mostly” and P30 (gay man) writes “neutrality towards gays”. Coleman (2001) cautions that asking people why they are drawn to Buddhism because the reasons they give “are usually ex post facto affairs that have more to do with justifying our behavior than understanding it” (p. 207). Nonetheless, he goes on to claim “there is something useful to be gained from asking people about their motivations as long as we maintain a healthy scepticism about what their responses really mean” (p. 207). To conclude therefore that being drawn to Buddhism has little to do with being an LGBTQIA+ person is premature, despite the fact that elsewhere in the survey, participants did explicitly challenge the importance of their LGBTQIA+ identity within their Buddhism and vice versa.

Some participants are rather antagonistic when it comes to discussing the intersection of LGBTQIA+ identity and Buddhism. P12 (gay/pansexual/polyamorous man/non-binary) is somewhat confrontational when it comes to the survey and its questions. They say: “So far this survey has not even begun to touch on the issues that matter to me in my Buddhist community. I hope the next questions can go beyond ‘marriage’ and being ‘out’”. P12’s comment goes a long way to suggest that, for them at least, there are other pressing concerns, it is unfortunate that these are not expressed. There are also some who display what is sometimes referred to as “internalised homophobia” (Weinberg, 1975). P33 (gay man) says:

I think that gay people should realise that the whole world does not revolve around them. We have as much right to live our lives as ‘straight’ people do [...] So similarly, should gay people not ‘bang-on’ about their ‘special’ lives (or they may risk being called extremist).

More concerning is P73 (straight man)⁷ who says:

If [LGBTQIA+ people] adopt kids, I feel they are not considering the kid's feeling in the future. Also, if they display public affection, I do not think it is appropriate. I have seen many demonstrations and shows by LGBTQIA people - some with inappropriate outfits, is this reasonable? Is it fair for kids who are innocent? Are you recruiting or are you helping their own friends? If they are recruiting for more people to BECOME LGBTQIA, I do not think it is appropriate.

Arguably, these views are quite extreme, yet others did suggest that their LGBTQIA+ identity is not relevant to their Buddhism and they speak of not having a “need” to either be ‘out’ or to discuss their LGBTQIA+ identity. P21 (bisexual man) says quite succinctly: “I am not ‘out’ as I don’t feel the need to be neither ‘in’ or ‘out’”. P52 (straight woman) says her “sexuality is never raised”. P59 (lesbian woman) recently came out and says “some [Buddhist friends] don’t but I don’t feel any need to discuss with many as I realise there would be total acceptance”. Some participants reflect on how their current “straight” relationships complicate their ‘out’ status. P23 (bisexual woman) is married to a man and “tr[ies] not to be ‘in the closet’, that is, I don’t act straight, if anyone assumes I am 100% heterosexual I correct that assumption”. P39 (pansexual woman) is also “currently in a heterosexual marriage”, she adds, “many community members recall when I was in same sex relationships I don’t think about it. It doesn’t feel any different to anyone else whose had a partner, broken up and moved on”. P79 (bisexual woman) is single and this means that “not all my Sangha would be aware. But don’t feel any need to hide it”. P57 (asexual woman) describes herself as “being a (straight-leaning) asexual” and as a result she does “not feel the need to be ‘out’”.

⁷ Participants who, at least superficially, may not appear to be part of the LGBTQIA+ community were not disqualified from participating nor were their answers excluded. At least one “straight woman” participant indicated elsewhere in the survey she is “intersex”; therefore one cannot assume a participant is not part of the LGBTQIA+ community because their identity is either cis and/or het.

It is revealing that just over half (38, 55%) felt reluctant to disclose their LGBTQIA+ identity within Buddhist communities. P76 (gay man) says he “certainly [doesn’t] always trust the (Buddhist) context” to come out. P62 (pansexual woman/transwoman) emphasises that their Buddhist Monastery “is a ‘male’ institution” and as a result it possesses “a typical structure that permits homophobia and transphobia within its structure”. They go on to add: “The judgements and phobias do not disappear because of ordination, they only do because he or she sees the need to change”. According to P56 (gay man) “sex is viewed as a distraction to the overarching objective of the religion, and not to be pursued or indulged in, regardless of orientation”. P74 (lesbian woman) is “cautious” when disclosing her LGBTQIA+ identity, but this is in the context of the Buddhist practice:

My teacher’s advice on everything is to check our motivation. So, if my motivation in coming out is to help another person who is or may be LGBTQIA then I do so. If it will ‘freak someone out’ [...] then I feel it is more important to keep my communication with them on a level that will help them do Buddhist practice.

For others, being out in the context of their Buddhist practice is more definitive. P48 (gay man) “It would go against my Buddhist beliefs to lie to others about myself”. Despite P48’s confidence, there is reason that some are reluctant to come out within their Buddhist communities. Eleven (16%) participants have been told that their LGBTQIA+ identity is not in keeping with the Buddha’s teachings. P6 (gay/queer man) adds he was “told by some people that it’s wrong sex conduct” and P50 (lesbian woman) adds “in the early nineties I was not allowed to join a Tibetan sangha because of my sexuality”. Reluctance to disclose one’s LGBTQIA+ identity is also justified when considering that over half (41, 60%) of participants felt that LGBTQIA+ issues and people were silence or ignored by Buddhist communities. While these responses are far from conclusive, there is some indication that LGBTQIA+ people

are not yet completely accepted within their Buddhist communities and subsequently they do not yet feel comfortable being 'out' as LGBTQIA+ Buddhists.

