



Gay Buddhist Fellowship

APRIL / MAY 2002 NEWSLETTER

Extraordinary Mind

BY SCOTT HUNT

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
San Francisco Bay Area,
the United States,
and the world.
GBF's mission includes
cultivating a social
environment that is
inclusive and caring.

I didn't prepare a lot of remarks and just thought about what I would like to talk about this morning. I remember years ago seeing a psychiatrist friend of mine. I'd go in and sit down and say, "I don't really have anything to say today." And he'd say, "Oh, no?" It would just sort of come out. What I intend to do is make a few remarks and then let's talk, have a discussion. My teacher's name is His Holiness Mindrolling Trichen Rinpoche. He is considered the highest living yogi in the Tibetan schools. He's very close with the Dalai Lama, and because of his wisdom, I'm able to pass some things on here today.

Okay, so today is Easter or Tax Day, so the obvious topics are Christ rising from the dead, which is what I think is the ultimate symbol of optimism, or Tax Day, which is about a loss of money and impermanence. Two great topics, but I hate talking about money, so let's talk about the idea of Easter. I've actually been writing quite a lot recently about pessimism, and how pessimism has thwarted many of the higher goals of mankind, having peace in our hearts and peace in our communities. Pessimism has become very insidious in that we believe that peace isn't truly possible and in our Buddhist practice we should stop and question whether we believe liberation, the ultimate peace, is possible. I think most of us still harbor things from our Christian past, just from this culture, about prophecies of doom and the innate badness of man. Today let's focus on the other aspects of man: compassion and joy.

For many millions of people around the world today, Christianity is of course the best path and they're celebrating this joyous event. For me personally, Buddhism is the correct path. It is the path, for me, of true liberation. It is a path that is joyous and delightful. And one thing I wanted to say first off this morning: if you're undertaking a practice and you don't feel joy, then you should probably stop. If you find you're viewing the four noble truths, that there is suffering in life, the first noble truth, life is suffering—if you're viewing that from a pessimistic standpoint or if you're feeling sad in your practice or it's too hard or meditation is so hard and sitting is so hard, then stop, because liberation, the Buddhist path, is about joy. →

Scott Hunt has been a student of Tibetan Buddhism for the past 21 years. He leads classes on meditation and Buddhism, and later this year, he will publish a book on peacekeeping. He spoke to GBF on Easter Day of 2001.

I read recently that “a man can’t cry unless he’s seen the face of God.” There’s much to weep for from the standpoint of ordinary mind. We use our ordinary conceptualizations. It’s particularly helpful if you stop doing that and approach your practice with extraordinary mind. I’ve spent about ten weeks together with some of you [in a dharma study class], and at the beginning of each session, we do something called the four transformations. Don’t worry about categoriza-

sudden joy, that sudden lightness. That Buddha nature is the kernel of faith. The last time I was here, we talked about the five spiritual powers, and the first spiritual power is faith. In a study group we had, I thought we would probably skip over that very quickly, but we ended up spending two or three weeks talking about faith, and I’ve realized as I’ve started to give teachings that faith is the hardest thing for us to comprehend, especially in Buddhism. Faith in Chris-

today about where you may be failing to feel that sense of joy and curiosity and wonderment on the path.

I was writing the other day about pessimism and whether even in despair you can feel joy, and it’s often given to us in black or white, that we either feel joyful or we feel suffering. But that doesn’t comport with my life experiences because I’ve been all over the world and have been in refugee camps where children have lost their parents and seen their parents killed

We have limitless possibilities, so there’s no sense pretending that we can predict our future based on our past, but rather open ourselves up with a sense of curiosity, with a sense of fearlessness, and walk into the future with a sense of optimism. That is the Buddhist path.



tions or how many numbers – Buddhism is full of numbers and categories. The point is, when you approach your practice, approach it from an extraordinary perspective. You’re not just a person sitting down in front of a statue of Buddha or sitting in front of some kind of Buddhist text. You are Buddha nature; you are a potential Buddha: you have that within you when you sit down to do your practice. So you have to have an extraordinary view of yourself and why you are approaching your practice first of all. And even your surroundings, though we may see them as four very ordinary walls, the floor and a ceiling—that very place, because of the authenticity of your purpose, the sincerity of your purpose, that place becomes a pure Buddha realm, so you’re transforming your motivation; you’re transforming your surroundings. You even transform your teacher, somebody whose words came from their teacher, all the way back to the Buddha. Transform that person to look past their faults and really try to see the essence of the goodness in their words.

