



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

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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

people and to see all people as a source of wisdom.

Finally, chanting meditation as a social activity helps to unite practitioners and to form a ground for the feeling of a closely-knit sangha. Silent meditation tends to emotionally isolate people from each other; each person is sort of in a cocoon from the other participants. (This is not necessarily a bad thing. I suspect this is one of the attractions of silent forms of meditation.) Chanting in a group is a social activity and engenders a sense of community, that all are involved in practicing together. The sonic object that appears during chanting, the collective voice of the chant, when done as a group practice, is a clear example of the core understanding of Dependent Origination/Interdependent Transformation. The sound of the chant arises due to causes, the people giving voice to the chant. The sound of the chant constantly changes; this also displays the core truth of constant change. Finally, when the chanting ceases, this is a clear display of the truth of impermanence. In this way, chanting practice provides an opportunity for experiencing and comprehending the central truths of the Buddhadharmā.

Personally, I have found chanting practice efficacious. It is my hope that as Buddhism takes root in the west, more and more people will find themselves open to this wonderful form of meditation.

Dear Dharma Daddy:

What Is the Role of Deities in Buddhism?

Dear Dharma Daddy:

I recently saw Himalaya (Eric Valli), a film in which all the characters are Tibetan Buddhists. I was surprised that they frequently mentioned "the gods" and prayed to them, as well as praying to "the Buddhas of the three eras." (Who are they?) Also, a Burmese student of mine, who spent some time as a Buddhist monk, told me that Gautama Buddha is the "main god" in Buddhism. What is the meaning of "god" or "God" in Buddhism? What is the role of prayer in Buddhism? To whom do Buddhists pray? Who do they believe bears their prayers?

-Michael Langdon, Oakland

Dear Michael:

Simply put, there are gods in Buddhism, but they are not like the God of the Bible or the Qur'an. They are more like powerful, technologically advanced beings on other planets who may occasionally visit earth in their UFOs.

The Buddhist universe is very extensive, containing a very large number — some sutras say an infinite number — of worlds and realms of rebirth, inhabited by many different kinds of beings, some anthropomorphic, many not, some with physical bodies, some without — some existing only as colored shapes or mental entities.

Many, though by no means all, of these beings are mentioned in the sutras with names in Pali and Sanskrit, and these names have been translated into the languages of the cultures into which Buddhism has spread. The English word *god* is used as a translation of *deva*. The word *deva* (literally, a being of light) is directly related to the English word *divinity*, but we should beware of thinking that it has the same meaning as the English word. Devas are very long lived, but they are mortal, and they are very powerful, but they are not omnipotent. Since *samsara* (cyclic existence) is beginningless, all beings, including us, have been born as devas (and devis, the female form) many times. But here we are as humans again, so being born as a deva is not such a big deal. There are also beings called *asuras*, who are about as powerful as the devas, but whereas devas are peaceful and calm, asuras are restless and competitive. Asuras are sometimes called, in English, wrathful gods or titans. And, yes, we've all been reborn as asuras many times as well.

If we come from a Christian, Jewish, or Muslim background, it is probably more helpful to think of all these beings as if they were part of a science fiction story than to try to relate them to our ideas of God. Then we can enjoy the