



DEVELOPING TRANS* COMPETENCE:

A SHORT GUIDE
TO IMPROVING TRANSGENDER EXPERIENCES
AT MEDITATION
AND RETREAT CENTERS

Our vision for a trans*inclusive sangha:

“ I feel connected to my sangha because I can trust them to treat me appropriately and with respect. When I introduce myself to someone, I trust that they will not assume the wrong pronouns for me regardless of how they perceive my gender based on the way my body looks to them. When I speak up in a question and answer session, I trust that no one will misgender me based on how my voice sounds to them. I know that if someone says something disrespectful to me, that other sangha members and leaders in the sangha will understand how to address it. My sangha is a place where I don't need to worry about encountering the transphobia and cissexism that I often encounter in the world. I can focus on practice and connection, and I feel relaxed in my body, not on guard for disrespect.

In part, my feeling of safety comes from seeing plenty of trans* and gender-non-conforming folks in the sangha and in leadership, and knowing that their voices are being heard. I can safely invite my trans friends to take part in the sangha because I know they will be respected. I never catch people staring at me because I look gender non-conforming.

When I find myself in a leadership position or giving a dharma talk, my whole self is valued and I am not seen as a spokesperson for trans people, nor is it expected that I should speak about trans issues. People in my sangha use other resources to educate themselves about trans issues, and do not expect me to educate them. Instead, they understand that being trans is just one part of my life.

I can go on a retreat, stay in a dorm that makes me feel comfortable, and use bathrooms, without fearing that someone will tell me I'm in the wrong place, or being stared at. ”

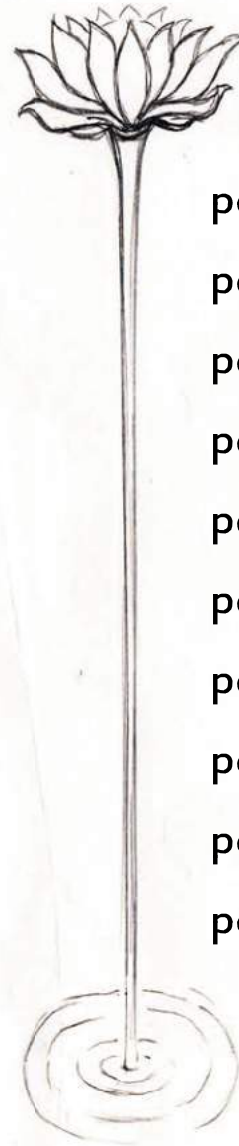


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INTRODUCTION

This guide was written and edited by a group of trans* Buddhists from different traditions and from around the country. Each of us has approached Buddhist practice as a gate of liberation. However, in practicing with sangha, we have encountered particular barriers on this path related to our trans* identities and experiences.

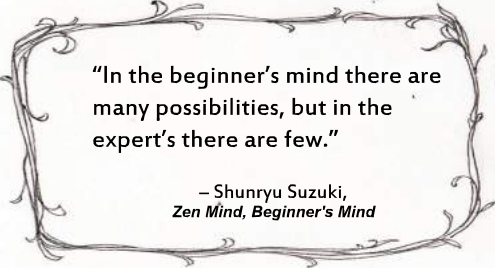
While practicing in community creates unique challenges for everyone, it is important to recognize that sometimes the systems put in place to accommodate community practice are a better fit for some than for others. They come with a set of assumptions about many things – including bodies, sexuality, and ideas about behaviors that are “normal” or polite.

Due to widespread ignorance about transgender experiences, we have each encountered situations in which the container for our practice felt very unsafe. Throughout the guide, we have included relevant vignettes as insets, in order to provide the reader with a clearer understanding of our experiences as trans* and gender non-conforming people in Buddhist centers. We have been repeatedly referred to by the wrong name or pronoun, have been asked to use facilities not appropriate to our gender, or have had difficulty finding facilities to use that felt safe to us. At times, our concerns about these issues have not been addressed, or have been framed as selfish or beyond the scope of what the community could reasonably accommodate.

