

## A Buddhist Vote for Same-Sex Marriage

Juniper applauds the actions of local governments and courts across the United States to legalize same-sex marriage. In our work *Heirs to Insight*, we explain how biases against gender, race, and sexual orientation are based on earlier cultural conventions and must be eliminated from modern Buddhist thought. Here, we extend this principle to show how Buddhist thinking embraces same-sex marriage.

The heart of Buddhist thought is its insight philosophy, which uses critical inquiry to challenge dogma and to reveal how seemingly fixed ideas are more arbitrary than we might think. Applying this philosophy, we see that social customs are not fixed laws but evolving conventions that serve a purpose in a particular culture and time. Marriage is one of these conventions. It is not a rigid law but a social custom that evolves.

The history of marriage supports this view. Throughout most of Western history, marriage was a negotiated arrangement between families, not a romantic choice. Women were not accorded the same marriage rights as men, interracial marriage was forbidden, interfaith marriage was shunned, and divorce was often illegal or granted only with permission.

Today, Western marriage is almost unrecognizable compared to these earlier forms. Marriage is now a consensual choice. Women have equal rights, laws banning interracial marriage have been struck down, interfaith marriage is common, and individuals can divorce freely.

Each of these changes represented an evolution of marriage to embrace the choices of consenting adults. Same-sex marriage is another step in the same direction—an extension of the marriage convention to adults that seek the same privileges as others. As the insight philosophy encourages us to see, this is not the violation of a fixed tradition but the progression of a social custom.

One of the arguments cited by opponents of same-sex marriage is the potential risk to children of same-sex parents. Again, Buddhist insight philosophy challenges us to examine the validity of this position. The flaw in

reasoning is to suggest that one characteristic—sexual orientation—might in and of itself create risks to children while failing to apply the same test to other characteristics such as age, education, income level, and so forth. Same-sex couples are forced to prove their fitness as parents in order to marry (proof that has been successfully made in study after study\*), whereas couples belonging to other demographic groups bear no such burden. Isolating sexual orientation as a basis for assessing risk to children thus appears to be the product of old biases, not an equally applied standard.

Buddhist philosophy helps to untangle us from artificial constraints and rigidity. By examining ideas once considered immutable, we find greater levels of freedom. Extending marriage to same-sex couples is an opportunity to progress in this direction. It is an opportunity that we welcome, and it has our vote of support.

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\*See, for example, Judith Stacey and Timothy J. Biblarz, "(How) Does the Sexual Orientation of Parents Matter?," *American Sociological Review* 66 (2001): 176: "Every relevant study to date shows that parental sexual orientation per se has no measurable effect on the quality of parent-child relationships or on children's mental health or social adjustment."