Conclusion

This online survey is just the first phase of a broader project designed to explore the intersection of sex, gender, sexuality, and Buddhism within the lives of Australian LGBTQIA+ Buddhists. It is too soon to say definitively what exactly the relationship between Buddhism and being an LGBTQIA+ person is. These responses reveal that the reasons LGBTQIA+ people are drawn to Buddhism fall into three broad categories of existentialism, a practical guide to living, and knowing oneself. Rarely are issues relating to sex, gender, and sexuality or being an LGBTQIA+ person mentioned. There appears to be the view within Buddhism that neither sex, gender, and sexuality nor being an LGBTQIA+ person are important. Having said that, more than half are reluctant to, at least sometimes, reveal their LGBTQIA+ identities. There is also evidence which suggests that LGBTQIA+ issues and people are silenced and ignored, LGBTQIA+ Buddhists have been told their identities are not in keeping with Buddhist teachings, and some have witnessed sexism, homophobia, and misgendering within Buddhist GCT. While the author is cautious not to make any final statements at this time, what is clear, Buddhism isn't necessarily as accepting as may be widely perceived, either by mainstream society or by LGBTQIA+ Buddhist themselves.

Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges that this research was conducted on the traditional lands of the Larrakia people, and they pay their respects to elders both past and present.

References

- Cabezón, J. I. (1992). *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*. Albany, NY.: State University of New York Press.
- Coleman, J. W. (2001). *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Corless, R. (2004). Towards a queer dharmology of sex. *Culture and Religion*, 5(2), 229-243.
doi: 10.1080/143830042000225457
- Halafoff, A., Fitzpatrick, R., & Lam, K. (2012). Buddhism in Australia: An Emerging Field of Study. *Journal of Global Buddhism*, 13, 9-25.
- Hall, D. E. (2003). *Queer Theories* Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jagose, A. (1996). *Queer Theory*. Carlton South, Vic: Melbourne University Press.
- Kerry, S. (2008). *Are You a Boy or a Girl? Intersex and Genders: Contesting the Uncontested*. Saarbrücken: VDM Publishing.
- Kerry, S. (2009). Intersex individuals' religiosity and their journey to wellbeing. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 18(3), 277-285.
- Kirsch, M. H. (2000). *Queer Theory and Social Change*. London: Routledge.
- Leonard, W., Pitts, M., Mitchell, A., Lyons, A., Smith, A., Patel, S., . . . Barrat, A. (2012). Private lives 2. The second national survey on the health and wellbeing of GLBT Australians. La Trobe University: Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society.
- Manders, K., & Marston, E. (Eds.). (2019). *Transcending: Trans Buddhist Voices*. Berkley CA.: North Atlantic Bookds.
- National LGBTI Health Alliance, & Australia Institute. (2017). Preliminary Results of the Coping with Marriage Equality Debate Surve: National LGBTI Health Alliance.

- Pitts, M., Smith, A., Mitchell, A., & Patel, S. (2006). Private lives: A report on the health and wellbeing of GLBTI Australians. Melbourne: Australian Research centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University.
- Tweed, T. A. (2008). Why are Buddhists so nice? media representations of Buddhism and Islam in the United States since 1945. *Material Religion*, 4(1), 91-93. doi: <https://doi.org/10.2752/175183408X288168>
- Verrelli, S., White, F. A., Harvey, L. J., & Pulciani, M. R. (2019). Minority stress, social support, and the mental health of lesbian, gay, and bisexual Australians during the Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey. *Australian Psychological*, 54(4), 336-346. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/ap.12380>
- Weinberg, G. H. (1975). *Society and the healthy homosexual*. Unknown: Gerrards Cross, Smythe.
- Weng, E., & Halafoff, A. (2020). Media Representations of Religion, Spirituality and Non-Religion in Australia. *Religions*, 11(7), 332-347. doi: <https://doi.org/10.3390/re11070332>
- Whitney, K. S. (2000). Vast Sky and White Clouds: Is There a Gay Buddhism? In W. Leyland (Ed.), *Queer Dharma: Voices of Gay Buddhists*. San Francisco, CA.: Gay Sunshine Press.
- Whittle, S. (2005). Gender Fucking of Fucking Gender? In I. Morland & A. Willox (Eds.), *Queer Theory*. Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Williams, D. R., & Sternthal, M. J. (2007). Spirituality, religion and health: evidence and research directions. *Medical Journal of Australia*, 186(10), S47-50.
- Yip, A. K. T., & Smith, S. (2010). Queerness and Sangha: Exploring Buddhist Lives. In S. R. M. Kath Browne, Andrew K.T. Yip (Ed.), *Queer Spiritual Spaces : Sexuality and Sacred Places*. London: Ashgate Publishing Limited.