

Gay Buddhist Fellowship

AUGUST / SEPTEMBER 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.

Sex for Queer Buddhists

BY ROGER CORLESS

The gay poet James Broughton once said, "The Buddha is very *down* on sex; Broughton is very *up* on sex." There are good reasons for being down on sex, for finding ways to channel and control this most powerful of human drives, but it is time to ask about the very: why is Buddhism so very down on sex? Can it be at least a little bit up on sex and still be recognizable as Buddhism? It is time to ask this because Buddhism in the Americas, and in the west in general, is a non-monastic phenomenon. For most of its history Buddhism has had more lay followers than monastics, but the spotlight has been on the monastics. Lay people were regarded as second class Buddhists because they did not have, in this life, the fortunate karma to take the monastic precepts. Now, lay people are moving out of the shadows, towards the center of Buddhist life, and demanding a teaching appropriate to their lifestyle.

Early monastic Buddhism was democratic. Decisions were made by consensus. The Pali texts quote the Buddha as being opposed to caste. In *Dhammapada* 396, for example, he proclaims that the person who is worthy of being called a Brahmin is one who lives a pure life, not one who happens to be born into the Brahmin caste. Over the centuries, however, hierarchy and a kind of caste system have proliferated within the Samgha.

Recently, some present day followers of the thirteenth century Japanese reformer Nichiren, who taught the equality of all believers, rebelled against the stultifying control of a corrupt clergy. The lay association SGI (Soka Gakkai International) broke away from Nichiren Shoshu, its clerical parent. A notable effect of the break is the freedom which SGI gained to re-organize along democratic lines, and to re-assess its teaching on sexuality. SGI not only supports married life, it enthusiastically accepts the contribution of LGBTQ persons.

LGBTQ persons should indeed be in the van of updated thinking on sexuality. If we are bisexual or "formerly" heterosexual, we may have produced children, but when we are acting as gays or lesbians our sexuality is one of relationship, not of reproduction. That is, we value sexuality for its own sake, not as a means to an end, as a mechanism for perpetuating the species.

I want to suggest an approach to sexuality which is more consonant with a culture in which Buddhism has regained its original democracy and is at last taking the lay person seriously. LGBTQ persons can make an important contribution to this development. →

TRADITIONAL BUDDHISM AND SEX

Practically all of the traditional Buddhist teaching on sex is found in the *Vinaya* (the monastic regulations). Since the regulations are concerned with celibacy, they are unbelievably negative, and they concentrate on genital activity. Sexuality is reduced to the physical activity of the genitals fueled by the passionate desire (*raga*) for sensual pleasure which can never be sated and so is addictive. In the Five Grave Precepts, which may be taken by a layperson, the third, to abstain from sexual misconduct, is generally taken to mean merely abstention from adultery.

The focus of attention is the male, with the sexual activity of the female being treated, if at all, by analogy with that of the male. Its heterosexism supports a dualism between subject and object despite a rhetoric of non-duality. This discordance is especially poignant in Tantra, where the symbolism of non-duality is entirely patriarchal. The absence of any discussion of sexuality as relationship, in a tradition which bases itself on the teaching of interdependence, is startling.

SEX AND RELATIONSHIP

A Suggestion from Christianity

Many westerners, especially if they are LGBTQ, come to Buddhism on the rebound from Christianity and its nega-

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tive teachings on sex. But although Christianity has, like Buddhism, a strong tradition of celibacy, it also, unlike Buddhism, manages to honor, rather than merely tolerate, marriage and sexuality. The Christian witness is indeed not all positive—the ascetical writings are often pathological in their fear of sex and their hatred of women (and of “beardless youths,” we might add, who were a particular problem for the Desert Fathers), but leaving them aside for the moment, we find marriage being, literally, celebrated. Before the Reformation, and after it in the unreformed churches, celibacy gets a higher ranking than marriage, but the liturgical books, nevertheless, provide a Christian context for marriage, and the Roman Catholic Church regards it as a sacrament, that is, an occasion for a ritual hierophany.

