



Newsletter
February 2000

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.



Chortens near Muktinath, Nepal

The Four Immeasurables

Part One of a Dharma Talk by Jim Wilson, Recorded June 13, 1999

I'd like to talk today about a set of Buddhist practices which are often referred to as the Four Immeasurables. I'd like to give an overview of them. They form a core practice, or a set of core practices, in many Buddhist traditions.

They're also called the Four Bramaviharas, which means the abode of the Gods. That is, that these sets of practices will open the mind and heart into a very expansive state. The implication is that they will have the capacity to transform you in an almost cosmic way. But it takes some persistence—doesn't happen overnight.

The four traditional immeasurables are Compassion, Love, Joy, and Equanimity. They are rooted in a sutra called the Metta Sutra. It's a very short sutra. In that sutra, the Buddha explains that if you wish to enter the peace of nirvana, the way to do so is to treat all living beings like a mother treats her only child. And this is true whether you're a male or a female. That practice is the golden road to enlightenment.

What the Buddha is talking about in that sutra is opening oneself up to the relationship to all of existence; establishing oneself in relationship to all of existence. The central insight of the Buddha was the interdependence of all

GBF Committees

We always welcome and need interested participants, so please, JOIN US! 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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Call 415.974.9878

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The following committees are currently without chairs:

Development Committee
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If you are interested in volunteering, please contact us at 415.974.9878.

things. Everything exists interdependently; nothing exists separately. But we have the habit of mind that views things as if they do exist on their own, separately. So how do you open yourself up to the reality of the interdependence of all things?

There's a group of Buddhist practices which focus on analysis as the key to comprehending the interdependence. This form of thinking is to examine things very closely, and try and find something about any existing thing which exists separately. You can do that with any object. A good object is yourself [laughs]. If you examine carefully any object and you try and find what about that object exists separately, you can't find anything there that exists separately. Not that it doesn't exist, but you can't find anything about it which exists separately. That approach is the basis of Buddhist analysis and the many different systems of analysis which Buddhism has developed.

There's an interesting thing that happens here, and that is that because such analysis is an intellectual process, it establishes the discursive consciousness as the base for realizing interconnectedness. But the discursive consciousness separates things out—that's its job. The discriminative consciousness categorizes things, separates things out from each other. The word "discrimination" means "to pull out, to separate out."

Something really interesting happens when the intellectual consciousness latches on to the idea of interdependence. It separates people into those who understand that reality and those who don't [laughs]. Because the discursive or discriminatory consciousness can't help it, that's what it does. That's what it does with any kind of material that it's given.

Isn't that interesting? You could actually meet many people like this; you know, like "Everything's interdependent, and those assholes don't understand that!" [laughs]. That's how the discriminative consciousness works.

The practices of the Four Immeasurables, however, are practices aimed at heart wisdom, the wisdom of the heart. That's why you have to take a step beyond intellectual understanding, into a meditative kind of practice, because it is the heart wisdom which truly understands the interconnectedness of all things. That is where the wisdom of compassion, love, equanimity, and the comprehension of interconnectedness really arises.

The problem is that we don't recognize when that wisdom is present. So the first thing is to be able to recognize its presence, so that you know when it's there and when it's not there. These practices are done in a progressive way, so that we can become more familiar with their presence, and as our familiarity grows, then we can expand that wisdom, and that understanding of the heart.

What I'm saying is that this kind of wisdom, the wisdom of the heart, can be cultivated. Just like the wisdom of discrimination can be cultivated and expanded upon and built upon, the wisdom of the heart can also be cultivated and developed. For most of us in this culture, heart wisdom is highly atrophied, because you don't get any rewards for it [laughs]. It's nascent there, and you always start developing this wisdom from a place that spontaneously appears.