On this last point, we beg to differ. We believe, however, that creating a trans*-inclusive sangha is a responsibility and opportunity for each sangha member to learn from others and to practice compassion and generosity. We further believe that transforming our sanghas into communities in which trans* people are safe and affirmed is not difficult. Sometimes, all that is needed to start are a few concrete steps in the right direction. This is what our guide seeks to provide.

This was written with the whole sangha in mind, some of it will speak more to retreat organizers, while much of it may be of interest to any sangha member interested in creating an inclusive sangha. We want to express gratitude to everyone who is taking up this issue in their own way. By prompting an investigation of ways of being in community and in shared spaces, we hope that this guide may contribute to both personal and collective growth.

We have chosen to open up this conversation with confidence that we will be met with the utmost care and respect. Thank you for taking in these suggestions with spacious hearts and minds.



“In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert’s there are few.”

– Shunryu Suzuki,
Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind

A FEW WORDS ON TRANS* IDENTITIES

First, a few words about trans* people and trans* experiences. Gender is not the same as sex, rather, it is someone’s internal experience of being a man, woman, or something else. When someone’s sex assigned at birth is aligned with their gender, this is referred to as being cisgender (non-trans*). When someone’s assigned sex is not aligned with their gender, this is generally known as being transgender or gender nonconforming. In this document, we will use trans* (pronounced “trans” or “trans-star”) to refer to this group of identities as well as other non-cisgender identities.

It is important to note the diversity in trans* identities. Many trans* people see themselves as men and women first, and consider their trans identity or trans experience to be secondary to that. Other trans* people, especially those who identify as gender nonconforming, may feel that transgender is their primary gender identity, or may have a gender identity that falls outside the binary categorization of men and women. Keep in mind that gender is not determined by the body parts that one has; it is about one's understanding of oneself. Each person is always the authority on their own gender.

Some trans* people access medical care related to their gender, such as hormones or surgery. While this is important to some, it is not what defines being trans*. People's genders are no more or less legitimate based on what another person thinks they look like. In this culture, it is considered rude and embarrassing to accidentally refer to a cisgender person by the wrong pronoun. It is equally rude and embarrassing to do this to a trans* person, no matter what they look like. Just as with cisgender people, if you refer to a trans* person by the wrong pronoun, you should apologize and correct your speech.

For further information on terminology and related topics, please refer to the glossary in the appendix, or to the suggested reading list.

COMMON PITFALLS & SUGGESTIONS FOR ADDRESSING THEM

Retreat Spaces that Assume No One is Trans*

The main challenge for trans* people in retreat centers is that many things function under the assumption that everyone is cisgender (non-trans*).

Here are some ways that this assumption plays out:

- People are expected to identify themselves as either men or women
- It is assumed that men used to be boys and women used to be girls
- People in men's and in women's spaces are all expected to have similar body types
- People are generally expected to be comfortable undressing in front of others of the same gender
- It is assumed that we can tell someone's gender identity and correct pronoun by looking at them

This guide will take up some of the ways that these assumptions impact our practice settings, and offer suggestions for how to accommodate the reality that some sangha members are trans*.

"I found myself lingering to change clothes until my dormmates had left, and lowering my voice while chanting so that my voice would help me pass. The backdrop of the binary gender system as institutionalized within Vipassana, even within a silent retreat, meant that I sat with others' microaggressions of transphobia and my own internalized transphobia and fear of being discovered."

Registration Forms

Many retreat centers ask about gender on registration forms, often using "male" and "female" checkboxes. Once we recognize trans* experiences, one's gender may not actually tell us very much about their life experience, their body, or where they would like to be housed. With this in mind, we can gain clarity by asking ourselves exactly what it is we need to know.

"Yet no matter how many times I ask people to refer to me as "they, their, them" with regards to pronouns, I find myself correcting them many more times over. And sometimes I just don't. It's exhausting. It brings up doubt. I still get called lady, woman, girl as well. And I don't look anywhere near any of those terms."