The Book of Common Prayer, used by the churches of the Anglican Communion since 1549, states that marriage is a symbol of the mystical union between Christ and the Church and that the purpose of marriage is the mutual support of the spouses as much as it is for bringing up

children in a Christian environment. These statements, with the many scriptural references cited in support of marriage, are not compelling outside of Christian theology, but they can stimulate the Buddhist to develop a dharmology (or “Buddhist theology”) of marriage and same-sex partnerships.

Martin Luther is the great Christian supporter of marriage over against celibacy, and the advocate of the virtues which accrue to the married state. Having tried the monastic life and found it wanting he wrote at first of marriage as little more than a concession to weakness and as the divinely ordained mechanism for the continuation of the human race. After he married Katherine von Bora, a former nun, he enlarged his view of marriage to include companionship. He called marriage “a school for character,” and spoke of the trials of dealing with spouse and children as a more effective means for becoming virtuous than the isolated ascetical practices of the monastery.

A Buddhist Response

The *Vinaya* concentrates on lust and genital activity. But a marriage or a committed relationship is just that, a relationship, and if the focus is not on the connection between the partners the relationship dies. When we query (or query) the Dharma for help on relationship, we are almost overwhelmed by the material. It is a secret that has been hidden in plain sight. All that we need to do is apply the teachings to marriage and committed relationships.

The teaching that reality is *interdependent arising* is so central that it is sometimes said that fully awakening to this is what constitutes perfect enlightenment. When a Buddhist is with a partner, whether intimately or socially, bringing the knowledge of interdependent arising into awareness will assist the relationship and, if the partner is also Buddhist, further the practice of both.

In Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimagga* (The Path of or to Purity, a Theravadin text on practice), there is an extensive and detailed teaching on the four pure abidings (*brahmavihara*): friendliness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity, which begins:

The student who wishes to practice the development of the Four Pure Abidings should first think on the evils of hate and the advantages of patience.

Buddhaghosa is addressing monastics, but his teaching can be readily adapted to lay life. Couples may not have as much time for meditating on the pure abidings “in a secluded spot” as Buddhaghosa recommends, but they will have more opportunities to develop these virtues in the vicissitudes of daily life.

In the *Essay on the Golden Lion*, Fazang (643–712 CE) teaches that everyday reality interpenetrates, and is interpenetrated by, the Buddha Nature. This teaching can be applied to interpersonal relationships, deepening our understanding

and practice of the Golden Rule, which is expressed in Tibetan Buddhism as “exchanging self for other.”

Further support for this view is found in the sutras of the Tathagatagarbha school, which sees reality as the womb or matrix (*garbha*) of the Buddha (*Tathagata*). The possibility of high attainment by the lay person is famously recounted in the *Vimalakirtinirdesha*. (The Teaching of Vimalakirti).

If we interpret the term sexual misconduct in the third precept as inauthentic conduct it would include all the above considerations. Actions which do not take account of the interdependent arising of all phenomena, of their interpenetration, and of the supreme value, or Buddha Nature, of the other person—all of which Thich Nhat Hanh summarizes under the term interbeing—are not authentically Buddhist.

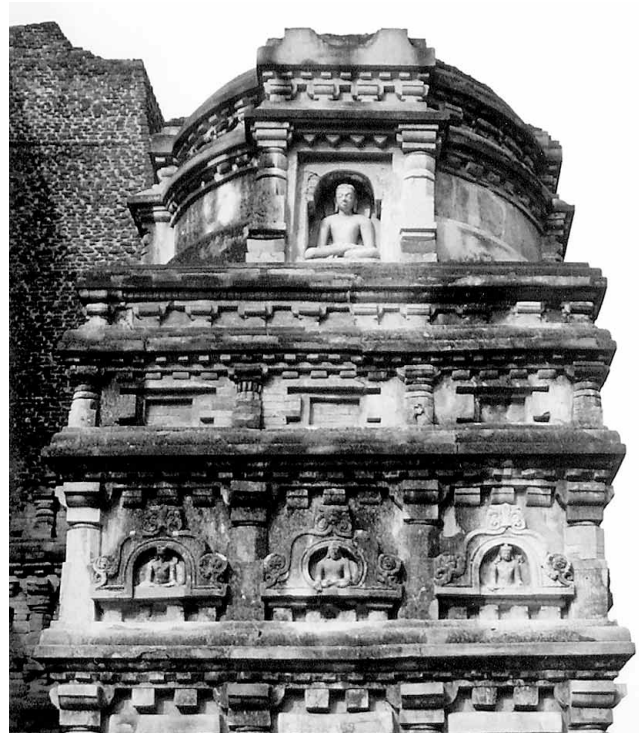
QUEERING SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS

