



Gay Buddhist Fellowship

OCTOBER / NOVEMBER 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.

Digesting the Dharma

BY KATHLEEN 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. She spoke to GBF on March 16, 2003.

What I'd like to talk about today is two things that keep coming up over and over again, either when I speak with people I work with at the Zen Center, or for me, and actually in practice for almost everyone. First, what are we actually doing when we meditate? And then I'd like to talk about reactivity. Reactivity is our human nature and the way we work with it in the world. Both of those things come up all the time, so that's where I'm going to start.

Recently I've been teaching a class in sacred reading, and in this class our intention is to take one single book, usually something relating to the dharma, either a sutra or a commentary, and read it for half an hour every day. Everyone who came to this class was clearly a book junkie. There was no doubt about that. Everybody came in just like me with three or four books that they were going with. Initially, I thought to myself, this is going to be pretty easy; this is going to be pretty simple; all we're going to do is read a book for half an hour a day and try to apply one thing from that reading to our practice during that day. It sounds easy, doesn't it? This is based on a book called *Sacred Reading: the Art of Lectio Divina*, which is by a Benedictine abbot in Australia. He is a very clear thinker and he has worked with this particular practice for years and years. In this book he describes how to do it, and then he immediately gets into the pitfalls and I thought, "Gee, this is kind of interesting. I'm surprised that people would have this many pitfalls with reading a book half an hour a day." But that was before I listened to the reactions from the people who were in my class and to my own particular reaction to reading a book half an hour a day. One of the most common ones was "I don't want to take time out of my personal reading to read this book for half an hour a day." This is pretty interesting. So we all came in with this intention of doing this practice to support our basic intention, which is waking up. Many people have a very hard time doing that, a very, very hard time. And they had different reasons. There wasn't enough time in the day; they didn't want to read something for just a half hour; they wanted to read it for more than half an hour. They

couldn't believe the amount of resistance that rose up. Initially for some people it was really easy and they really liked it, and then they got to a point where all of a sudden there just wasn't time in their lives to do this any more. Basically, I said you could read any book you want; if you want to read a novel and show that this has application to your religious life, then you can read it. But most people chose to read something dharma-related. The other thing was reading for half an hour. A lot of people felt that to read for a stated time period was too much like being told what to do. They had very strong reactions to this. After a while, not immediately, they didn't want to be told what to do. That came out very clearly; there was a lot of resistance. So opening a book and applying yourself to the book, you come to the book wanting to be taught; you come to the book as a student; you come to the book without defenses; you come to the book with as clear a page as you can, with only the intention of somehow finding something that will inspire your spiritual practice. This is how you come to the book. We came to the book with prejudice, with reaction, with negativity, often with terrible resistance, and I thought, "You know, in many ways, this small half hour practice is a metaphor for what we do in our life. The place where we say, "Don't tell me what to do," where we have resistance to things that are happening. We think we want the truth, but to do the thing that leads to the truth is a very big commitment, because really it is totally giving up in some way your preference. It's not even giving it up in some way. It's saying, "Okay, I'll do it." It's hard.

In Japan, there are two ways of going into the monastery. Either your father's the temple priest, and automatically, if your father's the temple priest, you're the next temple priest if you're the eldest son – unless you can talk the next oldest son into doing it, and that's happened. When you're 18, unless you go to university and get your degree – in which case you go when you're 21 – you get sent, if you're lucky,

to one of the two major training places, the *Heiji* or the *Sotoji*, or you go to one of the smaller training places; then you stay there for at least a year, sometimes two, to get this training, and then you come back to your temple and become your father's assistant. When he dies you become the abbot at that temple. It's a very regular thing. But there are some wild hairs in Japan. There are some people who actually think, "What is this life? What is the nature of this life? And what am I as a human being?" And they can't do it in the middle of Tokyo. I just read somebody's autobiography lately. This is his description of what happened