So now, I’d like you to just stop and look within yourself, and raise that awareness of Buddha nature, raise your awareness of that potential to achieve. (Pause). You can feel that

tianity is often obedience; it is often faith in a savior. Buddhism is at first uncomfortable because the faith is in you, in your own potential. There is no savior. Buddha said, “You are your own master. How else could it be?” There’s no one that can change your mind; there’s no one that can get inside you and change the way that you perceive things. All the work must be done by you. It’s very difficult to have faith in ourselves, especially when we have failings and limitations and sorrow. Again, I’m coming back to the point that we need to examine whether we truly have faith in liberation. Have we really experienced our Buddha nature? Do we really believe it’s possible to liberate ourselves?

Last time I was here, I mentioned that when you develop faith and you fail to take any action on the faith, it’s like being in a burning building and seeing the exit but failing to go outside the exit. Somebody said to me that they don’t like that analogy at all because it takes the delight and the wonderment and the curiosity out of Buddhism, and I think he was correct. Buddhism is full of parables, stories that seem a bit heavy-handed and harsh, and I want to keep coming back today to the point that this is really a joyous path. I want to hear from you

and yet continue to play. I’ve stopped by the sides of the roads in India and sat with lepers and had lunch with them. They have no fingers and just stubs for feet and festering wounds, and yet we managed to laugh and share and have a good time together. I’ve met victims who’ve lost their legs when they stepped on land mines in Cambodia, and again, we were able to share and laugh. I guess my point is that it’s within all of us to go back to the Buddha nature and to pull that joy out and to face suffering even when we’re having challenges and adversity and feel that joy.

So let’s talk a little about our conceptions of faith and if you don’t mind, I would like you to raise your hand or just jump in as we’re talking about faith. Last time when I was here I talked about faith and how it is said that it’s hard to meet a teacher in this life that you connect with and it’s harder still to meet the Buddha, but it’s the hardest thing of all to have true faith in the teachings, so we know it doesn’t come easily. The importance is captured in Dilgo Kyentse’s saying that if you have practice without faith in yourself, without true self confidence rightly understood, it’s like sitting in a cave that faces north waiting for the sun to pour in. It just won’t happen. So let’s talk about what proper faith is.

We are trying to position our faith between cynicism and doubt, which we don't want, and blind faith, which we also don't want. If we have blind faith in the teachings or the teacher, we are giving up our Buddha nature; we are giving up our own mastery of our lives and our faculties. So when you read about all the abuses that happened in different sanghas, etc., you're reading about people who have come to the teacher and thought, "He looks a certain way," or "Isn't he

these questions went on and on for a time, and it's said that the Buddha gave no reply whatsoever to the questioner, because the Buddhas don't waste words on unnecessary things.

There's also another story of the fourteen unanswered questions, in which a disciple was asking Buddha all these questions and Buddha picked up a handful of leaves and said, "Now tell me, are there more leaves in my hand or more leaves on the tree?" And the disciple said, "Of course, there are

such an experience, but we rather are pretty proud of ourselves for having it at one time and then we recreate all these stories, and have all these wonderful Buddhist things around us.

Scientists often become very mired in their egos by questioning the validity of everything. "Until I can measure it, and see it, I don't believe that it's true." And this is another egocentric view that we have to let go of.