Consider the table below:

What you would like to know	Question to ask	Why this question?
Demographic information for your records	What is your gender? (fill in the blank)	This allows people who have non-binary identities to indicate that and lets sangha members know that the center is aware that not everyone identifies as male or female.
What pronoun to use for someone	What gender pronoun do you go by? (i.e. he/him, she/her, they/their, something else)	Most people in this culture go by "he" or "she" but some people who have a non-binary gender may prefer to go by "they" or another gender-neutral pronoun. The only way to know is to ask. Again, this sends a message to the entire sangha that the center understands that we can't always tell someone's pronoun by looking at them.
Where to house someone	For shared rooms, which dorm assignment best suits your gender? <input type="checkbox"/> Female Dorms <input type="checkbox"/> Male Dorms <input type="checkbox"/> All-Gender Dorms	For a variety of reasons, it may not feel appropriate to every trans* person to stay in the dorm that matches their gender identity. This topic, as well as the all-gender option for accommodations, will be addressed at greater length later in the document.

A final thought on registration is that many trans* people, like many cisgender people, prefer to go by a name other than the one printed on their credit card and other documents. Being called by the wrong name is a particular issue for trans* people, as it may reveal someone's trans* identity to others who were not

aware of it without their consent, and can be emotionally triggering. It is important to have a system where someone's preferred name is always what comes up in their records.

DORMITORY ASSIGNMENTS

Most retreat centers choose to designate separate restrooms, bathing areas, and dorms for men and for women. This is a major area in which trans* people have encountered confusion from retreat organizers and other participants. Rather than leading to a single moment of discomfort or awkwardness, these difficulties can affect a person's entire retreat experience and can bring up past feelings associated with lack of acceptance, gender dysphoria, and/or gender-related trauma.

For this reason, it is critical, not optional, to provide appropriate accommodations for trans* people. As discussed in the chart above, we recommend using the following question to assign dormitories:

**For shared rooms,
which dorm assignment best suits your gender?**

Female Dorms Male Dorms
 All-Gender Dorms

This question acknowledges that not everyone identifies as male or female, and provides trans* people with a sense of agency in determining their gendered experience of the retreat. It acknowledges that not every trans* person will want to stay in a dormitory that matches their gender identity. For instance, one trans man might prefer to stay in a male dorm while another trans man who is frequently mistaken for a woman and who has been harmed by sexual violence committed by men may not feel safe staying in a male dorm despite his identity. This person might be best accommodated in an all-gender dormitory or single room.

"If I wanted to wash my hands during the brief breaks we had before meals, I'd have to dash up two flights of stairs and hope that a single stall restroom was free. Silent retreats became a constant game of logistics. At this hour, might the multi-stall restroom be empty so I can use it? If so, which should I use? The wrong gendered one that I'd been explicitly directed to use, with the downside of feeling potentially triggered, plus awkward and dishonest should anyone happen upon me, or the right gendered one in which I'd been told my presence was distracting, and in which I might get in trouble?"

- In spaces where the facilities are not private-use, such as a locker room with many showers in one room without dividers, or a sauna or whirlpool, we suggest having different times designated for women's, men's, and all-gender use.
 - For example, 7-10am all-gender, 10am-2pm women, 2-6pm men, 6-10pm all-gender
- Put up curtains and/or dividers in locker and shower rooms.

Please note that if your center decides to go with the timeslot approach, be mindful of splitting these times fairly and reasonably, not putting the all-gender hours only at inconvenient times of day. Adopt a justice perspective that ensures that people of all genders have equal access to these facilities.

