

*Newsletter  
August 1999*

# 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.***

## **Transcending Autobiography**

*by Jim Wilson*

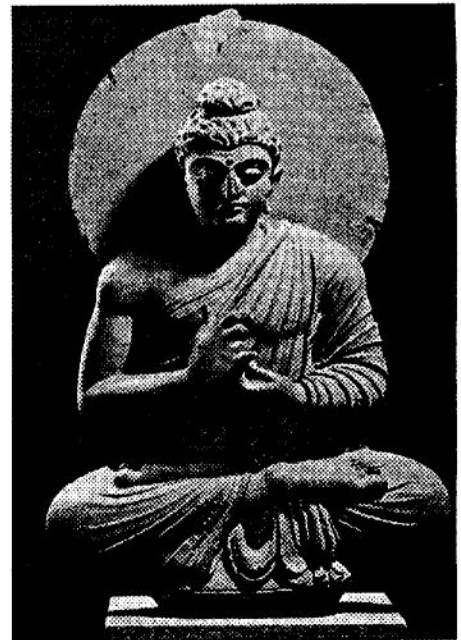
During the years of my growing up, I remember vividly the international tensions focused on the border between East and West Germany. Great armies stood poised, ready to destroy each other—ready to destroy all of us—to maintain the reality of that border.

Then conditions changed, the Soviet Union collapsed, the Berlin Wall fell, and the border disappeared. Where did that border come from, and where did it go to?

The tendency would be to respond to such a question historically, to point out that at the end of World War II, the allies divided Germany into spheres of influence, etc. But this does not really answer the question. The border between East and West Germany arose from the mind of humanity; it had no other existence other than that dependent upon the mind.

To make this clear: consider that birds did not understand this border, the wind did not understand this border, only humans understood this border. Where did this border come from? From the mind. Where did it go to? It vanished when humans no longer wanted to maintain that division.

Much more tenacious than borders between nations are divisions between humanity expressed as sexual divisions. The divisions between male and female, and between straight and Gay seem to reflect basic structures of our biology. And the tensions surrounding maintaining these divisions bear a remarkable similarity to the tensions surrounding the maintenance of borders between nations. During the years of my growing up, I remember vividly becoming aware of the hostility and violence that those who violated the strictures of sexual divisions would receive. Just as someone who attempted to cross the border between East and West Germany would run the risk of being on the receiving end of great, even life-threatening,





## Why Do Gay Men Practice Together?

by Alan Oliver,  
*Gay Men's Buddhist Sangha*

**Many people have asked why we believe it is important for Gay men to practice together. There are many other Buddhist centers and traditions in the world, so why create a separate practice environment for Gay men? This is a healthy question which raises important issues of dualism, separatism, and interdependence. I believe the following seven reasons help to explain why we choose to practice together.**

**1. Affinity groups with similar interests, backgrounds, or visions have been a common model for people to create meaning in their lives. By knowing on multiple levels what your fellow practitioners have experienced, by sharing common life experiences, you can have a powerful base of understanding. Women's groups, African-American groups, and Jewish groups are just three types of affinity groups that have proved worthwhile and successful.**

**2. When we practice together, we have the opportunity to directly apply Buddhist principles to**  
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hostility, so also those who cross the borders of sexual divisions in our culture similarly run the risk of being on the receiving end of great, even life-threatening, hostility.

The tendency is to explain the origins of these sexual divisions historically, to explain that as Western culture developed under certain conditions, there arose certain views regarding sexual desire and its proper expression. But this does not explain the situation. These divisions, just like the divisions between countries, come from the mind; they have no reality other than that given to them by the mind.

The First Noble Truth of the Buddha, the Awakened One, is the truth of suffering, that all people are in a state of suffering. When confronted with our own suffering, our own anxiety, our own anguish, the tendency is to try to explain the suffering in personal historical terms, through our autobiography. I suffer because of my less than perfect relationship to my parents, or I suffer because of certain traumas in my life, or I suffer due to the social oppression of who I am. This is the basis of therapy. The view is that by becoming clear about my autobiography, I will in some sense settle, or at least understand, the conditions and tensions in my life.

The Buddha had a different sense of the meaning of suffering. The Buddha understood suffering as a universal condition. The Second Noble Truth says that this suffering has a cause—primarily clinging. Clinging to our beliefs, clinging to any stasis, causes suffering because everything constantly changes. From this perspective, suffering arises due to a habit of mind, a very tenacious and strong habit of mind, the habit of mind which understands things as having a fixed, unchanging nature when in fact everything is subject to change and transformation.

Some people draw the implication here that even if all forms of institutionalized social oppression were eliminated, people would still experience suffering. I look at it in this way: institutionalized oppression, war, hostilities, arise from the habit of mind that attempts to impose upon fluid phenomena a fixed nature. This attempt is doomed to failure, but the habit and desire to have such a fixed nature remains very strong. This explains the tenacity with which humans engage in oppression and war. Because the root cause of such suffering remains, namely, the clinging habit of mind, putting an end to a particular war does not bring an end to war as such, and ending a particular oppression does not end the inclination to oppress.

For these reasons I have come to believe that peace among all peoples can only happen on the basis of a spiritual awakening. By "spiritual awakening" I mean simply the realization that all of us have more in common than what divides us. And that what humanity has in common constitutes the more important part of us than what separates us.

Personally, this was a very difficult realization for me. As a young man I participated in the civil rights movement. There followed years of activism in the anti-war movement during the Viet Nam War, including draft resistance. Years later I became involved in various Gay activist causes. After all these years I came to the painful realization that oppression teaches oppression, and that often the oppressed want to end oppression so that they can have an opportunity to oppress, and that many people involved in the anti-war movement wanted to end that war for ideological reasons, but not because they wanted to end war.

