



European Buddhism and queer refugees: a plea for compassion and awareness

The European Buddhist Union's Rainbow Sangha is requesting particular attention to the needs of LGBTQI+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans- and intersexual and queer) refugees, as they often face extra discrimination once they arrive in Europe, both from other refugees and sometimes by European authorities. Furthermore, if 'outed' here and then sent back, they may even face the death penalty in their country of origin.

Many Buddhists have interpreted the first precept - to refrain from taking life - as not only a passive precept (avoiding to do or be part of an evil act: not eating meat, not killing, ...) but also an active precept (doing an act to avoid an evil: saving lives that are under threat). We already see this attitude in some of the Jataka stories.

Throughout its long history, concern about the needs of refugees has always been part of Buddhism. Sometimes Buddhists took care of refugees; other times they have been refugees themselves:

- Ven. Hsing Yun for example described in his book "Humanistic Buddhism" that monasteries and temples have offered shelter to refugees in times of hardship and war.
- During the Japanese invasion of China in the last century, the monastics at Qixia Temple in Nanjing rescued tens of thousands of internally displaced persons.
- The Vietnamese Zen monk Thich Nhat Hanh - who became a refugee himself - was rescuing boat people and helping to resettle refugees.
- Buddhist Global Relief, a charitable organization founded by Bhikkhu Bodhi, also supports projects that help refugees.
- Since 1960, tens of thousands of Tibetans have fled to India to escape Chinese oppression. HH the Dalai Lama has lived since that time as a refugee in Dharamsala in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh.

- Shin minister Jeff Wilson, in his article "Amida Buddha Welcomes All Refugees", describes how the experience of exile and flight of the two Japanese founders of Pure Land Shin Buddhism, Shinran, and Rennyo, affected their Dharma teachings.

In recent years Europe has been a place of hope and shelter for many refugees fleeing war and persecution. Buddhism is now an established European tradition. How do we as European Buddhists respond to the needs of refugees?

In 2015 most European refugees were fleeing war from countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Eritrea - this year refugees from Ukraine are leaving their country because of the Russian invasion. But war is not the only reason why people are fleeing to Europe. Almost four decades ago, the first asylum applications of people who were persecuted because of their sexual and gender identities were recognized for the first time. Being gay or lesbian is still illegal in 69 countries, and in 11 countries lesbians and gays even face the death penalty. 13 countries explicitly criminalize transgender people but there is de facto criminalization of trans*people in at least 37 countries.

The situation for LGBTQI+ refugees in Europe

A recent study states: "LGBTQ+ refugees are especially vulnerable to multiple forms of discrimination based on their intersecting identities. For a subgroup of participants, both discrimination experiences and mental health burdens subjectively increased during post-migration."

The reasons for this are manifold. They can lie in administrative hurdles during the asylum process or the experience of racism. Sometimes interpreters can be hostile to LGBTQI+ and deliberately mistranslated so that asylum cases fail. But a main problem is the policy of 'collective housing,' putting all refugees in one accommodation regardless of the ideological and other differences between them. For LGBTQI+ asylum seekers such collective housing is often very hostile: they usually don't get support from their families and their ethnic group and if they come out - or are outed by someone else - they are discriminated against, often leading to physical violence and exclusion.

European authorities sometimes even hold against LGBTQI+ refugees that they are not living openly as queers in collective housing. The asylum request might then be rejected, even if the asylum seeker has been persecuted in their country of origin and faces persecution or even death penalty. Even this last fact (persecution in the country of origin) is often not sufficient to be recognized as a refugee in Europe. If the authorities think that the asylum seeker does not want to live openly as LGBTQI+, it is concluded that they can also survive in this way in his home country and their asylum application is rejected. This attitude is called 'discretion reasoning' and should be abolished.

For a culture of empathy and awareness towards LGBTQI+ refugees

We need a culture of compassion towards LGBTQI+ refugees and awareness of the extra discriminations they are facing when they enter Europe.

The Metta Sutta beautifully describes why Buddhists should contribute to the values of compassion and equality:

Whatever living creatures there are
with not a one left out—
frail or firm, long or large,
medium, small, tiny or round,

visible or invisible,
living far or near,
those born or to be born:
May all beings be happy!

A call to action

We call the EBU and all its members to look for ways in which they can address this issue and protect the weakest and most vulnerable. It may simply be a matter of increasing awareness that refugees are a very heterogeneous group. Many Europeans are, for example, not aware of the extra discrimination LGBTQI+ refugees are facing. It might also be about specific actions for refugees in general, and LGBTQI+ refugees in particular. Does your organization have options to help them directly and, for example, provide them with accommodation or care?

If you would like to contribute, please contact Tobias Trapp, chair of Buddhismus unter dem Regenbogen (Rainbow Sangha Germany): buddhismus-unterm-regenbogen@gmx.de

Sources:

- [Amida Buddha welcomes all refugees](#)
- [ILGA World Annual Report 2021 | ILGA](#)
- [Trans Rights Map 2021 documents alarming loss in trans rights - TGEU](#)
- [Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Claims of Asylum | SOGICA](#)
- [Experiences of Minority Stress and Mental Health Burdens of Newly Arrived LGBTQ* Refugees in Germany](#)
- [Metta Sutta](#)