Okay, we've talked about the kinds of wrong faith. So what is the proper



exotic, from the East," or "Doesn't he have interesting command of different foreign words?" They forget that they are the object of their own veneration, that they are the Buddha nature, that they're trying to become the Buddha, and that the teacher is only a teacher because the student says so. "You teach me now. You're my teacher." So we can't have blind faith in anything. We have to have proper investigation. The Dalai Lama tells us over and over again, "Even the words of Buddha are not true until you investigate them and make them true. Until you bring things home, until you really know in your heart that something is true, it is not so." Of course, the other wrong type of faith is this cynicism, this intellectualizing of everything in the dharma. For example, in the debate of King Melinda, someone approached the Buddha and said, "Okay, I think I want to follow you. You're resplendent, you give a certain kind of light, and you're a wonderful teacher, but I have some questions first, and if you can answer these questions, then I'll follow you. I want to know: Is the world eternal? Is the world not eternal? Does the Tathagata (the Buddha) exist after death? Does he not exist? Is the soul the same as the body? Is the body one thing and the soul another?" And

more leaves on the tree." And the Buddha said, "Well so it is with the answers that I can give. There are more answers that I know than I can actually give to you." So again, we have to discover the answers; someone can't give them to us.

One of the main problems of having either kind of improper faith is that the ego plays tricks on us. On the one hand, if we have blind faith in a teacher, we're just creating all kinds of stories, all kinds of scenarios about this exotic teacher from the east, this exotic teaching: "Look, I have this wonderful lama, and I sit a certain way and I wear a certain type of clothing and I have a certain type of Buddha," etc. All of these things can actually take us farther and farther away from just understanding the purity of mind. These are more labels, more conceptualizations that we're heaping on our already crowded minds.

On the other hand, our ego can play tricks by pretending we're having a spiritual experience when we're really not. We've referred to this as a facsimile experience. We do have one mystical experience and it really ignites us and sends us on the path. We feel very joyous, like we can dive into Buddhism now. In fact, we never go back to have that experience again; we never do the hard work to sustain

faith? Firstly, faith has to be experience. When I invited you before to look within and to somehow align with the feeling of higher awareness, some of you did it and some of you didn't. You just wanted to hear what I had to say. But everything I have to say is useless until you look into your higher awareness and feel some of these words resonate with the truth you're discovering in you at this very moment. So Buddha nature, what is it? That is something impossible to tell anyone else. You have to discover it yourself, but it is the seed of all enlightenment; it is the seat of higher wisdom that you have inside you.

There are said to be four stages of faith. Let me just discuss those very briefly. The first stage of faith, again faith being self-confidence, confidence in your Buddha nature, is called clear faith. And in that stage in faith, we feel this great sense of joy that there is liberation from suffering and that we are making progress. The second stage of faith is called longing faith. Once we've discovered that joy and felt that liberation, we necessarily, I believe, have a desire to help other people, so we have this longing desire to help others and to keep improving ourselves so that we can help other people as well.

The third stage is confident faith.

That's characterized by not having as much backsliding as you used to have, but having a true understanding that this path is going to work for you and that this is the right path.

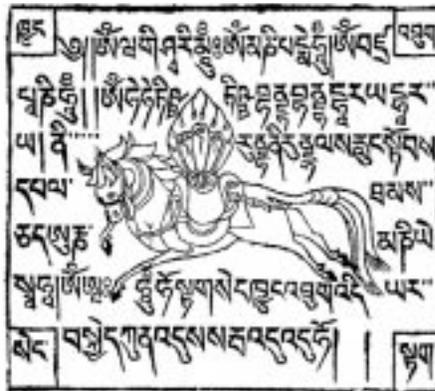
The fourth stage is called irreversible faith, and this is something that I would love to acquire in this lifetime. My teacher has it, and I hope to have it one day. That's characterized by the complete lack of doubt, so much so that you have an absolute unwillingness to renounce any of the truths you have found, even at the price of your own life. This is the faith that people like Gandhi and the Dalai Lama and others develop, and Christ, we should say, on Easter: the complete unwillingness to denounce the truth that you have found even at the cost of your own life.

Of all aspects of faith, the one thing that I want to leave you with today is that again you are the master of your own life, you have to create self-confidence, you have to believe that you can achieve. There's an equation that I believe encapsulates the entire Buddhist path: supreme self-confidence plus virtuous action equals supreme attainment.