Buddhism teaches that the untrained mind divides the interconnectedness of reality into discrete units such as person, place, or thing, and assigns an essence or “own-being” (*svabhava*) to them. The effect of this is to close up the basic openness of reality, to deny change, and, most importantly, block the door to freedom by assuming that the suffering of samsara is imposed by fate or some other outside force over which we have no control. When these supposed essences are subjected to analysis and insight they are found to be illusory, and *shunyata* (emptiness or, as I prefer to translate, transparency), that is, the lack of inherent existence in persons, places, or things, is seen to be the case. The identification of men and women as male or female in their essence is recognized as a function of untrained mind. Rita Gross has shown that, at least for the Mahayana, there is considerable support for the argument that there is no such thing as inherent femaleness (and, by extension, no support for inherent maleness). There are many examples in the texts of persons changing from one sex to another so that, finally, the Dharma is neither male nor female.

The argument is even stronger for queers. By “queer” I mean anyone whose sexuality does not fit the accepted social models. Such people may self-identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered or intersexual, or as heterosexual but enjoying non-normative sexual activities such as bondage, sadomasochism, and fetishism.

What all these persons have in common is their indifference to, or even opposition to, heterosexual activity in the missionary position. By their very existence they proclaim the absence of an intrinsic maleness or femaleness, and since most queers engage in non-reproductive sex they demonstrate that sex is about relationship as much as, if not more than, reproduction.

One of the more important discoveries of the feminist approach to cultures is the patriarchal nature not only of the sexual mores but of the culture as a whole. Patriarchal consciousness, the feminists claim, goes along with a splitting of reality into the male subject and the female object. The male subject is regarded as rational, passionless, and a privileged observer. The universe “out there” is made into



the despised female other, irrational, full of disordered passions, and existing only to be possessed, controlled, and enjoyed by the male subject. Everything from the history of philosophy through oppressive governments to the present ecological crisis has rather convincingly been ascribed to the exercise of the patriarchal consciousness.

From a Buddhist perspective, the most obvious mistake which patriarchal consciousness makes is to split reality into subject and object. This is identified as a serious block to understanding reality and achieving liberation from samsara. When reality is seen through feminist eyes the patriarchal dualism is not so much in evidence, but it is even less credible from a queer perspective which, by its fluidity, supports the teaching of the interdependence of subject and object.

Gay Consciousness and Non-Duality

Harry Hay, the founder of the modern gay movement, has proposed that gays (he was writing before the re-establishment of the word queer) see reality differently. When a gay man falls in love with another man, the relationship is not that of subject to object, as it might be for a man and a woman, but of subject to another subject, not of me to another but of me to another me.

He calls this gay consciousness *subject-SUBJECT* consciousness or *analogue consciousness* and proposes it as a solution to the problems brought about through the unthinking acceptance of patriarchal consciousness, or what he calls Hetero male consciousness. Hay regards the gay male as neither male nor female at the level of consciousness, but as something else. He tells gay men that when you were young the boys told you that you threw a ball like a girl, but if you were to have asked a girl about

this she would “have told you that you didn’t throw a ball like a girl, but like something *other*. You were not a feminine boy, like the boys said, you were *OTHER!*”

Gay (queer) consciousness challenges dualistic thinking and replaces it with non-dual consciousness, and overturns, inverts, turns inside out, consensus reality. This is a stated goal of Buddhism. Ordinary, deluded views about reality are called “upside down” (*viparyasa*). The Yogachara school teaches that wisdom is obtained when consciousness is reversed—literally turned around or turned inside out (*paravritti*). Perfect wisdom appears when the deepest level of consciousness is reversed. If this is true, queer consciousness is more compatible with the Buddha Dharma than the traditional patriarchal consciousness, and we can expect queer thinking to refresh and reform Buddhism.

