



Newsletter October 1998

Gay Buddhist Fellowship

The Gay Buddhist Fellowship supports Buddhist practice in the gay men's 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.

The Positive Value Of the Negative Precepts

By Roger Corless

Transcribed from a Dharma talk given at the July 12, 1998 GBF sitting.

The Precepts I want to talk about are the five so-called grave Precepts. They are expressed in the negative, yet Thich Nhat Hanh calls them the Five Wonderful Precepts. In my experience of GBF over the years, there has been sort of a dancing around these Precepts. Maybe partly because this is San Francisco, where nobody can tell anyone anything. "I've got to do it my way, thank you" we say. If anybody tells us not to do something, that's exactly what we are going to do. Also, many of us come out of abusive religious or family situations as children. So when we come up against the basic Precepts of the Buddhist tradition and find that they are expressed in the negative, we think "Well, that's the end of that". We're going to do something else, and look for some other way to practice the Buddhist tradition.

I would like to reframe the Precepts so that we can see something worthwhile about them, even as, or just because, they are expressed in the negative. I don't wish to rewrite them in the positive. This is not as easy as it sounds. I've asked my students at Duke to discuss the positive value of the negative Precepts, and practically no one has got it. They were disappointed in the grade when they got their papers back, because most of them had merely rewritten the Precepts in the positive. They had difficulty seeing that there is a positive value in saying "No".

Since some of you may not be too familiar with the Precepts, I will go through them briefly. I will first chant them, but, not in English. I'm sure, as I tell my students at Duke, that the Buddha would have spoken English if he could have, but he couldn't, it hadn't been invented yet. So, we have to study them in Pali and then make an attempt to translate them into English. The Precepts are commonly recited at the beginning of traditional Buddhist services, just after reciting the Triple Refuge—something else we haven't had the tradition of doing at GBF.

GBF Committees

We always want and need interested participants, so please, JOIN IN! Call the contact person on the committee, or talk to him (or anyone on that committee) at a GBF sitting or event. This is a great practice opportunity!

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They go like this:

Panatipata veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami.

Adinnadana veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami.

Kamesu micchacara veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami.

Musavada veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami.

Surameraya-majjapamadatthana veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami.

That's in the Pali tradition, as used in Theravada Buddhism (the form of Buddhism dominant in Southeast Asia). The Sanskrit form is not used because there is no continuing tradition in Sanskrit, but Tibetan and Chinese translations are used. The heart of them is the repeated phrase about "undertaking the rule of training", that is, the sikkha (shiksha in Sanskrit), a word we often translate into English as practice. Shiksha means learning how to do something, like learning how to drive a car, or learning how to live. It's not just learning information. So, in the Precepts we say that we undertake the rule of training, or rule of practice, to refrain from (this is where the negative comes in)—and then we have the list of five. In English, then, they go something like this:

I undertake the rule of training to refrain from harming living beings.

I undertake the rule of training to refrain from taking that which is not offered (i.e., stealing).

I undertake the rule of training to abstain from sexual misconduct.

I undertake the rule of training to abstain from false speech (especially, but not only, lying).

I undertake the rule of training to abstain from alcohol.

Each of these has extensive commentaries, and I think the commentaries by Thich Nhat Hanh, entitled For a Future to be Possible (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1993) in which, as I have said, he calls them the Five Wonderful Precepts, would be a good place to do further reading. (Professors are only as good as their bibliography, you know, so I have to give you further reading.) And then also, there is a book called The Mind of Clover (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), which is largely a discussion of the Precepts, written by Bob Aitken, the Roshi who until recently was in charge of the Diamond Sangha in Honolulu, and one of the best known teachers of Zen Buddhism in the West.

The foundation of them all is the first one which is the precept not to harm living beings. Now we should realize at once this is impossible, that as long as we're living in samsara (cyclic existence), we are going to harm living beings. Somehow it seems that if Caucasians become Buddhists in the West, they have to become vegetarian. They have to take their shoes off, be vegetarian, and sit on a cushion. That must be Buddhist, they think. Of course, it's incidental. And actually, only the Chinese Buddhists are traditionally vegetarian. Other kinds of Buddhist are sometimes