to him: he was in World War II, and they made him a kamikaze pilot. He actually went up—I guess he was lucky enough to have landing gear, because often they sent them off in planes that didn't have landing gear—and he came back, and then his parents died very shortly after that, but his father had always said to him, "Well, you know, people go on; there's the land; your land is very important; hold on to it." So he thought, "There's the land; I'll work it." But something happened to the land. He didn't inherit it the way he was going to, so he returned to his high school in a state of funk,

basically, and talked about philosophy with his friends. He became kind of like a beat generation person more than a hippie. So by the time he was 20, he was roaming around with no family, which in Japan is major, and no real way to think about his life – Nietzsche, I think, was the philosopher he was most closely tied to at that point. He was at a loss, completely at a loss. So he went to Daitokuji, which is one of the biggest Renzai temples, to talk to the teacher there. And the teacher said to him, "Here, this is the way it is. You can either come here and trust me right now like that, or get out and don't bother coming back." And here he was, as he described himself, with his long, filthy hair trailing over his chest, no shirt on, something of some kind around his hips, and he looked at himself and looked at the teacher and he said, "Okay." That was the beginning of his

“So the object of meditation is just to know what’s happening. It’s not to make anything go away. It truly is not. It’s not to make yourself stop thinking. It’s not to have a completely blank mind, because we don’t have blank minds; we have this stuff that goes on over and over and over again.”

training, because there was no other place for him to go. He had no life at that point. He was alive, but there was no life for him. And he got trained; of course, once he entered the monastic training, they told him what to do, over and over again.

So what is our life, and how do we live it? We profess to be Buddhists. All of us in this room have some connection to being Buddhist. But what is that? Now I come from a particular tradition, Soto Zen, but there are lots of different ways of talking about Buddhism. Buddhism is a very old religion. There are more sects of Buddhism than there are in Christianity, I'd be willing to bet. Just as in Christianity, there have been schisms in Buddhism; there have been splits; there have been sub-sects of splinters; there have been wars; it's all happened. People are people, no matter how they're trained to come to the truth. So when I talk about Soto Zen, I'm talking about a particular training. Soto Zen is very interesting in its training. When we come to Soto Zen, our whole life is Zen; our whole life is Buddha. You find this out first when you sit down in the zendo, because the zendo is where

you can look at it in a certain way, but the rest of the time, your whole effort should be to manifest what is Buddha. We say *Buddha*, but actually it's *truth*. What's truth? What's the truth that is so complete, that is so actual, and so real, that when you see it you immediately know it like *that*, in an uncompromising, total, complete, compassionate fashion. There are probably people in this room who have met somebody who's like that, whose whole life is the truth and you know that. You know that because when you're in front of them there is something that attracts you deeply at a gut level that you can't deny.

We have this in Zen, because anybody who's a real teacher, who has done this, who has gotten as far as they can get, is going to be teaching truth, and you know a teacher not by the way they say, "This is it; this is the true

thing," but by how they are and what they do in the world. You see somebody who has completely digested the whole course of their training and has come to some place. This teacher doesn't worry about enlightenment; this is not an issue. Digestion is the issue. And how do you know? Well, when you think about it, it's right here. When you eat, it goes through and it goes out, and what's left completely supports the vitality of your life. That's why you eat, because you know when you don't eat, then you get weak and you feel a little weird and you get faint. But

when you do eat, and it's completely digested, then you can go on and run your marathon or do whatever it is that you have to do, and it's okay; you're supported. And this is the teacher who has completely digested. There's nothing left; there are no dregs; there's no feeling of stickiness or ego; there's just this.

So how does that happen in Zen? This is just a way, right? One of many. I think it's interesting because it happens to be what I experience and continue to experience. The real drawback with Zen is that at someplace you have to commit yourself to sitting down for a long, long time into a particular kind of training, and

although there are many excellent and good Zen teachers now in the United States, all other teachers and all other students still have to come to them and say, "Yes, I'm going to do this; I'm going to take it on; for a certain number of hours a day, I'm going to sit zazen; if you tell me what to do, I'm going to do it because I see you as somebody who has digested pretty well." Taking on and doing what someone tells you to do, and taking on sitting a certain number of hours, is a fairly major thing in your life. This practice is not based on books. This practice is a very experiential thing. This practice is a lot about cleaning the toilets when you're told to clean the toilets; it's a lot about cooking; it's a lot about cleaning, much cleaning, more cleaning than you can possibly know, in fact. It's a lot about your teacher saying to you, "I don't think so; go back and sit some more." It's

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a lot about looking at what's going on when you sit.

