



# Gay Buddhist Fellowship

JUNE / JULY 2002 NEWSLETTER

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.

## Awakening Buddhahood Within

BY DIANA ELROD

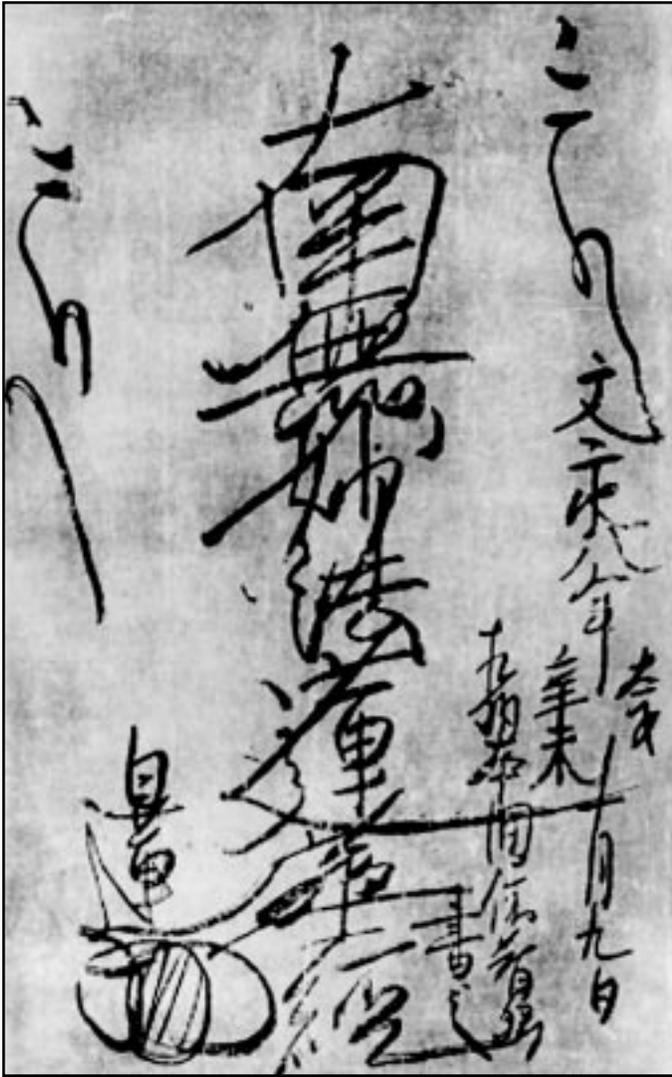
HAS ANYBODY HEARD OF SOKA GAKKAI INTERNATIONAL? SGI? Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism? Nam Myoho Renge Kyo? Say "Nam Myoho Renge Kyo" and more people raise their hands.

Diana Elrod is an active member of SGI, Soka Gakkai International. She spoke to GBF on September 23, 2001.

Our organization has twelve million members who practice this Buddhism in 177 countries in the world. The vast majority of those people live in Japan, where this Buddhism originated. Here in the United States, our organization is called Soka Gakkai International, which

means "Value Creation Society." It was founded by a group of educators in the 1930's in Japan. The gay and lesbian group that we have has about 350 members here in San Francisco.

So where does this Buddhism come from, and how is it different from some of the other Buddhisms that I'm sure you've all been exposed to? Shakyamuni Buddha preached a number of sutras, and one of the last ones was the Lotus Sutra. A lot of people didn't pay much attention to the Lotus Sutra because it was very different from some of the other sutras, but it became a central focus of this particular branch of Buddhism. In 13th century Japan, there was this guy, Nichiren Daishonin, and he was student—he was a monk—of Buddhism. He understood all different kinds of Buddhisms, and he realized that, for him, the Lotus Sutra was the pinnacle teaching. The Lotus Sutra differed from the other kind of Buddhisms. A lot of people who practice other kinds of Buddhisms practice things that happened before the Lotus Sutra. The Lotus Sutra really said that enlightenment isn't something that you attain but something that you awaken to. This was profound and some people thought it was heresy almost, that if everybody was already enlightened, what did that mean? You didn't actually have to do all these austerities. It was kind of scary, from a political standpoint even, and what Nichiren Daishonin did was to take the essences of the Lotus Sutra and create a practice out of it, part of which we →