"I attended a 3-day silent LGBT sit [where] I got to choose my roommates, of any gender. I roomed with people I knew, worked with, and my partner. The bathroom that I used was marked for people of all genders, and people of all genders indeed utilized that washroom (sometimes men's bathrooms are changed to say 'people of all genders', but still just the men use the bathroom). Where we sat over the course of the three days was not determined by gender, it was completely mixed... I have never felt so important in silence, both individually and collectively, and have a renewed commitment to my practice as essential to liberation for all"

EDUCATING THE SANGHA

Providing the options above will not guarantee that trans* people will feel safe in their dorm because of the possibility that another person will misread their gender and think they are in the wrong dorm. One way to address this might be to put the following language below the question about dormitories on the retreat registration:

Note: Our sangha is inclusive of trans* and gender nonconforming people and sangha members are trusted to select the housing option that is most appropriate for them. We all have different bodies and life experiences and do not expect that people must look a certain way to use a gendered facility they feel is appropriate for them.

For retreats that offer an opening talk or orientation, this may be an opportune time to remind people of basic inclusivity issues. Language such as the below may be used:

We strive to be an open and inclusive community, accepting and supporting diversity in age, race, physical and mental abilities, as well as sexual orientation and gender identity. As this last term may be new, it is important to realize that gender is not dependent on how someone looks, and can be something other than male or female. One's gender is often inferred by the pronoun used as reference (for example, he/she/they). If a misuse of pronouns is corrected, please gratefully apologize and be mindful of using the correct pronoun in the future. Repeatedly using the wrong pronoun is disrespectful.

"My first retreat, I was standing on line for dinner on opening night and the lead teacher was walking along, greeting folks. This is someone for whom I have mad respect and admiration... When he walks past me, he tells his baby daughter that he has hoisted up to "wave at *her*." I am a transman and this sent me into a storm of fear, anger, sadness. I was mad to be there supporting an organization that I felt like didn't understand me, and that wasn't mindful of my needs."

"Six months to a year after I had finished my transition in most aspects of my life, sangha members began to come to me, saying how happy for me they were...With as much grace as I could muster, I would thank them and tell them I was happy for them, too. And I was happy for them, that they could now see me in a way they couldn't before. But I was also sad for them, that they had missed this opportunity to see me as male before I "looked" male, this opportunity to learn to see gender in a new way."

A statement like this will not only encourage sangha members to be mindful of this issue, but it will show trans* people that practice leaders are aware of these issues and would be receptive to any concerns that come up. Trans* people get the message from society that it is our fault if we face hostility, fear, or confusion, and sometimes we assume that we will not be supported by others when we encounter disrespect related to our genders. A statement like this encourages us to speak up and work with practice leaders to resolve any issues that arise.

"I was cutting onions on one of my first work meditations, and a kitchen staff member told someone who asked if they should help with the onions that "he's already taking care of it." I knew I was supposed to stay in silence unless it was absolutely essential to talk, but I felt so uncomfortable that I just blurted out "I'm a she. I go by she." Looking back, this was clearly essential speech, but at the time I felt like I had broken the rules or that I was being rude, and my heart was pounding and I felt myself sweat a little. The staff member was mildly apologetic but I didn't get the sense that she took it that seriously. It didn't help that another practitioner who was working on the same shift broke silence to say to me, referring to the staff member, "she just made a mistake," as if to confirm that yes, I was being rude."

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that these changes will raise questions among some sangha members. Such questions are not a problem. Rather, they are an opportunity for teaching moments and for allowing some openness around our fixed views related to gender.

Although many sangha members know which pronoun I use they don't always feel comfortable correcting others, and I haven't figured out how to talk to them about this. I remember one time when a group of us was talking, and someone used the wrong pronoun for me. I tried to be relaxed, but a friend of mine may have glared. I left to pack up my room at the end of retreat, and in a few moments, the person who had used the wrong pronoun knocked on my door and said, "Hi, I just wanted to ask you about what pronoun you prefer to use. I noticed it seemed awkward in the room just then, and I wondered if I had used the wrong pronoun." I felt extremely grateful to her for coming and asking me in such a straightforward way, and for not defending her use of the wrong pronoun even if no one had told her before.

CLOSING IDEAS

We hope that the information offered here will be useful in building more inclusive practice environments. This guide is just a beginning and is specific to trans* experience. Our intention is that you will treat this guide as a living document - one that can be referred to, revisited, and added to as new situations arise.