What did the Buddha teach about meditation? He said two things—if you read the sutras over and over again, you'll see two things: “clearly aware” and “mindfully aware.” “Clearly aware” is when you know that you have the intention to do this: you have a clear awareness of what you're setting down to do. “Mindfully aware” is the intention you bring to what is actually going on for you.

So this is what meditation is. Meditation is knowing what's going on. When you know what's going on, then actually you begin to see what your tendencies are. Your tendencies are not always so pleasant. Your tendencies may have to do with anger, revenge, envy, jealousy, anxiety—it may not feel so good to meditate. Sometimes you have these really pleasant times when it feels good and you're blissful, and sometimes you're really overwhelmed by a lot of emotional stuff. Other times you may find that you just can't stop thinking. This must be familiar. You can't stop thinking. So the object of meditation is just to know what's happening. It's not to make anything go away.

It truly is not. It's not to make yourself stop thinking. It's not to have a completely blank mind, because we don't have blank minds; we have this stuff that goes on over and over and over again. And in fact, the nature of our curiosity and the nature of finding out truth are to know what goes on in our minds. And when you look at your mind, what you find is that nothing stays the same. There's not one thought you have that's eternal. Not one. Or if anyone has one, please tell me. Not only is the thought not eternal, but neither are you. You're all in the process of aging. The minute you're born,

you're born to die. So now I sit here, with a lot of gray in my hair, and occasionally I look at myself in the mirror and I think, “Gee, that's different.” There's a place in my mind where I'm three, fifteen, twenty, thirty. I think these places are real, but actually what you're looking at is 61. In the mind there is no time, and that

can be very delusive, because you want to go back, but we're born to die. There will come a time, and we don't know when. Like the poem says, “I always knew this day would come, but yesterday I didn't know it would be today.” So there will come a time, and maybe we'll actually face that consciously, which we kind of like to think we will, and maybe it will come at us from behind because some MUNI bus will go whack and we won't know anything about it. There's a lot of different ways for this to happen.

Now, this shouldn't be too hard to do. Everyone think of something that's going on in their life where they had just real resistance. Didn't want to do it. Really didn't want to do it. I'll give you my example, okay? At the Zen Center, we have a standard form of service

which we've been doing for many, many years. It was in the past three years that they took all the sutras that we've been chanting, that I've been chanting since I was a mere young thing in Zen, and changed them all, changed the wording, changed a lot of things. I have huge resistance to this. Huge. I don't want to chant these chants. I don't want to do this. I want to do the things I do. The thing I do is what I want. This is very strong. Very strong. That's the kind of thing I'm talking about in your life. Okay? Think of that.

Now, think of dying, where you have no choice. How

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do you take it? There will come a time when you can't say no, when we say yes. What is this truth that enables us to say yes? It's not simply emptiness. It's not no mind at all. It's a living, vital thing. And the way we find it is by being present with everything we are. And eating it, completely, and then shitting it out completely. And what's left? What's left is the presence and vitality that enables us to live life completely and die completely.

I don't think that this is something that you can only attain by practicing Soto Zen. I don't believe this at all. What I do believe is that anybody who has strong intention and a way to practice meditation and somebody to talk to and a willingness to listen and be guided can do this. It doesn't depend on robes; it doesn't depend on being ordained; it doesn't depend on any of that, for any of you. And I think you all want to. We all do. But what it does depend on is knowing what happened in the last half hour. Big Time.

So I'm going to talk about meditation a little bit. I'm not going to give you the official Soto Zen version of how to meditate, because that's just "count from one to ten"

and it took me years to realize what it meant to count from one to ten. This is more my eclectic personal version that I've developed over some time.