GBF: There was one thing that you taught us in the class that has helped me a tremendous amount, in addition to many things, but one of them is the idea that Buddhists are fearless and why that is: if you really see your own death clearly, if you're not attached, if you're able to transcend lust, you can be fearless. There was a lot more you had to say about it, but it's really stayed with me.

SH: You know, I've studied mindfulness for years and I thought I was getting pretty clever at it, but there was always this—I couldn't get it very deeply—and then it clicked for me when I was in Cambodia working with the Supreme Patriarch there. I asked him a lot about his past, but he resisted, with a smile always, but he kept resisting talking about the past and I just wasn't getting it. I wanted to know his stories. And for him, the stories took away from who he really was at that moment. He didn't want to keep going to the past. He leads these marches through areas where people

are shooting and some people have died and there are land mines and all these factions fighting. His entire family was wiped out in the genocide that happened there. I asked him, "Aren't you ever afraid?" And he said, "No. I'm a monk. Because I'm a monk, I'm focused on the present and because I'm focused on the present, there's no space for fear." And it just clicked. Fear is a projection that what happened to you in the past will happen to you in the future. That was the most important aspect of fearlessness that I discovered, that we need to actually intercede with these projections we have of the future and just stop. That actually is the seed not just of fearlessness but of opti-



mism, to return to my original theme—joy, joy, joy. We have limitless possibilities, so there's no sense pretending that we can predict our future based on our past, but rather open ourselves up with a sense of curiosity, with a sense of fearlessness, and walk into the future with a sense of optimism. That is the Buddhist path.

I've met some extraordinary people, like the Most Venerable Thich Quang Do in Vietnam, who has been in prison many times for advocating freedom of religion in that country. He's always laughing, telling me these horrible stories about torture and other things, and he's laughing. I asked him, "How did the guards treat you when you were in prison?" And he said, "Well, at first they were very suspicious of me because I was always laughing at them, and they would yell at me and give me the Communist party line, but I'd say, 'What you want me to do, weep? I won't weep. I'm a Buddhist. I've found a path. I've found a path that can take me out of my suffering, and I

practice that path. There's no greater joy, so I'm happy and I'm going to laugh with you.'" And then slowly his guards would respect him and learn to laugh with him.

When we approach our practice, as I was saying before, with ordinary mind, like "All right, let's sit down and do this practice," we really don't have a fulfilling meditation or a fulfilling practice. We really have to transform our meditation. This is something extraordinary that we're doing. At the same time, we can't approach it with absolute seriousness. Partially, that may come from a Christian background, too. Don't laugh in church; don't play in church; no clapping. But we have to have a lightness about us. Yes, we're very serious. This is a serious thing we're trying to do, but we have to be able to enjoy the path. If we don't have joy on the path or in our practice, we're not going to keep up with it. I wonder how you experience your practice when you're feeling "Forget it, I'm not going to be happy." Where is that impulse coming from?

The one way to cut through all of these things is to actually sit and experience Buddha nature. Now I want you to teach me something. I want to know from some of you how you experience your Buddha nature. We know it's impossible to put in words, we know that, so let's try anyway. What is an experience of higher awareness for your Buddha nature, your innate spirituality?

GBF: Singing

SH: What happens for you?

GBF: It's totally just being there in the moment, especially if you're singing with others; it's a joining and merging experience. It's beyond words; it's an experience of unison.

SH: When you're singing, do you say, "I'm singing, so I'm happy"?

GBF: No, I'm not saying anything.

SH: Exactly.

GBF: I'm just doing it.

GBF: I feel the same way about art, creativity.

SH: So why don't you feel the same way in sitting?

GBF: I don't know. I try all the time to find that joy that I find when I create

paintings or sit in front of the computer.

SH: When you sit down to create paintings, how do you approach the task?

GBF: I just do it: it's a drive in me; I can't stop it. It takes over, but I have no control – it just flows over me.