Importantly, we want to stress that event organizers should include trans* people and members of other traditionally excluded groups in conversations about planning, issues that arise, and evaluating the retreat experience. If changes are in store for the future, let it be known to the sangha. The sangha may also be able to support fundraisers toward making the space more appropriately suited for trans* people.

"Probably the hardest part of being a trans*Buddhist for me right now, though, is NOT the endless external work that needs to happen, educating and raising awareness throughout communities, and speaking out. Indeed, much more difficult is the task of remembering that I deserve this. I deserve this medical care, I deserve this job, I deserve to be referred to as I request, I deserve to be treated with love and respect."

APPENDIX II: FURTHER READING

Here are some resources we suggest for further reading on trans* and gender nonconforming issues:

San Francisco Zen Center Transgender Sangha Statement
An example of a way that one sangha is taking up trans*inclusive practice.

<http://blogs.sfzc.org/blog/2013/01/23/inter-relationship-with-the-transgendered-sangha/>

Transgenderconsultant.com

justin adkins offers videos and in-person consultations geared towards creating schools and workplaces that are inclusive of trans* people.

My Gender Workbook: How to Become a Real Man, a Real Woman, the Real You, or Something Else Entirely

by Kate Bornstein

My Gender Workbook enables the reader to explore their own unique gendered experience, as a gateway to a more nuanced understanding of their own gender and that of others.

Redefining Realness

by Janet Mock

“Yoga: How We Serve Diverse Sexual and Gender Identity-based Cultures” by Rob Schware

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rob-schware/service-yoga_b_2619735.html

This is an interview with Jacoby Ballard about his work teaching yoga specially geared towards queer and trans* communities.

Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity

by Julia Serano

Nina Here Nor There: My Journey Beyond Gender

by Nick Krieger

The Nearest Exit May Be Behind You

by S. Bear Bergman

I Am Not Your Tragic Trans Narrative

<http://feministing.com/2011/05/31/i-am-not-your-tragic-trans-narrative/>

“About Purportedly Gendered Parts” by Dean Spade

<http://www.deanspade.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/Purportedly-Gendered-Body-Parts.pdf>

Explores alternatives to talking about bodies in gendered ways, and thereby increase accessibility for people who are often alienated from certain spaces and services.

“Toward Freedom and Enlightenment Queerly: LGBTQ and Dharma” by Larry Yang

http://www.larryyang.org/images/Toward_Freedom_and_Enlightenment_Queerly_LGBTQ_and_Dharma_1.08.2012.pdf

“Toilet Training” by transgender videomaker Tara Mateik and the Sylvia Rivera Law Project

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2I3y2X6mPCw>

APPENDIX III: WAYS TO GET STARTED

- Read articles on the experiences of trans* practitioners.
- Throw a fundraiser for specific trans* supportive changes.
- Have a panel and listen to personal experiences.
- Hold educational sessions when there is usually a dharma talk, such as bringing in leaders from the community or showing films with discussion.
- Hold a LGBTQ sangha sit, yoga class, or retreat.
- Have a LGBT breakout group after retreats
- Create a process to thoughtfully draft a diversity or inclusion statement, and post it publicly. Elicit and act on feedback from sangha members about structural changes need to make the goals of the inclusion statement a reality.

GLOSSARY

cisgender adj. having a lived experience and understanding of one's gender that is aligned with one's assigned sex. For example, a cisgender man is someone who was assigned male at birth, and lives and identifies as a man. Often abbreviated to cis, i.e. cis man, cis woman, cis people.

gender n. conventionally used indistinguishably from sex; more appropriately used to refer to psychological-social-cultural elements commonly associated with gender categories such as male and female. For example, one's assigned sex is, for instance, a "female" label attached to one's body, while one's gender is one's internal sense of being "male", "female", or a host of other things (see also gender identity). It is also the lived experience of being in that category in the world, including choice of behaviors such as dress, gesture, speech style, etc. (see also gender expression). v. the process of assigning an individual such a category and/or referring to a person as such. I.e. "He gendered Pat as male." -- he decided Pat was male, referred to Pat by male pronouns, and this may or may not be correct.

