

## **We Have a Daughter!**

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On Vesak Day, 26th May 2021, our family officially welcomed our daughter, Chai Leng, into our family. Actually, all these years, some 5 years now, despite our initial (mostly psychological) difficulties, we have always accepted her. She said that she was 12 when she first felt she was mentally a woman although physically a man.

In fact, this is one of the biggest difficulties for Ratna and me. We took some years to get used to addressing Chai Leng as “she,” “her” and so on—she persistently insists on this. The good thing is that she has a strong and independent personality, which gives Ratna and me quick, easy and full confidence in accepting her as she is.

### **Estrogen**

One of the first things we did together was to see a psychiatrist specializing in gender identity about her physical and mental health. The psychiatrist prescribed a regime of estrogen (female hormones; British spelling, oestrogen) that would help balance up her hormones to overcome depressive episodes caused by gender dysphoria (discomfort or distress arising in one whose gender identity differs from one’s sex assigned at birth). In fact, after taking the prescribed estrogen, she felt very much more “normal,” that is, without the depressive spells.

As an individual, Chai Leng is a person of great talents of both sides of the brain, so to speak. She has not only completed a course in Game Design and Development, but also enjoys putting together her own high-powered computers, and enjoys doing pixel art, even selling them.

### **Diverse tastes and talents**

Besides this technical penchant, she also has culinary interests and abilities, ranging from Japanese, Korean to Italian dishes. She makes deliciously hot som-tam (Thai papaya salad) and her home-made pizzas are better than any commercial ones we had tasted (Canadian, Domino’s or Pizza Hut).

We were delighted to know of the Gender Identity Clinic in the National Institute of Mental Health, and consulted a specialist there. She complimented us on being a very supportive family, and said that not all trans people (short for transgender individuals) and families are so fortunate. Her psychological evaluation confirmed, in layman language, that she has a “woman’s brain” in a man’s body.

### **Closeness**

On a family level, Chai Leng is very close to her younger brother, Chai Seng. In fact, I can recall only once when they actually had a loud quarrel with one another many years back. It’s remarkable how friendly and supportive they are of one another. Coming to think of it, I

recall being just as close with my late elder brother: despite being painfully separated by different religions, we had always been otherwise close and supportive of one another.

In Chai Leng's case, understandably, she has an interest in women's clothes and gear (such as women's hats). In fact, her clothing taste may be said to simple yet refined as far as women go. In such women's matters, she is naturally closer to the other woman in my life, that is, my wife, her mother, Ratna.

### **Early Buddhist teachings**

In Buddhism, the suttas (early Buddhist texts) speak of "femaleness" (itth'atta) and "maleness" (puris'atta), such as in the Saññoga Sutta (A 7.48/4:57-49), SD 8.7. The phrase, itth'atta, for example, consists of itthi, "woman, female" + atta, "self." but here has the sense of "mind"; hence, we have "femaleness, femininity." Similarly, puris'atta is purisa, "man, male" + atta, "-ness," meaning "maleness, masculinity." Sexuality, in other words, is a mental quality.

Only in later Buddhist scholastics, Abhidhamma, is sexuality—femininity and masculinity—seen as "material" or "physical" qualities, that is, as "sexual phenomena" (bhava,rūpa) as items 14 and 15 of the 18 "concretely produced form" (nipphanna,rūpa) [SD 17.2a Table 10]. But this is by way of an analysis of matter (rūpa), without affecting the sutta teaching that sexuality is basically a mental or psychological state. In other words, early Buddhism accepts that there are both a bodily and brain aspect(s) of sexuality, and a mental or psychological aspect of sexuality.

### **Gender dysphoria**

Gender dysphoria—the discomfort or distress we feel when our gender identity differs from our sex assigned at our birth—attended by depression, etc, is real and painful. When this suffering is further burdened by rejection from loved ones and others, it can simply be unbearable. This difficulty is inborn, not a choice we make. We can and must change our attitude towards the sufferings of others. Their dysphoria and gender identity are not choices they can make.



The idea of writing this reflection is not only to openly show our full acceptance of our daughter, but also show our support, social and spiritual, to others who are in a similar situation. We are fortunate to be educated in a faith that is profoundly human--centred and steeped in unconditional love.

### **Unconditional love**

Our loved ones should be accepted for who they are in a positive way. As parents, siblings, relatives and colleagues, we should educate ourselves in this delicate matter of humanity and health. We can start by googling "Trans-

gender” and go from there. June is Pride Month, and this a good time for us to come out in support of the happiness of those whom we love and care about.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

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