practice every day, twice a day. In the morning and evening we recite part of the Lotus Sutra, two different chapters—the expedient means chapter and the life span chapter. The life span chapter really encapsulated the practice for common people like us. The phrase “Nam Myoho Renge Kyo” means literally devotion to—that’s “Nam”—Myoho, which is the mystic law, Renge, which means “cause and effect” but specifically the lotus flower, and “Kyo,” which could mean various things—sutra, teaching, sound vibrations. So strung together, we’re chanting, “Devotion to the mystic law of cause and effect through sound vibration.” In fact, “Myoho Renge Kyo” without the “Nam” in front is the title of the Lotus Sutra. So what we’re doing is chanting the title of the Lotus Sutra when we chant repeatedly.

Now, that seems kind of silly, but someone once explained to me that the name “Japan” means the entire country of Japan, the entire culture, and everything in it. The word embodies this consciousness in our head. And saying “Nam Myoho Renge Kyo” basically expresses the entire Lotus Sutra. We chant (or recite) part of the Lotus Sutra—it’s in Japanese pronunciation, which we do pho-

netically—but chanting “Nam Myoho Renge Kyo” is considered the essential part of the practice. We do this to awaken Buddhahood within. Buddhahood within can be variously described as becoming eternally happy, having a sense of strong conviction about your life, understanding that you are a profound person, that you have a deep mission, that your life has meaning beyond whatever your day-to-day problems are. And so we’re awakening this indestructible happiness. Our chanting is sometimes described as polishing a mirror, pumping up our life force, and we do this as much as we can. Some people chant five minutes a day; some people chant three or four hours a day—it depends on whether or not you have a job. I have job. I can’t chant five hours a day.

One of the things I wanted to say briefly about Nichiren Daishonin was that he was very much persecuted by a lot of different Buddhist groups, and not just because he was practicing what a lot of Buddhist groups thought was heretical but also because he took a stand against government, and government in Japan in that time was very linked to religion. Some of the things that Nichiren Daishonin espoused were the equality of all people, that there’s no difference between the Buddha and you—you are the Buddha, that men and women equally have enlightened properties, which at that time was considered unbelievably insane because women were not considered the same as men. So it was a Buddhism of absolute equality, absolute freedom. We call it the Buddhism of absolute freedom because it says basically that the only law is the law of cause and effect. If we do a good cause, we get a good effect. If we do something bad, we get a bad effect. It’s all about personal responsibility, and there’s nothing outside of us that will help us or intercede for us, or anything like that. These were really revolutionary ideas in 13th century Japan.

Each of us has in our homes a Gohonzon, which means object of devotion. I have here with me a traveling size Gohonzon. People who travel a lot can carry one of these with them. In our homes we have big altars, and enshrined in them is a scroll with the same stuff on it. If you travel for work, you can’t really unenshrine the Gohonzon. You can’t take it with you. So this travel size Gohonzon is to remind us what is there. We don’t chant to a statue or anything like that. We chant to the scroll, and the scroll says in the middle “Nam Myoho Renge Kyo.” All around it is depicted various parts of life. Buddhism talks about the ten states of life, and the ten worlds, from hell, hunger, animality, all the way up to Buddhishatva and Buddhahood, and this Buddhahood says that they are all together in a human being. It’s not possible to just to be Buddha; you have to be Buddha in hell. There’s Buddhahood in hell; there’s Buddhahood in hunger; there’s Buddhahood in anger. And practicing helps us awaken ourselves to use the life states of hell, hunger and animality so that they don’t use us, so that we become masters of our own lives, and we employ human states.