The Buddha Nature is Queer

Harry Hay’s paean to gay consciousness is somewhat idealistic and it tends to oppose good gays to bad heterosexuals. In real life, we find many gay men, lesbians, and queer persons in general who are anything but loving and egalitarian. On the other hand, we also find heterosexual men and

carry out her life purpose” only if she ceased being a lesbian. She chanted the *Daimoku* (the mantra NAMO MYO HO REN GE KYO which pays honor to the Lotus Sutra as the teaching of the true Dharma) earnestly, sometimes for ten hours a day, for ten years. Her sexual orientation did not change but she could not get a date. In 1998 she had a spiritual experience on hearing a passage from Nichiren (the root teacher of her lineage): “Cherry, plum, peach or damson blossoms—all just as they are, are entities possessing their own unique qualities.” She realized “I am a pear trying to be a cherry,” accepted herself as a lesbian, and recovered her zest for life. SGI members whom I have interviewed seemed to be comfortable with an identification of “[one’s] own unique qualities,” also expressed as “one’s own true potential,” with the Buddha Nature as it is taught in the Lotus Sutra. I want to extend this insight and suggest that it is not only the Buddha Nature of queers which is queer, but the Buddha Nature is in itself queer.

Queer consciousness is not really about sex, although sex is a part of it. It is about relationships. When it is allowed to show itself, it removes our attention from sex as genital interaction and the mechanics of reproduction, and transforms addictive lust into the pure abidings. It creates an environment in which Buddhism can re-visit sexual relationships and see them as noble.

This conclusion is not only applicable to the lay person. The *Vinaya* remains intact. The monastic witness is central to Buddhism in a way that it is not to Christianity. Jesus was an unmarried rabbi, but he was not a monk. Siddhattha Gotama, the Buddha for our space-time continuum, was a monk if ever there was one, and there is massive scriptural support for monasticism in Buddhism. Corruption is not an argument for the abolition of the monastic samgha, it is merely an indication that the samgha should be reformed. The celibate who is in touch with his or her queer consciousness (whether they self-identify as LGBTQ or plain old heterosexual), is existentially in touch with the Dharma which is neither male nor female. Not only the Buddha Nature, but the Dharma, is queer. It queers samsara so that we can see it as nirvana. ■

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women who have the gay, or queer, consciousness. Locating gay consciousness in non-heterosexuals and denying it to heterosexuals escapes from one essentialism only to fall into another. The way that we can refresh Buddhism by queering it, in my opinion, is to encourage the queer consciousness which is, I believe, present in all humans.

When the SGI, as mentioned above, split off from its clerical Japanese parent and followed its own insights into the nature of true Buddhism, many queer members were encouraged to see their Buddha Nature as queer.

Martha “BiBi” Potts, an African-American member of SGI featured in the March 2002 issue of the SGI journal *Living Buddhism*, presumed at first that she “could fully

identify as LGBTQ or plain old heterosexual), is existentially in touch with the Dharma which is neither male nor female. Not only the Buddha Nature, but the Dharma, is queer. It queers samsara so that we can see it as nirvana. ■

EDITOR’S NOTE: Roger Corless is Professor of Religion, Emeritus, at Duke University. Having retired to the Bay area, he contributes to the GBF Newsletter under the nom de plume Dharma Daddy. This article is an abridged version of “Towards a Queer Dharmology of Sex,” a paper read at the Queer Visions in the Americas conference at the University of California, Santa Barbara, May 24–26, 2002. If you would like a copy of the original paper, replete with footnotes, please contact Roger at tashi5@juno.com.

