

Gay Buddhist Fellowship

DECEMBER 2002 / JANUARY 2003 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.

There Is No Way Not to Be Who You Are, and Where

BY WES NESKER

Co-founder and editor of the international Buddhist journal, *The Inquiring Mind*, Wes Nisker has practiced Vipassana meditation for 30 years. He's the author of *Buddhist Nature: Evolution as a Guide to Enlightenment*, *Crazy Wisdom*, *A Romp through the Philosophies of East and West*, and *If You Don't Like the News, Go Out and Make You're Own*.

I'd like to begin with a couple of poems. I'm a poetry lover and one in particular grabbed my attention and has been my sort of theme poem for this last few months. It's by a Japanese poet named Ikiyu.

Long Life: The Wild Pines 1 and 2

*Passion's red thread is infinite
like the earth,
always under me.*

Now I'm 70.

Still alive.

Looking up every night.

and snapping my fingers at time and the promise of love.

Listen! I'd like to give you something.

But what would help?

Self, other, right, wrong,

wasting your life arguing with it.

Face it! You're happy!

How many times do I have to say it?

There is no way not to be who you are, and where.

It's like a mantra: there's no way not to be who you are and where. Such a great line.

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Help GBF Save Money

You can help GBF save money (and save the life of a tree) by receiving your newsletter electronically. For details, see page 6.

And this poem is by Hafiz, the Sufi who came about a century after Rumi and who has become popular recently. I like this one. It's called "Tripping Over Joy."

*What is the difference
Between your experience of Existence
And that of a saint?*

*The saint knows
That the spiritual path
Is a sublime chess game with God*

*And that the Beloved
Has just made such a Fantastic Move*

*That the saint is now continually
Tripping Over Joy
And bursting out in Laughter
And saying, "I Surrender!"*

*Whereas, my dear,
I am afraid you still think*

You have a thousand serious moves.

Both those poems are really about the same thing – the inevitability of things being the way they are, and us being who we are. At the core of the Buddhist teaching is the concept of *annata*: that this self with a small s is not something that I own, that it is living through me in some very, very deep way, and that embracing ourselves is really all we can do. We might be able to come to some new kind of freedom within this personality's constraints and within the constraints of being human, some kind of ease and freedom with that that's living through us, but we really have very little choice.

In recent months, I've been very taken with the sense in the dharma of the persistent nature of the difficulties we

tion. First of all, there's death and the preknowledge of our own death, which is something that we're all given as humans: the inevitability of old age and sickness and not getting what you want. When you strip it down to the bare facts, it's not a very pretty picture. We're always trying to put a good face on it, to make it seem like it's a beautiful thing that serves some higher purposes, and that's not to say that there aren't joy and some moments of real happiness and ease, but they are fleeting like everything else. The core truth of existence in this form is *dukka*, or unsatisfactoriness. Sometimes it's translated as suffering, but a better translation is unsatisfactoriness, or unreliability. So fragile, our existence. So I have this litany of the stark naked facts, and I think it's really helpful. Most people say that when they hear and actually embrace the truth of this, it is a very soothing, relieving, because it's an antidote to our idealism, that we're going to somehow get it all right and live happily ever after, which is a myth of our culture – we're going to get it all together and it's going to stay together, and of course, it's contrary to all evidence that this is ever the case. So I'd just like you to consider with me just for a few moments the bare facts.

First of all, we didn't ask to be born, or at least we don't remember asking. We wake up sometime in early childhood and suddenly realize that we're in a body, we've got a life to be lived, and we've got an identity and there it is. When we're born, we're born with this most powerful instinct, which is to stay alive, the survival instinct. We want nothing more than that, to stay alive. So we don't choose to be born and we can't choose to die. It's like Nature trapped us in this life.

We don't get to choose who we will be in this lifetime. We don't get to choose our bodies. I don't remember any catalog of choices. You know, would you like eyes in the front or the back? Would you like to swim, fly or walk as your primary means of locomotion? You get the stan-

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face in this incarnation as earthlings. Maybe it's because of the world situation. Just a few years ago, everybody was making a lot of money and just chugging along and everything was going to be great, and then everything changed with the collapse of the economy and the election—the selection—of the Bush Administration and this drum beat for war.

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matter at all, which means we didn't get to choose our parents, the dear ones who will set our lifelong neurosis for us. So we don't get to choose our body, and we don't get to choose our personality. We're not free to be who we are. We are forced to be who we are.