SH: So maybe when you're sitting down to do practice—I just put this out there for you to examine; I don't know the truth of it—maybe you are approaching it with a type of rigid seriousness, whereas when you sit, the best thing you can do is to elevate yourself beyond conceptualizations. You can't stay there permanently: if we could then we'd have it all figured out; we'd be in nirvana already, but the point of going back to Buddha nature and feeling that pulsing within us is that we bring out of it fearlessness and joy and a lot of wisdom, a lot of information that helps us get back to that place, helps us cut through the anger and delusions and greed and attachments that you were talking about before. I don't know what to suggest for you exactly, but maybe you should approach your practice the way you approach your art.

Let me say something else here. Another thing that we tend to do in the West is compartmentalize things. It's particularly true with the Christian background because there's Sunday, Sunday School, and Church, and then it's back to watch the football game. The rest of the week it's work, or now work's done and this is my free time, or this is my family time. Everything is your practice. At all times. So what you can do is look within your life and find those

moments that give you the most enjoyment properly understood, not as ego attachment but true joy and alignment with your Buddha nature, with spirituality, and try to export that into other areas of life. Like with your art, and if you can't do, then maybe play a little game with yourself—that your art is your practice. So having that sort of no mind in which you're not thinking about the past or projecting on the future, introduce in that moment some of the teachings of Buddha and let it go through you and see how it is.

GBF: The question of difficulty in practice and joy that you brought up – isn't it possible to have joy and difficulty and to try to find the joy in the difficulty

SH: Absolutely. I didn't do very well in making that point but I was trying to suggest that as well. You can have adversity and suffering and yet have periods of joy.

Sometimes when people are faced with an absolutely hopeless situation, and they've been trying to control everything, and they've been resisting, putting up a great fight, they come to a point where they just snap and start laughing. "This is totally pathetic! I can't do anything more about it." And it's in that type of releasing and letting go of it that peace starts to flood back in. It's the same thing that we experience when we're in meditative absorption, *samadhi*, when we're understanding Buddha nature. It doesn't erase the difficulties in our lives. It doesn't erase our awareness of the miseries of the world, but it cer-

tainly gives us a real visceral connection with our innate joy, and that well-spring keeps our practice going. So I agree with you: you can definitely feel the two at once. And you should.

GBF: Can you conceive of practice as being action, the awareness in the experience, that doesn't involve sitting, also?

SH: Absolutely. That's the other point that I'm not doing a very good job of making, but from the moment you get up to the moment you go to bed, and even, in my tradition, even when you're sleeping, it's all part of your practice. So when you have sexual attraction to someone, that's part of your practice: how do you play it out? Okay, you have sex with the individual. Do you do it with condoms? Do you have respect and love for that person on a really deep level? Regardless, that's part of your practice. When we're at work, we tend to say, "Well, this is business." Well, there's no such business compartment that excuses bracketing morality or bracketing my sense of what's truly right. It's all part of your practice. Absolutely.

What sitting is to me—and it's going to be something different for everyone—is the time when you're utterly focused within, and you just say, "Stop. Look. Listen. Breathe. And reenergize."

GBF: On that very hopeful and joyous note, thank you for a very provocative teaching.

SH: Thank you for teaching me today. ■



PHOTOS: CLINT SEITER

Engaged Buddhism

Once a month, a group of GBF members gathers at the Hamilton Family Center to prepare a meal for homeless families. Here are some recent photos of our volunteers at work.

gay buddhist fellowship

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Annual GBF Hike to Chimney Rock

Come join us on a short, but quite spectacular hike and picnic at Chimney Rock in Point Reyes Park on Saturday, April 27. Chimney Rock is famous among Nature lovers for its incredible springtime displays of wildflowers, and with all the rain we've been having, they should be more spectacular than ever. Drake's Bay on one side and the Pacific Ocean on the other provide dramatic back-grounds. We might also visit the Point Reyes lighthouse. The hike is short (about a mile each way), but the drive up, while beautiful, isn't; be prepared for an all day excursion. This will be a pot-luck picnic so please bring a dish to share with others. We will be carpooling from the GBF Center (37 Bartlett St.) at 9:00 a.m. Bring warm clothing (it gets windy up there), a blanket, and sun block. Rain cancels. For more information, call Clint Seiter at (415) 386-3088.