There are other things here, on the little Gohonzon that talk about being enlightened as we are. We become happy or enlightened as we are without having to give anything up, because it's not possible as a human being, according to Nichiren Daishonin, to rid yourself of desires, but actually through your desires, through working through your desires, you become happy. Our practice is sometimes misinterpreted. It's thought that people who practice this Buddhism chant for cars, and money and stuff and get happy, like Tina Turner and people like that. In one way, I think that's true. When I first started practicing, my partner, who introduced me to the practice, said to me, "Chant for what you want." And we wanted to buy a house. In San Francisco. With no money. So I said, "I want to chant for this particular house that we can't afford." And she said, "Fine. Chant for it." I said, "Okay." And I chanted to prove it wrong, and you know what? We got that goddamn house. And I had told her, "If we get the house, I'll never stop chanting." So I'm still chanting. It's eight years later, and I'm still paying for it. For the longest time I thought the benefit of me chanting was getting this incredible house in the Castro, but in truth I realized that was the conspicuous benefit; that was the piece of cake. The inconspicuous benefit was what changed in me. I had always believed that I couldn't have dreams because they would always be ruined, that somehow I'd never get what I wanted, and so why even bother dreaming for anything? And so this taught me that I didn't have to give up my dreams just because I thought they were impossible, that I actually could fulfill what I thought was my dream. In the process I also realized I had a determination and I never stopped believing that I could fulfill my dream. I never gave up. That was another thing for me—I always tended to give up before the race got started because I figured, "Why bother? I'll never get it anyway." So it really confirmed for me the conviction that I didn't have to give up my dreams and that there are things that I could really work for.

So chanting to the Gohonzon is like looking into a mirror: we're looking at the mirror of Buddhahood, so I'm chanting and looking at my Buddhahood. We chant every day twice a day. It ends up taking about a half an hour long in the morning because we go through the prayers five times, and in the evening three times. We also read and study a lot. The writings of Nichiren Daishonin were collected not too long ago into one entire volume. And these were letters he wrote to his followers, and there is a lot of really great stuff in there. He explains the meaning of life in his letters to his followers. He was pretty much a loon, kind of an embodiment of a stand-alone spirit. There weren't really that many people who were doing the same thing he was in 13th century Japan, and so he was exiled and almost beheaded twice.

Anyway, he had an amazing life for somebody who went through such persecutions.

We all practice for different reasons. You all probably practice what you practice for different reasons, but for us, I think essentially we would all agree, those of us who practice Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, that one of the greatest benefits of this practice is maintaining a sense of hope. With everything that's happened in the last two weeks [since September 11], it's really hard not to have nothing but negative feelings. I mean it's so hard to have any kind of hope. And it's such a struggle. And I think the more we practice, the more we find we have hope for the future. We see our lives as not being just contained in this little moment here, but expanding from the past into the future, and that helps us generate a kind of confidence that allows us to overcome all our obstacles. It helps to share that sense of hope with other people, and that's what we're trying to do by reaching out to friends of ours. My dad was on a search and rescue team in New York. He just got back this week, and he felt very hopeless. I told many of my friends—I'm a moderator on an international discussion group for people who practice Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, mostly gay people; I'd say 98% of the people are gay—I told them that my Dad was going to New York and that he was really scared and everything, and people just sent him floods of emails—he had his computer there—trying to encourage him, saying, "You're doing the right thing; this is so great; we really appreciate you." That kind of feeling of caring for other people is something I think is often lost in our everyday world. So, for me, that's one of

## The Lotus Sutra said that enlightenment isn't something that you attain but something that you awaken to.

the reasons I continue practicing Buddhism—that sense of hope and the encouragement I receive from other people.

Are there questions or comments or anything?

GBF: You said there were philosophical differences with other forms of Buddhism, and I didn't really get them.

DIANA ELROD: I think a lot of people would describe it as a practice. I practiced Zen for a long time, and I had a really hard time sitting zazen. I just thought it was impossible. I have a very active mind and it was painful to me. What we practice is very outward. It's a very loud thing; we really express a lot of our feelings through our chanting. I think there are a lot of similarities between various kinds of Buddhism. I think the difference is in the origin. A lot of things are based on the other sutras, and this is based on the Lotus Sutra. There are other sects that prac-

tice the Lotus Sutra too, but they are not Nichiren Daishonin. I think the other thing that makes it different is there is a lot of writing specifically from the founder of this Buddhism, Nichiren Daishonin, which isn't the case with other kinds of Buddhism. I think that's the easiest way to explain it.