gender binary n. the conventional system of gender in western societies in which individuals are understood to belong to one of two categories: either male or female, man or woman, boy or girl, masculine or feminine, etc.

gender expression n. the factors of one's current external appearance that tend to be interpreted in terms of gender, that may or may not correspond to one's internal gender identity. i.e. clothes, hair, vocal patterns, behavior, etc.

gender identity n. one's internal sense of being male, female, both, or something else entirely. Because gender identity is an internal circumstance, one's gender identity may or may not be visible or correctly interpreted by others. Not to be confused with sexual orientation.

gender nonconforming adj. having an experience of not conforming to the roles or expectations placed upon one based on one's perceived gender, perceived sex, or actual gender identity.

gender pronoun n. (often abbreviated to pronoun) the set of pronouns by which an individual wants to be referred to when others are speaking about them in the third person. For example, she/her, he/him, they/them.

genderqueer adj. (also gender queer, gender-queer) having a gender identity and/or gender expression that is outside of the gender binary, including the following: on a spectrum between male and female, neither, both, or something entirely outside the logic of male/female.

identify v. to establish a certain identity label as representing one's experienced understanding of oneself, and simultaneous to require that other people respect that designation. For example, Sherri identifies as a woman, i.e., Sherri is an expert on her own experience, so her establishing that she is a woman means she is a woman and we need to listen to her.

LGBTQ adj. lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/queer also sometimes includes Q=questioning, I=intersex, GNC=gender nonconforming

misgender v. to mentally, verbally, or otherwise assign a gender category to someone to which they don't identify. For example, "Lisa got misgendered at the post office." Someone at the post office decided Lisa was a gender other than Lisa's felt and/or lived experience of gender, and referred to Lisa as such. An experience that trans* people are routinely subject to, but that cis people very seldom encounter.

pass v. to be perceived as the gender one identifies as. Generally used in reference to the gender binary. "Skyler doesn't take off his shirt at the beach because he is concerned that he won't pass."

sexual orientation n. how one identifies in terms of sexual or

romantic interest and behavior. i.e. lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, heterosexual, etc.

sex n. (also sex assigned at birth; assigned sex;) the social category one is placed in, usually starting at birth and often continually throughout life, based on perceived physical qualities of their body, such as having a penis, not having a penis, vocal range, body shape, body/facial hair, etc.

trans* adj. an umbrella term including transgender, transsexual, genderqueer, gender nonconforming, and any gender identity/expression/experience that is non-cisgender. The asterisk is like a wild card, as in trans(fill in the blank).

transgender adj. having a lived experience and/or understanding of one's gender that is different from one's assigned sex. For example, a transgender man is someone who was assigned female at birth, and lives and/or identifies as a man. Often abbreviated to trans, i.e. "He is a trans man" etc. An umbrella term including any experience of gender that differs from that which is associated with one's assigned sex, including transsexual, genderqueer, and gender nonconforming, among other things.

transition n. (also gender transition) the process undertaken by some trans* people of changing one's gender expression in order to live externally in a way more closely aligned with one's internal gender identity. For some this is a finite process; for others it is always occurring. May involve changing name, pronoun, hair, dress, behavior, and/or vocal patterns, and may or may not involve medical options such as hormones or surgeries.

transsexual adj. having a particular kind of transgender identity that involves understanding oneself and/or living as a different gender than one was assigned at birth. This includes trans men and trans women, and is generally in contrast to genderqueer identities. May or may not include availing oneself of physical transition options such as hormones or various surgeries.

Excerpt from the Karinaya Metta Sutta

Think: Happy, at rest,
may all beings be happy at heart.
Whatever beings there may be,
weak or strong, without exception,
long, large,
middling, short,
subtle, blatant,
seen & unseen,
near & far,
born & seeking birth:
May all beings be happy at heart.