



# Gay Buddhist Fellowship

**The Gay Buddhist Fellowship supports Buddhist practice in the gay mens' community. It is a forum that brings together the diverse Buddhist traditions to address the spiritual concerns of gay men in the Bay Area, the United States, and the world. GBF's mission includes cultivating a social environment that is inclusive and caring.**

## Looking in the Mirror

*by Kevin Berrill*

In July, my partner Chuck and I took part in a nine day Vipassana retreat at the Insight Meditation Society (IMS), a beautiful and friendly Buddhist retreat center in Barre, Massachusetts. I had been to IMS before, and this retreat was very similar to the others, consisting of intervals of sitting and walking meditation from dawn till bedtime. Each evening we listened to a talk given by one of three dharma teachers. We also met periodically in small groups that were facilitated by a teacher. The food was delicious and varied. Our rooms were monastically simple; mine looked up a steep hillside of ferns and fragrant pine trees. The clean, cool, dry air was a welcome relief from the oppressive heat and humidity of Washington, DC, where we live together.

As I walked the lovely grounds of IMS on that first evening, I felt relieved to be there again, and slightly nervous about how my experience of the retreat would unfold. The quiet and peace of the place offered the possibility of serenity, and I did have my serene moments. There were also plenty of moments when my mind was like a noisy theme park. At those times, I felt as if I were lost in a funhouse, wandering through a gallery of mirrors. I took a look in those mirrors and did my best to make friends with whom I saw.

Upon our arrival at IMS, we were assigned a daily "yogi job." On previous retreats, I had washed pots or run the dishwasher. When I was asked to water and tend to the plants, I thought, "Perfect!" I pictured myself a beacon of serenity, a Buddhist Martha Stewart, gliding through the place with my watering can, exquisitely mindful, full of ease and joy.

That might have been the case, were I not still caught up in some very old habits around work: a struggle with perfectionism, a tendency to over-commit my time, a difficulty pacing work, a fear of making mistakes and being criticized, and a habit of merging with what I do. So, I found myself relating to my assignment as if it were some new high-powered Washington job. Since I knew next to nothing about plants, I read carefully the laminated care instructions in each pot. Sometimes, I was so focused on the instructions, I never even stopped to notice the plants. That provoked a little judgement; and I was unnerved to discover that some plants didn't come with care instructions. Fear. The housekeeper was nowhere around; I didn't know what to do. Doubt. I wondered: Was I over watering? Was I under watering? Was I killing a plant and not knowing it? I accidentally "pruned" several healthy branches off a Wandering Jew. Would I be rebuked? Sent off to wash pots? It was soon

## **What to do With Hurt Feelings**

*by David Richo, PhD*

**We humans have a long history of being mean to one another. In the face of this unfortunate fact, the ego has a repertory ready to be employed: attack in a vengeful way or withdraw in an alienating way. What is the alternative adult spiritual response when someone hurts your feelings, acts inconsiderately toward you, or is downright mean to you?—Practice loving kindness. As you live in accord with standards that transcend your ego's habitual strategies of fight and flight, you evolve.**

**Here is what the defense-less and resource-full alternative might look like:**

**I let myself feel this hurt fully without any defense against it.**

**I vow not to retaliate.**

**I declare directly to the person the impact of his/her behavior on me without blaming or shaming.**

**I accept the fact of occasional inconsiderateness or meanness as a given of the human condition.**

**I am determined not to be mean myself.**

*(continued on next page)*

evident that there wasn't enough time during the 45 minute work period to water, clean, and prune the plants, and also finish my other duties. I began to rush, or at least to feel rushed. Stories formed in my head: I have no real sensitivity for plants; I'm not really "good" with plants; and so on.

I was making a hell out of heaven. This sweet, simple job became overlaid with fear and judgement and stories. Even as this drama was unfolding, I knew it was less about the plants than about my old conditioning. I also knew that none of these feelings was out of place: this yogi job was the perfect context for these feelings to unfold. This retreat, I reminded myself, was not about transcending what is difficult but having the spaciousness to be with it fully. Here was a perfect opportunity to bring curiosity and awareness to a new situation where I don't know all the rules, and where it is likely that I will make mistakes. Here, too, was a chance to attend to grasping and confusion with compassion and sensitivity. (Near the end of the retreat, I was surprised and amused by a note from the IMS housekeeper. It began: "Blessings for your exquisite care of our plants...")

I handled sitting and walking meditation in much the same way I tended the plants. My efforts to stay present in the moment were often a struggle. As I tried to concentrate, the muscles of my mouth, forehead and jaw tightened. As I investigated these feelings and sensations, I realized that my struggle was fueled by a subtle but powerful desire to improve myself. Without being aware of it, I was using meditation as a tool to get somewhere, to get myself fixed, to become—more effective, productive, smarter, better. I also realized that if practice hinges on becoming rather than being, then there is an agenda outside the present moment, where the practice is grounded. Because expectation kept me leaning forward into the future rather than resting in the present, there was always the underlying question of whether I would get what I desired. Caught between wanting and fear-of-not-getting, struggle was inevitable.

The striving in my practice mirrors my outer life. Ever since adolescence, I have been preoccupied with improving myself: I practiced the softball throw to avoid humiliation in gym, went to therapy to become heterosexual, and read self-help books on how to relax. More recently, I pushed myself too hard in a rewarding, insane, ten year stint as an organizer with a national gay civil rights organization. Exhausted and in poor health, I left that work a few years ago for a less demanding and inspiring job, where I remain to this day. Although I am better able to care for myself, I am no longer as appreciated, useful, "important," or visible in the media. I'm not particularly interested in returning to the adrenaline highs of professional activism; but I still yearn for meaningful and challenging work that will also permit me to have a balanced, healthy life. Although this desire is reasonable and wholesome, sometimes it is so strong that it clouds my openness to what is good and true in the present.

During a talk at the retreat, one teacher distinguished between aspiration and intentional planning, on the one hand, and preoccupation on the