Then consider that once you get this body, you have to feed it a few times a day to keep it going. That means

belong to me or anyone else; it has arisen due to past causes and conditions." Now he didn't know the specifics of evolution, but he understood that we didn't create this form, this condition of human existence, that it comes from a great stream of causes and conditions and circumstances that we have nothing to do with, and it is that understanding that begins to even give us some

But there's a great relief in recognizing these truths because first of all it means we weren't singled out for punishment. The Buddha said that the only true happiness can be found by eliminating the false sense of self. This is our common condition, and the more we understand that, the more that we see this is the human condition living through us and not our personal drama.

you have to work, think or schlep to make money to feed yourself. You fight gravity every time you get up in the morning, every time you take a step. You're not told exactly why you're here or what you're supposed to be doing while you're here, and you're given just enough awareness to know that you do exist and that someday you will die, which you very much do not want to do.

These are the facts of life. As my friend Wavy Gravy says, "If you don't have a sense of humor, it's just not funny." I think actually Nietzsche put it best. He said, "God's only excuse is that he doesn't exist." But there's a great relief in recognizing these truths because first of all it means we weren't singled out for punishment. We share this condition with each other, and misery loves company, for sure, but it also just gives a realistic sense of what we are doing in this life. And the Buddha said that the only true happiness can be found by eliminating the false sense of self, the false idea that it is us alone that is doing this. This is our common condition, and the more we understand that, the more that we see this is the human condition living through us and not our personal drama. We can shift our focus and actually find much more ease with our personality and with our life we have to live.

It's always a very difficult concept, the concept of *annata* or no-self, that is taught by the Buddha, but it really is what he means: this is not a self-existing entity that belongs to us. The body is kind of a loaner. He says in one point in one of the sutras, "This body does not

ease about the temporary appearance of this form, this life. I'm very interested in evolutionary science. I never was interested in science when I was young, but since actually starting to practice meditation and study Buddhism, I've become extremely interested in evolutionary psychology, evolutionary biology, because it's such a powerful message of *annata*, of no self. You realize that this whole life was shaped by millions of years of life stream adjusting to different environmental conditions. There weren't legs before land arose out of the oceans because legs were unnecessary. You also begin to see how young a species we are. If you look at the story of evolution, in biological time, we're just babies. We're just starting. We just got these big brains, and they didn't come with a very good instruction manual. We're really just learning how to use them. When you think that Lao Tse and the Buddha and Socrates were 2,500 years ago, and Darwin and Freud and Einstein are basically our contemporaries, you realize that we are just coming to a new understanding of who we are and how we can better control or override the instincts that we've inherited and come to some new, some real consciousness. We can maybe live up to the name *homo sapiens sapiens*, twice-knowing humans, which now I think means we have to hear something at least twice before we get it.

So I wanted to say those things because I think it's useful at a difficult time to really touch into the deeper stories and the deeper perspectives on the human condition and who we are. ■

Buddhism and Spiritual Androgyny

Dear Dharma Daddy:

I'm very happy to have read your article "Sex for Queer Buddhists" (GBF Newsletter, August-September 2002). I related well to the section on no inherent femaleness or maleness. I thought of medieval alchemy and the discussion of the hermaphrodite. Many philosophies have associated higher spiritual beings with this gay-transgender nature. What about Buddhism? Also, who are the Desert Fathers?

— Kenny

DEAR KENNY:

IONE, CALIFORNIA

Thanks for writing. I remember that you sent in another question some time ago. It's good to know that you are still studying the Dharma.

To answer your second question first, *Desert Fathers* is a general term which scholars have assigned to the pioneers of the Christian monastic tradition. In the early years of the Church, some Christians wanted to spend their whole time in prayer and meditation so they left society, took a vow of celibacy, and went into voluntary isolation in the desert (mostly in Egypt and Syria). Many of them became wise teachers and people addressed them as *Abba*, the Aramaic word for Dad—it's really not as formal as "Father." Their sayings have a Zen-like quality. A young man would seek advice from an elder by asking, "Abba, give me a Word," and the Abba would respond in a brief, often baffling way.

Since Jesus was not a monk the Desert

Fathers had to find out what worked and what didn't by trial and error, and some of them were pretty strange birds—once again, reminding us today of Zen Masters. Thomas Merton, the great pioneer of Buddhist-Christian inter-monastic dialogue, was fascinated by the resemblances, and his book *The Wisdom of the Desert* (New York: New Directions, 1960) is a good introduction to the Desert Fathers.

Your question about alchemy, the hermaphrodite, and Buddhism is intriguing. You are quite right that the symbolism of a person who combines both sexes is given an honored place in many religious traditions. Sometimes the figure possesses the physical characteristic of both sexes; at other times, the figure is physically of one sex but spiritually of both. For convenience we refer to the former as a hermaphrodite and the latter as an androgyne. In his classic article, "Mephistopheles and the Androgyne or the Mysticism of the Whole," Mircea Eliade explains how, so often, good and evil are seen to be necessary for each other until there is a resolution into wholeness. The alchemical process is a way of understanding, and participating in, this conflict and resolution. The wholeness may then be taught as a meeting of opposites (technically, *coincidentia oppositorum*) and pictured either as a hermaphrodite or as what

the Russian theologian Nicolas Berdyaev calls, in an evocative term for gay men, the youth-maiden. "The man-androgyne," he writes in *The Meaning of the Creative Act* (Collier Books reprint, 1962, page 189), "is not a man, not a fractional, disintegrated being, but a youth-maiden. The mystics felt the androgynism of the new Adam-Christ." We can thank Berdyaev for calling spiritual androgyny holy and linking it to creativity, but we might disagree with him when he speaks of physical hermaphroditism, untransformed into spiritual androgyny, as an evil caricature.