Sunday Discussion Groups: Creating Sangha Through Right Speech

BY PAUL SHEPARD

About two years ago, when Justin Hecht was facilitating one of the Sunday meetings, he asked us to break up into smaller groups for discussion. This has since become the format for our monthly open discussion meetings. I had run workshops and groups that used small group discussions, but for some reason I sort of winced when Justin made the announcement. Would I feel comfortable being in a group that was randomly selected? What if I didn't like everybody in it? Would it be boring? Shouldn't we have a speaker every Sunday so we can learn more about Buddhism?

It turns out that while I was in that group, I realized that previously I had only superficially known other members of GBF. For years I had appreciated the fact that I had a place to sit once a week with other gay men and listen to dharma talks. Still it remained a rather impersonal group for me, even with the chatting during the social period following the sitting and talk. I have been very touched in the small groups by the way we would disclose what was going on in our lives relative to our practice. I feel that I have a more intimate connection with our Sangha than I had before. I regard my fellow practitioners as my teachers who often give me insights into how the practice is working for them and can work for me. It is not always about how much I can get from the Sangha, but about giving back in service to others. I have felt how important it is for me to just be there listening to others. It feels so nurturing to have my practice validated and strengthened by listening to the experiences of those in my Sangha. I have developed great respect and fondness for men I had previously not really known or thought I didn't like. I am glad I was there when I or another was going through difficult times and sorely needed to connect specifically with other Buddhist gay men. Often we have communicated to the group a deep sense of joy in our practice. Now on Sunday morning I feel more connected to men I see with whom I have been in these groups, even though I may have forgotten their names.

I would like to offer some guidelines to keep our time in these groups fruitful and safe.

1. Refrain from giving advice unless specifically asked to do so. Giving unsolicited advice can give the message to another that he doesn't know something he should know or that you know better than he does.

2. Keep to speaking from your experience and not from a strictly theoretical perspective. Stay more in your heart and less in your head.

3. The facilitator usually suggests a topic, but the groups are for discussing anything that is currently up for anyone.

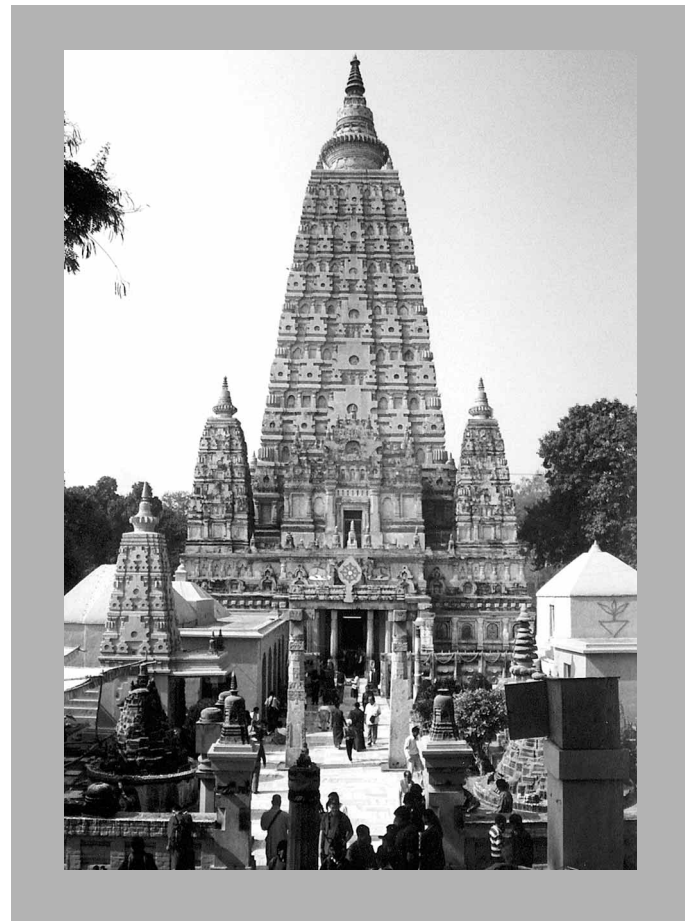
4. Make sure everyone in the group is included in the discussion. Often members feel excluded because the energy

gets to a level where participation seems competitive. Some are silent because they have thoughts that they feel are difficult to articulate and need gentle encouragement to speak. Others like myself must practice right speech by being succinct and not monopolizing the discussion.