GBF: I was wool gathering when you talked about how many gays there are in this movement. You said there were twelve million?

DE: Oh, no. There are 12 million people practicing; they're not all gay, unfortunately. I shouldn't say that. That's another thing: SGI is I think the only organized religion in the United States that officially sanctions same sex weddings. They do them all around the country. They really try to put their money where their mouth is in that respect. When they first announced that they were going to perform same sex weddings even though they're not legal, my partner and I jumped at the chance and we were the first couple in San Francisco who were married here.

This Buddhism is attractive to a lot of gay people I know all over the country, and I think that one of the reasons is that many religions—not just many Buddhisms—are not that diverse. You go to a meeting or something and there aren't that many people of color. And ours is unbelievably diverse. It's very attractive for that reason. It's a Bud-

There are a lot of Buddhist traditions that had an extreme amount of enmity, if you will, towards homosexuality. It wasn't specifically the doctrine of the Buddhism, but it was how it was practiced. There were a lot of control issues about monks having sex with young boys. There is no proscription like that. There are no real precepts in this kind of Buddhism. It's basically the law of cause and effect is extremely strict, and no other law is above it. It applies to everyone, whether you practice Buddhism or not. It's like gravity. Or you turn on a light and the light switch comes on. It applies equally to everyone. So that's another way that's fundamentally different.

GBF: Another question: Are there monks and nuns? Are they all lay practitioners?

DE: That's an interesting question. We are a lay organization. We used to be connected to a priesthood. Nichiren Daishonin was very clear when he wrote in 13th century Japan that you should never follow someone who distorts this teaching even if he or she is a priest or the High Priest. The tradition was at that time passed down among priests, but there were lay believers who always practiced. There has been actually a long tradition of problems with the priesthood in this particular kind of Buddhism. In fact, after Nichiren Daishonin died, many kinds of Buddhism were created from a distorted view of

what he was teaching. And we as an organization were excommunicated from the priesthood in 1990. So we are no longer connected to the priesthood. There are a number of reformist priests,

because the High Priest in Japan changed the rules and said, "Actually, the only way to enlightenment is through me. I'm the only one who can create the 'eye-opening' ceremony. I'm the only one who can endow your Gohonzon with a special power." Nichiren Daishonin didn't say any of that shit. He just said it's available to everyone: you can have it; you can have it; you don't need a priest. The problem was that in that time, in 13th century Japan, there had to be somebody who would carry on the tradition, in the same way that there were other clerical orders to carry on a pure tradition. Unfortunately, a lot of them got distorted. A lot of people would say that basically Catholicism is a distortion of Christianity. So, we're fine without the priesthood. It was for some people very difficult because a lot of people feel a need for a priesthood, somebody to help them, but we struggled through it and realized that we are living exactly what Nichiren Daishonin said, which was that we don't need anybody to tell us how to live our lives. ■

## It's not possible as a human being, according to Nichiren Daishonin, to rid yourself of desires, but actually through your desires, through working through your desires, you become happy.

dhism of diversity, and so we've got in San Francisco, I'd say, probably 30% who practice are gay. We have 30% African American, 30% Asian, 15% maybe Hispanic, 15% white – it's a very broad movement. In terms of the United States in general, I'd say a good percentage of the people are gay. We had this year our very first conference on Buddhism and Sexuality at our national conference center, which is in Florida, in the Everglades. I hate Florida, but it was cheaper. They restored the wetlands and stuff, and at least there are no alligators, so I'm fine with that. But we had our first conference, and it was the only conference the SGI has put on since it opened this conference center, and it was 100% capacity filled. There is really an intense desire of people who are gay to practice this Buddhism. The other thing that maybe differentiates this Buddhism from other kinds is that Nichiren Daishonin was extremely explicit that there is no difference among the leaders—men and women are equal; all have inherent uniqueness, and we all equally possess Buddhahood.

