



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.

Constructing the Body Of the Buddha from a Single Leaf of Grass:

Mindfulness and Work

by Jeffrey Schneider

Jeffrey Schneider, the director of the San Francisco Zen Center's facility on Page Street, has been practicing in the Zen tradition since 1978. He spoke to us on February 14th.

In early December of this year I was invited to go to the Austin, Texas Zen Center where a friend of mine is the priest, and they were having their first *sesshin*. *Sesshin* is a seven-day meditation intensive, and the December one ends on the day we celebrate the traditional anniversary of the Buddha's enlightenment, so this is a big deal. I was invited to go down there to help them put together their first *sesshin* and to be the head cook, which actually turned out to be the only cook. But, in the Soto Zen tradition, work is a very intrinsic part of our practice. We don't make a great deal of separation between work or our daily lives and our more formal meditation practice. So, in order to prepare for this job, although I have cooked for many *sesshins*, I decided to reread the *Tenzo Kyokun*. The *Tenzo Kyokun* was written by Dogen Zenji (Zen Master Dogen). Dogen Zenji was a Japanese monk who lived in the 13th century who traveled to China, studied there, and brought with him to Japan the Soto Zen tradition, from which I come. He wrote extensively on practice and Buddhism, and one of the things he wrote was called the *Tenzo Kyokun*, which means, *Instructions for the Head Cook*. The *tenzo* was the head cook. So I was invited to Austin to be the head cook, the *tenzo*. In order to prepare myself – it's considered a teaching position, by the way, sort of the same as the head of the meditation hall – so in order to prepare myself, I reread the admonitions that Dogen had written for us almost 800 years ago.

And I found that they were so pertinent to all areas of my practice that I wanted to use this text to talk about what Dogen said. This is not about meditation per se; it's about taking the mind of meditation, that we develop in our meditation, into the rest of our lives. So it's very practical in some ways, for those of us – all of us, actually – who live in the world, and not just perhaps in a mountain monastery someplace. So I'm just going to pick out little things here and there from the text, read them to you, and give you my take on them.

He says, "Baoning Renyong said, 'Use the property and possessions of the community as carefully as if they were your own eyes.' The *tenzo* should handle all food he receives with respect, as if it were to be used in a meal for the Emperor. Cooked and uncooked food must be handled in the same manner." I'm told, though I haven't read it myself, that in the rule of St. Benedict, which is one of the earliest writings governing Christian monasticism, St. Benedict says that the pots and pans in the kitchen are to be handled with the same respect as the holy utensils on the altar which receives the body and the blood of Christ. And, you know, in our meal ritual, in the Zen tradition, we have a line in the chant that talks about

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the purity of the three wheels, of giver, receiver and gift. So the gift is that which intimately binds the giver and the receiver. Just as the perception is what binds the subject and the object. It's all one event. So when Dogen is talking about handling the teacups, the property of the community, he's talking about the essential oneness – that's not the word I want actually – *connectedness* that binds the object and subject through the act of perception. That's one way of looking at it. This is a way of looking at the world which allows the world to be *subject*, as opposed to being divided into the isolated subject relating to isolated objects. So there's a continuity in subject and object here as seen as points on the continuum rather than as separate entities or separate events. And this is what encourages us, this understanding, this way of looking at it, at the world and ourselves and our place in the world. This is what encourages us to practice gratitude and respect. These are the two essential parts of our practice, gratitude and respect, and they come together in a bow.

Further on in the text, Dogen Zenji writes, "Both day and night, allow all things to come into and reside within your mind. Allow your mind and all things to function together as a whole." Let's read that again: "Both day and night, allow all things to come into and reside within your mind. Allow your mind and all things to function together as a whole." So this is basically the same thing. What he's saying here is to allow, to let go, to get out of our own way, so we don't impede the world, and not impeding the world means, to the best of our ability, not to place our expectations, our demands, our interpretations on things, but to allow each thing, each person to be as it or he or she is, to acknowledge the essential continuity between self and other. He also says, "When making soup with ordinary greens [because these are the instructions for the head cook], do not be carried away by feelings of dislike for them [ordinary greens] nor regard them lightly; neither jump for joy simply because you have been given ingredients of superior quality to make a special dish. By the same token, do not indulge in a meal because of its particularly good taste. There is no reason to feel an aversion towards an ordinary one. Do not be

negligent or careless just because the materials seem plain and hesitate to work more diligently with materials of a superior quality. Your attitude toward things should not be contingent on their quality. A person who is influenced by the quality of a thing, or who changes his speech or manner according to the appearance or position of the person he meets, is not a man working in the way."

So what he's talking about here is value, how we value things. In the world normally as we go through our lives, we value things, some of them somewhat more highly and some of them somewhat less highly. A diamond is more valuable I suppose than a lump of coal, or the president of the university is more valuable than a street person, something like that. But what he's inviting us to do here, what he says is that a person practicing the way is somebody who sees absolute value in each thing and in each person, and of course absolute value is the same as no value at all. If we place each thing on a footing of absolute value, each thing is treated equally. For a short time I studied formal Japanese tea ceremony, and what they tell you is that when you're making tea, sometimes you go in and out of the tearoom, and you carry things in and out of the tearoom. One of the things you carry is a large container that has the waste water in it. And it can be kind of heavy. Or you carry a small teacup. And the instructions are to carry each thing as though it weighed the same. So we give ourselves equally to each thing, to each person.

This is not so easy. It goes against everything we know and everything that is ingrained in us, but this is where meditation comes. In meditation, we're given the opportunity, if we choose to take it, to treat each thing as though it had absolute value – each thought, each emotion, each part of our body, and as we develop this minded meditation, as we carry it into our everyday lives, we are allowed, if we choose, to experiment with this. So the meditation hall, this room, we can think of as a laboratory. By extension, we can think of our lives as a laboratory. Meditation is not about something other than this body and this mind. It's about me; it's about you; it's about using the body and mind as an experiment to find out what works.