Here are some thoughts from Thich Nat Hahn's *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*:

On Right Speech: "Deep listening is the foundation of Right Speech. If we cannot listen mindfully, we cannot practice Right Speech. No matter what we say, it will not be mindful, because we'll be speaking only our ideas and not in response to the other person...Compassionate listening brings about healing."

On Sangha: "Practicing with a Sangha is essential. Even if we have a deep appreciation of the Sangha, it can be difficult to continue without the support of friends... We have individual eyes and Sangha eyes. When a Sangha shines its light on our personal views, we see more clearly... Take refuge in the Sangha and you'll have the wisdom and support you need." ■



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First Semi-Annual Sangha Meeting

On Sunday, September 22, the Gay Buddhist Fellowship will have the first of its new semi-annual sangha meetings (which will usually take place on a Sunday near the first day of spring and the first day of autumn (mid-September and mid-March).

This first meeting will begin with a period of meditation, followed by a “sharing ceremony” of taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Those who participate will be invited to share a brief passage, poem, personal thought or offering of Silence on the subject of the Three Jewels in their practice of the Buddhadharma. We will close with a chant and song of taking refuge.

Please give this some consideration in the coming weeks. If you can find a passage of text or verse of sutra that sums up your feelings or view, please copy it down, tuck it in your wallet, and bring it with you. Or take a moment to explore your own connection to these powerful archetypes of transformation and share with us what you learn.

Following the semi-annual Sangha ceremony and sitting, we’ll sponsor a backyard vegetarian barbecue at the home of Lee Robbins and his partner, Steve Davis. Their address is 4433 17th St., located four blocks northwest up the 17th St. hill from Castro and Market. Those with cars will provide rides from the Sangha sitting; parking is OK. Please bring something veggie with you to the sitting to share at the party following. GBF will provide veggie stuff to barbecue, buns, condiments and drinks. It will help us out if you leave Lee Robbins a quick RSVP at 552-9800 if you plan to join us so we’ll know how much food to get. Should the weather be cool or rainy, we’ll move inside and light the fireplace. We look forward to a good time chatting with old Sangha friends and meeting new ones.

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 following 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.

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.

August / September GBF Sunday Speakers

August 4 **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.

August 11 **Open discussion**

August 18 **Sean Hargens**

Sean Hargens is a doctoral student at the California Institute of Integral Studies. He is currently working on a number of projects with the philosopher of consciousness, Ken Wilber. Sean is a practicing Tibetan Buddhist who has recently lived in the Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan for over five months.

August 25 **Roger Corless**

Roger Corless has a Ph.D. in Buddhist Studies from the University of Wisconsin at Madison. After teaching at Duke University for thirty years he has retired to the Bay area where he teaches part time at the Institute of Buddhist Studies and Stanford University. A long time member of GBF he contributes to the newsletter under the nom de plume Dharma Daddy.

September 1 **Open discussion.**

September 8 **Open discussion.**

September 15 **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.

September 22 **Jim Wilson**

September 29 **Bill Weber**

Bill Weber is a member of the Insight Meditation Community of San Francisco, led by Eugene Cash, and is involved in the Community Dharma Center for Spirit Rock. He is also the producer, co-director and editor of the recently released and very well received documentary, "The Cockettes". Bill's talk will be about freedom vs. liberation.

Miss a Dharma Talk?

You can listen to it on the Internet. Audio files of dharma talks are available at the GBF website.

How to Reach Us

For 24-hour information on GBF activities or to leave a message:
415 / 974-9878

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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