So, if Alchemy views the hermaphrodite as spiritual gold, Christianity can see Christ as an androgyne, and therefore as the perfect divine-human, Hinduism can symbolize God as the half-male, half-female Shiva-Shakti, and so on, what about Buddhism? I think there is a teaching about spiritual androgyny in Buddhism, but we have to dig for it. The most obvious place to look is Tantra. Eliade discusses this, but the published texts which he uses (the true teachings are kept secret) are in code and purposely left incomplete, so it is difficult to assess the reliability of the information. In any case, Tantra is a special variety of Buddhism which is either unknown to, or rejected by, most other forms of Buddhism. There is, however, a secret hidden in plain sight. Shakyamuni Buddha is presented as biologically male. He marries and has a son. Then he leaves his wife and child, maintains celibacy for the rest of his life, and transcends

sexuality. One of the "marks" (*lakshana*) of a Buddha, along with such

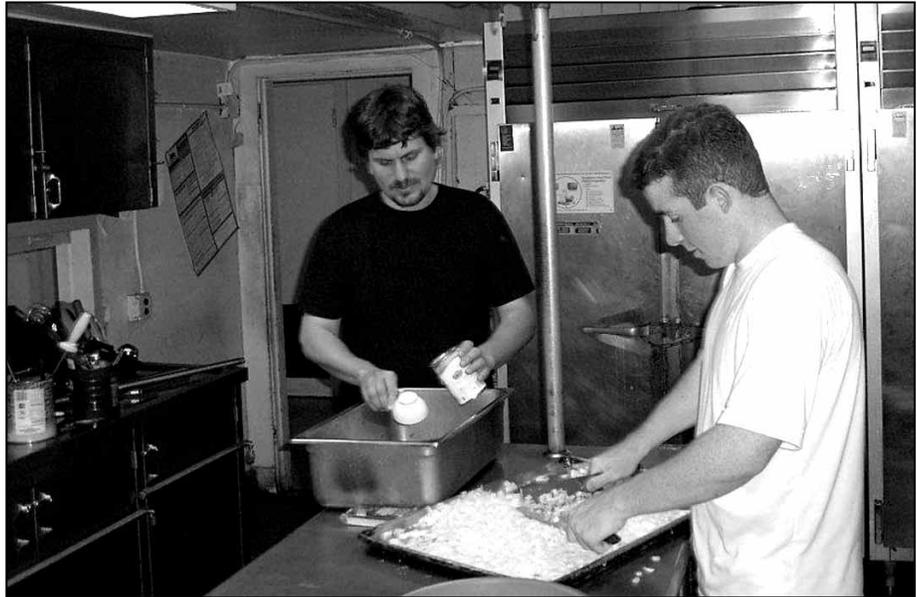
things as large ear lobes and a head bump (*ushnisha*), is a sheathed penis. Whatever this might actually have been, it indicates that the Buddha was regarded as a male who could have an erection but did not. His personality is described sometimes in masculine and sometimes in feminine terms. His sermons are compared to the roar of a lion, and he says that his compassion for all beings is like that of a mother for her only child. In art, the Buddha is shown as trim and perfectly proportioned. (The little fat man, often called the Laughing Buddha, is not a Buddha but a Bodhisattva.) Yet his body is more rounded and feminine than muscled and masculine. Indeed, it is said to have lacked concave surfaces. But again, there is often a moustache. What I see in these qualities of the Buddha is an attempt to suggest that the Buddha was a spiritual androgyne, reconciling in non-duality the conflicts of ordinary, dualistic, mind. "One who sees me, sees the Dharma," he said. I believe we can take this to mean that when we contemplate the Buddha as androgyne we realize the teaching of the Middle Way. ■

Send your questions about the Dharma to Dharma Daddy, GBF, PMB 456, 2215-R Market St., San Francisco CA 94114 or by e-mail to tashi5@juno.com.

