



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.

On Chanting as a Buddhist Meditation Practice

by Jim Wilson

It has been my observation that Americans seem to be attracted to those styles of Buddhist meditation that take the form of silence and stillness. These include Vipassana, Zen, Dzog Chen, and other forms of meditative cultivation that center on sitting quietly and in stillness. One then turns the mind inward to enter into the specific practice. Sometimes I think that the attraction to these particular types of Buddhist meditation is due to the extremely busy and active lives that we lead. Silent and still meditations offer an antidote to the active distraction of so much of our lives.

The dominant form of Buddhist meditation in East Asia and Tibet, however, is some form of chanting. (I am not familiar enough with the Theravada countries to know if chanting meditation is used there.) This kind of meditation is much more widespread, and engaged in by far more people, than the forms of silent meditation. For example, the largest school of Buddhism in China, Korea, Vietnam and Japan is Pure Land Buddhism. The central practice of this form of Buddhism is chanting. In Japan, some of the largest traditions are those schools based on the teachings of Nichiren. Once again, the central practice of this tradition is chanting.

By chanting I mean the repetition of a short phrase, usually the name of a Bodhisattva or a mantra, most often done collectively, and having the form of a simple melody, or sometimes sung on a single tone. The simplicity of the melody allows for group participation; no one has to have a developed sense of musicianship in order to participate. The most widespread examples of chanting are:

"Namu Kwan Shih Yin Pu Sah" — Kwan Yin is a Bodhisattva representing infinite compassion. Kwan Yin is by far the most widespread and popular Buddhist deity. The ritual chanting of the name of this Bodhisattva is the common form of both worship and

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!

Steering Committee

Jack Busby

Justin Hecht

David Holmes

Michael Langdon

Lee Robbins

Clint Seiter

Jim Stewart

Peter Washburn

Newsletter

Michael Langdon, Editor

Roger Corless, Contributing Editor

Jim Stewart, Transcriber

Robin Levitt, Mailing List

Newsletter Mailing Party

Jack Busby

Hamilton House

Clint Seiter, Contact
415.386.3088

Website

Joe Kukulka
Contact
webmaster@gaybuddhist.org

Sunday Sitting Facilitators

Justin Hecht, Contact
415.673.0283

meditation that people participate in. My initial contact with Buddhism was a chanting retreat during which the participants chanted the name of Kwan Yin (in Korean, "Kwaseum Bosal") for about 12 hours a day.

"Namu Amida Butsu" — This is a Pure Land invocation to the Buddha Amitabha, the Buddha of infinite Light and Life. Practitioners of Pure Land Buddhism chant the name of Amitabha in order to attain rebirth in the Pure Land which Amitabha has emanated from his vast store of merit gained over countless lifetimes of altruistic practice.

"Om Mani Padme Hum" — The most widespread mantra chanted in Tibetan forms of Buddhism. It is considered a mantra of Avolokiteshvara. Kwan Yin is the Chinese pronunciation of Avolokiteshvara, so there is a connection between this practice and the first listed. The mantra is also an invocation to Buddha nature.

Chanting as a meditative practice has great efficacy. First, chanting unites body, breath, and mind into a single activity. This proves a very effective means for developing concentration, onepointedness of mind. Other forms of concentration meditation are more difficult because the mind tends to wander easily from the object of concentration. In chanting, however, because body, breath, and mind are all united on a single activity, the development of concentration happens rapidly and with less effort.

Chanting unites aspects of the mind which normally do not function together. The musical and discursive functions of the mind do not normally work together. However, when we chant we simultaneously engage the discursive function of the mind by chanting words and the musical, rhythmic functions of the mind through giving voice to a simple musical phrase or melody. The result is an energizing of the mind and often a feeling of a slightly altered state of consciousness. My teacher used to observe that at chanting retreats, at the end of the evening, people had a great deal of energy and would stay up for many hours. During meditation/zazen retreats, at the end of the day, people often felt very tired and most would go straight to sleep.

Chanting meditation gives the mind an object of focus and attention that is benign. When one is chanting the name of a Buddha or Bodhisattva, the mind becomes more aware of the virtues associated with that Buddha or Bodhisattva. These virtues include compassion and wisdom. Thus this kind of chanting meditation slowly increases one's awareness of the central Buddhist virtues and inclines one to develop those virtues. In the case of Nichiren practice, the chanting of the name of the Lotus Sutra inclines one to cultivate one's understanding of that sutra. The central teaching of that sutra is that all beings have Buddha Nature. Thus, this form of chanting helps the practitioner to awaken to the worthiness of all