# What's all the Noise About?

## Dharma Daddy Explains

### Sacred Sound in Buddhism

BY ROGER CORLESS

SGI CHANTING SESSIONS ARE NOISY. The practitioners use their full voices for the mantra, rubbing (not counting) their rosary beads vigorously between their joined hands, and often turning to each other and smiling. At GBF meetings we sit still without fidgeting, as quiet as mice. Dharma Daddy is pleased that you can be such good boys, and he hopes that silent meditation works for you, but he wants to tell you about another way of purifying our minds.

There are many practices in Buddhism, but they all come down to one thing: mixing the mind with the Dharma. When our minds contact the Dharma and interact with it, they become clearer and more compassionate. Silent sitting is an important tool for waking up in the present moment, but it is not always effective. Sometimes our minds just will not quiet down, while at other times we doze off. Sacred sound gives our minds something to focus on and keeps us awake. More than that, however, it transforms our minds.

Sacred sound in Buddhism might better be called efficient sound. It may or may not convey information but it always does something. The Buddha said that anyone who hears the Dharma contacts the Buddha. There are many stories of the Dharma bringing benefit just by being heard. My favorite comes from Japan. Kakukai (1142–1223) was told in a vision that he had once been born as a clam that a small boy picked up and carried into a temple. The clam heard the chanting and therefore was reborn as a dog that lived at the same temple and continued to hear the chanting. After two more rebirths as an animal coming into contact with the sutras, and one as a human who was a caretaker at the temple, he was reborn as a respected Dharma teacher.

Apart from what we might call the accidental effects of sacred sound, all Buddhist traditions employ sacred sound purposefully. In Theravada, paritta (protection) verses are used in ceremonies such as the dedication of a temple, and by forest dwelling monks to ward off snakes and other dangerous animals. Mantra and dharani (in effect, a longer form of mantra) is used in many ways in the Mahayana and Tantric traditions.

A mantra is typically composed of a mixture of words and sounds. Although the words may have a meaning, the sounds do not, nor, usually, does the mantra as a whole. It is more like music than speech. The Dharma exists both at the conscious level of words and logic, and at the subcon-

scious level, working directly on deep mind by means of symbols, colors, and sounds, manipulating the energy flow of our positive and negative emotions. At the deepest level, known as Tantra, the Dharma mixes with and transforms sex, the most powerful energy of the human rebirth. It is recommended that we have a competent teacher if we practice Tantra, for as any psychiatrist will tell you, when we go deep enough into our minds we may awaken all sorts of demons. The Mahayana mantras, of which the mantra used by SGI is one, operate at a more superficial level of the subconscious mind and are generally quite safe to use without a guide.

SGI members, like other Buddhists in the lineage of Nichiren (1222–1282), chant NAM MYO HO REN GE KYO, paying homage to the Lotus Sutra, a popular text that forms the basis of much of the Mahayana. At the conscious level, SGI members study and discuss the sutra, but they also, and most typically, allow it to affect them at a deeper level by chanting the mantra, the last five characters of which are the title of the sutra. Japan accepted the Chinese belief that the title of a sacred text contains its essence. So, at a more profound level, the Lotus Sutra mantra is an encapsulation of the entire sutra. By reciting the mantra, the sounds awaken the teaching, especially the teaching about the Buddha Nature within the practitioner.

Now, wouldn't you like to make a lot of noise in the Dharma Hall and not have Daddy tell you that you are being naughty? ■

**Do you have a question about Buddhist doctrine and practice, to be answered in the newsletter? Send it to Dharma Daddy, by mail c/o GBF or by e-mail to [tashi5@juno.com](mailto:tashi5@juno.com).**

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# GBF Fall Retreat

Friday evening September 6th—Sunday September 8th, 2002

We are preparing for our 11th annual Fall retreat. We'll return again to the Vajrapani Institute in the beautiful Santa Cruz mountains amidst redwoods and clear streams. We use a retreat model that mixes silent sitting and walking meditation sessions with Dharma talks by Jim Wilson and one or two other process activities. Excellent vegetarian meals prepared by the Vajrapani staff, Dharma discussions, Sangha walks in the forest, an evening Sangha ceremony around the Vajrapani stupa and free time will complete the weekend. Past retreats have been much appreciated and well attended by both regular Sunday sitting participants and other men from both the Bay region and more distant homes. The retreat is designed and intended for both beginners and long time practitioners.