Engaged Buddhism: The GBF Homeless Project

BY CLINT SEITER

MANY BUDDHIST SANGHAS STRIVE to balance the inner work of meditation with acts of “engaged Buddhism,” i.e., conscious compassion directed at the surrounding community. The Gay Buddhist Fellowship is no exception. For the past eight years, along with the weekly meditation periods and dharma talks, GBF has been actively involved in a “feed the homeless” project within the Hamilton Center, a shelter designed for homeless families. Every second Saturday of the month, a crew of GBF volunteers comes together at the Hamilton Center (located in the Haight Ashbury neighborhood in San Francisco) and prepares from scratch a meal for up to sixty residents (half of whom are children). The menus are planned by the crew beforehand, and the food supplies are bought earlier that morning



PHOTOS BY CLINT SEITER

using a monthly \$200 contribution provided by GBF. The meals consist of a main dish (a casserole or meat dish), a salad, a vegetable side dish and a dessert. A vegetarian alternative usually is available for residents who don't eat meat. The project works on many levels. Beyond the obvious benefit of providing shelter residents with a nourishing and delicious meal, the project gives these residents the opportunity to interact with gay Buddhist men, perhaps challenging old stereotypes held by individuals on both sides. It has also created a community of sangha friends who enjoy getting together and working as a group to create each meal. The project is not only rewarding but also just plain fun. And Hamilton staff members have told the group that the residents believe GBF serves some truly kick-ass dinners.

The homeless problem in San Francisco is huge in scope, and it's easy to feel helpless when confronted with its enormity. In its own small way, this project enables volunteers to do something meaningful to address this terribly difficult issue.

Anybody interested in participating in this project can do so by contacting Clint Seiter at (415) 386-3088. ■

GBF

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Get Your Newsletter Electronically

GBF is now able to distribute newsletters electronically. If you're willing (and able) to receive your newsletter via email, you could help GBF save a substantial amount of money each month. (Our rent was just increased significantly, so we need to be cutting costs where possible.) If you'd like to begin receiving your newsletter electronically, let us know by sending an email to mailinglist@gaybuddhist.org.

Prisoners Urgently Need Buddhist Books

The most frequent request from gay Buddhist prisoners, other than for pen pals, is for books. In many prisons, they are circulated among small sitting groups and are used in daily and group practice. All books are welcome, particularly those suitable for beginners. If you have any available, please call Don Wiepert at (510) 540-0307, or email him at GDWiepert@aol.com. Don will arrange to collect them and get them to prisoners.

GBF Thanksgiving Potluck

On Thanksgiving Day, a few dozen members of the GBF Sangha gathered to celebrate the holiday at Bob Ross's beautiful home in the Berkeley Hills. The host supplied the turkey, and guests brought along favorite entrees, salads, and desserts to round out the feast. The general impression: mindfulness in the kitchen tastes good! (Clint Seiter's rum pecan pumpkin pie was an especially big hit.) Later in the evening, Bob sat down at his sexy grand piano and entertained the crowd with an impromptu jam session and sing-along. Aurelio Font (former Flirtations tenor, but better known to us as Jack Busby's partner) even lent his famous voice on a few numbers. In case you missed the festivities, here are a few photos.



PHOTOS BY AURELIO FONT

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.

December / January GBF Sunday Speakers

December 8 Cathleen Williams

Cathleen Williams has been in and about the San Francisco Zen Center for 20 years or so, practicing both as a lay student and as a priest. Currently she works for the Zen Center and also keeps up studies in psychotherapy, her other profession.

December 15 Donald Rothberg

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.

December 22 Open Discussion

December 29 Open Discussion

January 5 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.

January 12 Open Discussion

January 19 Christian de la Huerta

Christian de la Huerta is the author of the best-selling and critically acclaimed *Coming Out Spiritually*. Chosen by *Publishers Weekly* as one of the ten best religion books of 1999, the book was also nominated for a Lambda Award. Christian's writing has appeared in *The Advocate*, *Hero*, *Genre*, and other publications. He is founder and president of Q-Spirit, a strategic organization catalyzing the necessary conditions for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people to fully reclaim our spiritual roles of service, leadership and community enrichment in the world. Graduating with honors from Tulane University, de la Huerta holds a degree in Psychology. He has been a seminar leader and group facilitator for the past twelve years.

January 26 Bill Weber

Bill Weber is a senior vipassana student who is currently training in the Community Dharma Leaders program at Spirit Rock Meditation Center. Also a film editor and director, Bill co-directed the acclaimed documentary *The Cockettes*.

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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www.gaybuddhist.org

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For address changes or to subscribe or unsubscribe to the Newsletter send email to:
mailinglist@gaybuddhist.org

GBF Newsletter
Send submissions to:
editor@gaybuddhist.org

GBF Yahoo Discussion Group

There is now a GBF discussion group for the general membership (and others) on Yahoo!

Join the discussion at:
www.groups.yahoo.com/group/gaybuddhistfellowship.

Steering Committee Meeting

The next Steering Committee Meeting will be January 5, 2003, following the Sunday sitting, at the San Francisco Buddhist Center.

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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