Sutra Salons

Jim Wilson teaches two Sutra Salons. The S.F. Sutra Salon meets on the fourth Friday of every month at 7:30 p.m. The East Bay Sutra Salon meets on the third Wednesday of every month at 7:30 p.m. in Oakland. The Sutra Salons are run like a book club, but instead of reading the latest novel or biography, the monthly reading is of a Buddhist Sutra. The atmosphere is informal and conversational. The cost is \$10.00 per meeting, plus the cost of the reading. For more information contact at Jim Wilsom at jimfw@hotmail.com.

Local Dharma Centers

A list of local Dharma centers is available on our website and as a handout at our Sunday sittings. We encourage members to explore what these Dharma centers can offer to their practice.

Your Thrift Store Donations Earn Money for GBF

GBF members can donate their quality cast-offs to the Community Thrift Store (CTS) and GBF will receive a quarterly check based on the volume of items sold. This is a great way to support our Sangha, and the community. So far this year we have received over \$800 through members' generosity. Bring your extra clothing and other items to CTS at 623 Valencia St between 10am and 5pm, any day of the week. The donation door is around the corner on Sycamore Alley (parallel to and between 17th and 18th) between Valencia and Mission. Tell the worker you are donating to GBF. Our ID number is 40. Information: 415/861-4910.

calendar

San Francisco / Bay Area Events

Sunday Sittings

10:30 am to 12 noon

Every Sunday followed by a talk or discussion, at the San Francisco Buddhist Center, 37 Bartlett Street (near 21st St between Mission and Valencia).

MUNI: 14 Mission or 49 Van Ness-Mission, alight at 21st St, walk 1/2 block.

BART: 24th and Mission, walk 3 1/2 blocks. Parking: on street (meters free on Sundays) or in adjacent New Mission Bartlett Garage (75¢ first hour, then \$1 per hour, \$5 max).

The Center is handicapped accessible.

April GBF Speakers

April 7 **Jim Wilson**

April 14 **Sean Hargins**

Sean is a Ph.D. candidate at the California Institute of Integral Studies, where he is focusing his research on environmental philosophy, intersubjectivity, and Himalayan Buddhist traditions. He just recently spent five months in Bhutan, one of the last Buddhist nations, doing research on the intersection of environmental science, culture, and spirituality.

April 21 **Roger Corless**

April 28 **Open Discussion**

May GBF Speakers

May 5 **Jim Wilson**

May 12 **Open discussion**

May 19 **Carol Newhouse**

Carol Osmer Newhouse has studied Insight Meditation for more than twenty years and has been teaching for ten. Her root teacher is Ruth Denison, who was empowered by the great meditation master U Ba Khin of Burma. She has also studied with Dr. Rina Sircar at CIIS and Dr. Thynn Thynn in Daily Life Practice. She is the founding teacher of the Lesbian Buddhist Sangha in Berkeley.

May 26 **Blanche Hartman**

Blanche Hartman is the head abbess of the San Francisco Zen Center.

Steering Committee Meeting

The next Steering Committee Meeting will be May 5, 2002, following the Sunday sitting, at the San Francisco Buddhist Center.

How to Reach Us

World Wide Web Site
www.gaybuddhist.org

GBF Sangha

Send correspondence and address changes to:

GBF

2215-R Market Street

PMB 456

San Francisco, California 94114

Send e-mail to:

gbfsf@hotmail.com

For 24-hour information on GBF activities or to leave a message:

415/974-9878

GBF Newsletter

Send submissions to:

Editor GBF

2215-R Market Street

PMB 456

San Francisco, California 94114

If possible, include a Mac disk in Word or as a text file along with your hard copy. We do reserve the right to edit for clarity or brevity.

by the power and truth of this practice, may all beings have happiness and the causes of happiness, may all be free from sorrow and the causes of sorrow, may all never be separated from the sacred happiness which is without sorrow, and may all live in equanimity, without too much attachment or too much aversion, and live believing in the equality of all that lives.

—GBF Dedication of Merit

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SAN FRANCISCO CA 94114