## REGISTRATION

Cost .....\$155.00  
including food and lodging.

Discounted cost .....\$145.00  
for early payment (by August 15th).

A private cabin .....\$70.00 extra  
may be available—first come, first  
registered for cabins and retreat.

Include with your check the follow-  
ing information (*please print clearly  
especially email address*):

- name • full address
- email • telephone number

Indicate whether you:

- can provide a ride or need a ride

Make check payable to:  
**Gay Buddhist Fellowship**

Mail check to:  
**Lee Robbins**  
**GBF 2002 Retreat**  
**4433 17th Street**  
**San Francisco, CA 94114**

For further information call:  
**415-552-9800** or  
**415-442-7027** (to leave a message)  
or email:  
**LeeBearSF@earthlink.net**

Map, directions, arrangements for  
shared rides and what to bring will be  
sent after registration.

## 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 Jim Wilson at jimfw@hotmail.com.

## 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.

## June / July GBF Sunday Speakers

### June 2 Jim Wilson

Jim Wilson, the former abbot of the Chogye Zen Center in New York, has studied in the Chogye, Fuke, and Soto traditions of Zen. In addition to speaking at GBF on the first Sunday of every month, he leads two weekly sutra salons here in the Bay Area.

### June 9 Roger Corless

Roger Corless, our own beloved Dharma Daddy, is a former professor emeritus of Religion at Duke University. He is the author of several books, including the widely praised *Vision of Buddhism: The Space Under the Tree*.

### June 16 Steve Peskin

Steve Peskind, co-founder of the Coming Home Hospice, the San Francisco Shanti Project, and the Buddhist AIDS Project, has practiced meditation since 1973.

### June 23 Open Discussion

### June 30 Donald Rothenberg

Donald Rothberg has practiced Insight Meditation since 1976 and has written and taught widely on socially engaged Buddhism and transpersonal studies. He is on the faculty of the Saybrook Graduate School, where he has developed a program in Socially Engaged Spirituality. He has been an organizer, educator, and board member for the Buddhist Peace Fellowship (BPF), particularly working as a mentor for its Buddhist Alliance for Social Engagement (BASE), since its inception in 1995. He is also a meditation teacher, working with two small groups in the East Bay, and is helping to develop a new dharma center in the East Bay.

### July 7 Wes Nisker

Wes Nisker, the co-founder and editor of the international Buddhist journal *Inquiring Minds*, has practiced Vipassana meditation for 30 years. He is the author of *Buddha's Nature: Evolution As a Guide to Enlightenment* and *Crazy Wisdom: A Romp Through the Philosophies of East and West*. In addition to leading a regular sitting group in Berkeley, he teaches classes in meditation and philosophy at Spirit Rock and at other locations around the country.

### July 14 Open discussion

### July 21 Jim Wilson

### July 28 Sozan Schelin

Sozan Schellin began Zen study in LA in 1979 with Maezumi-roshi, with whom he had lay ordination in 1982; he studied at two monasteries in Japan. He was ordained in the Soto Zen Lineage of Shunryu Suzuki-roshi by Philip Whalen at Hartford Street Zen Center, San Francisco, in 1999. His teacher is Barbara Kohn-sensei, of Austin, TX, with whom he has been head of practice for the summer practice period, 2002.

## Steering Committee Meeting

The next Steering Committee Meeting will be July 7, 2002, following the Sunday sitting, at the San Francisco Buddhist Center.

## How to Reach Us

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[www.gaybuddhist.org](http://www.gaybuddhist.org)

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GBF Newsletter

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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