



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.

Generating Compassion: The Practice of Tonglen

Michael P. McManus, a former bodyguard/interpreter for General Colin Powell, has been a practicing Buddhist for 16 years. A former monk with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, McManus is currently at Stanford University pursuing a Ph.D. in Buddhist Psychology. He spoke to GBF on April 4, 2000.

Good morning – almost afternoon here. I want to thank each of you for coming up. This is my first chance to get to speak to everybody here, and it's good to see so many people.

A bit of background on myself. I started studying Buddhism back in 1984 when I was in high school. I was taking some honors courses my senior year at high school at a university near where I was living. Afterwards I would speak with the philosophy and psychology students just about life, and they said, "Oh, you have a very Buddhist outlook on life. Are you Buddhist?" I said, "Actually, I'm Catholic." The only view of Buddhism I had at that time was the little fat statue and burning incense. Other than that, I had no clue. They said, "Your outlook on life is very Buddhist; you should read some books about it." So I did my own investigation and said, "Well, this Buddha guy had it on. This is the way I think; this is quite interesting." Then after graduation from high school, I went into the military and was stationed in Germany, where I had the opportunity, living about half an hour from the French border, to go into Dordogne, France, where two Tibetan lamas were teaching. At the time, I just thought they were two really cool lamas. One was Dudre Rinpoche; the other was Dicho Tense Rinpoche. (Laughter). Later I found that they're probably two of the greatest lamas of our century. To me, they were just really cool teachers that I got to learn a lot from. And so I had my practices which they gave me to do, and I just followed that through.

In 1996, I was teaching in Thailand, and after my year contract was up, I just had a feeling that I should go to India to see the Dalai Lama and see if I could get some meditation instruction or something. When I was there, the next thing I knew, I had made the choice to become a monk. And people say, "Oh, that's such a big life-changing choice! Did you really have to think about?" I said, "No. It was like waking up and putting on a pair of underwear. It was that routine of a choice that I made." To make a long story short, the next thing I realized, I was in front of the Dalai Lama being ordained as a monk, and stayed that way for just

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under four years. I just recently disrobed, in November, for a couple of different reasons: to pursue my Ph.D. at Stanford in Buddhist Psychology, and to pursue a relationship. Being a monk is not really conducive for that. There are other stories about that.

The thing I'd like to talk about today is the practice of Tonglen. Tonglen is the Tibetan word for giving and receiving. I'm going to backtrack a little bit. I'm not sure what tradition everyone here is coming from. I guess it's all the same Buddha.

GBF: All different traditions.

MM: Good. The tradition I'm in is the Tibetan tradition of Vajrayana which has its basis, its foundation on – I don't want to use the term Hinayana because that's such a pejorative, but if I say Theravada, that limits, because there are 22 schools in the Hinayana, so I don't know if there's a better word that you would want to use for that,

but Vajrayana has a basis in the Hinayana and the Mahayana teachings. Without that foundation, you don't have what makes up the Vajrayana. It includes all traditions, all schools of thought leading up to what's being taught in the Tibetan tradition.

The practice of Tonglen, of giving and receiving, is actually probably one of the most profound practices that you can do for yourself and for others. I'll get into the specifics of how to do the practice, but the first thing that you need to generate for this practice is the compassion within yourself for yourself. This is, I guess, coming into the dualistic way of thinking, separating yourself from another person, when in actuality, if you kind of go with the premise of equanimity, thinking that you are equal to the person sitting next to you, whether it be the Dalai Lama, the King of Thailand, or the guy who sweeps, you are no different from them, and they're not different from you: we're all on the same level.

With that idea, that thought, generating that compassion in your thought, seeing that "Okay, we're all in the same boat, we all suffer, we all want happiness, we all want to help others have happiness and not to cause others suffering," to have that conscious thought in your mind and in your heart – that's the seed that needs to be planted, that will start to grow, once you think it more and more. It's easy to have compassion for those that we love – our family members, our loved ones, and then our friends – and spreading out compassion that way is a good way to start, to generate from a loved one. You can use your mother, for example, or a grandparent, somebody that you had a real close connection to that you love. Starting with that one person, just generate that loving kindness, that compassion, that understanding, that care. That's the important thing that opens up your heart, to be able to do it for others, and then branch out from there. Branch out to your friends, people that you want to have an acquaintance with, that you don't know so well. That's maybe a little tough, but once you make the connection, you can see how interdependent everyone is. Then branch it out from there, branch it out to people you don't know, strangers you see walking down the street, someone you maybe have an indifference to, neither your friend nor someone you dislike. Then take even a step further, branching that compassion out to people you perceive as your enemy, people that you don't particularly get along with, people you don't like – that's the challenge. Some people just like to bite that one right off at the beginning and go into that, which is good, a true test of how much compassion you can open in your heart and your mind for people.

The funny thing is with people who you perceive as your enemy – I use the word perceive because in reality they're not your enemy, just as someone who's your friend or loved one – it's just all based on perception, and a choice of