When you sit, no matter how you sit, whether you're sitting on a chair or your zabutons and zafus, a major point is to find a place of solidity and contact. Whether that's your butt on the zafu or your hands on your legs, find some place that you can come back to. When you're feeling overwhelmed or nothing especially seems to be going on, this is a place for you to begin; this contact is a very solid thing. I don't actually think it's a requirement that you sit bolt upright. I sit bolt upright because of many, many years of doing so, but I don't necessarily think this is the only way you have to sit. Many people slump. It's okay; you just can't breathe as deeply, that's all. Sometimes the meditation itself draws you upright, and you find that you can do it. Other times, you might just sort of slump. And at other times you may go to

sleep, and you drift back and forth, and sway back and forth. The main thing is to find a stable posture, however you're doing it. And if you're sitting in a chair, it's probably good to keep both of your feet on the floor, because that's a much more stable posture.

Then the next thing is that you bring your attention to your mind – in the first place you do bring your attention to the mind, and this is sort of an unfamiliar thing to many people. So when you do what you think is looking at your mind, lots of different stuff will start to happen. Initially, certainly at first, it will be very confusing, because many

people have never really sat down and looked. So you'll get a lot of thoughts or a lot of images, or lot of whatevers going on. But as you continue to sit over a period of time, you will find that stuff begins to slow down, and not be so intense, and that there are moments, between the thoughts and between the images, of quietness. The quietness is not something to obtain; it's actually something that happens, an effect of the meditation, essentially. And I think as you apply yourself continuously to noticing what's

happening, there's a place that you notice from, and in my body I identify that as somewhere in the back of my skull. It's not an I thing; it's not me watching; it's a place of consciousness, and that consciousness is awareness. It's not what we think about as ego. It's simply awareness. And that awareness is what you're attempting to cultivate so that you can see what is happening.

This is an ongoing thing, truth. You don't get to one moment of truth and then have the whole thing, because that makes it fixed and that's not where we are. Truth is a vital energetic ever-flowing thing. It's there all the time; we all have it, and this has been just a little bit about how to connect to that Truth that's here for all of us as we sit in this room. We're all connected. A lot of lines are going out anywhere, and the basis of the line is truth. When you have the truth, you see that everybody's the same. And that's a great thing. It's a great thing. And you can hold on to it. ■

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Jim Wilson Stepping Down as Monthly Speaker

BY CLINT SEITER

For several years now, GBF has had the privilege of having Jim Wilson speak to our gatherings on the first Sunday of each month. After November, Jim's schedule will no longer permit him to continue his monthly talks, although we do hope to have him back as a guest speaker from time to time.

Many of Jim's talks have centered on the virtue of gratitude, and it is with a spirit of great gratitude that we at GBF thank Jim for all the gifts he's given our community over the years: his wealth of knowledge of the dharma, his passion to share it with others, his wonderful sense of humor, his patience, his open and loving nature. You are a much-loved brother in our community, Jim, and you will always be welcome here. Many, many thanks for everything you've given us, and good luck with your future endeavors. ■

Prisoners Urgently Need Buddhist Books

The most frequent request from gay Buddhist prisoners, other than pen pals, is for books. In many prisons, they are circulated among small 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. ■

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.

October / November GBF Sunday Speakers

October 5 **Jim Wilson**

Jim Wilson, the former abbot of the Chogyo Zen Center in New York, has studied in the Chogyo, Fuke, and Soto traditions of Zen. In addition to speaking at GBF on the first Sunday of each month, he leads a weekly sutra salon in Sebastopol.

October 12 **David Holmes**

David Holmes will speak on the practical implications of David Brazier's book *The Feeling Buddha*, which presents an exciting new look at the most ancient Buddhist teaching: the Dharma Chakra Pravartan Sutra (The Setting in Motion of the Wheel of the Dharma). The Four Noble Truths like you've never seen them before.

October 19 **Open Discussion**

October 26 **Roger Corless**

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. He is the author of several books, including the widely praised *Vision of Buddhism: The Space Under the Tree*.

November 2 **Jim Wilson**

November 9 **Diana Elrod**

Diana Elrod, an active member of Soka Gakkai International (SGI), will speak about the Nichiren tradition.

November 16 **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.

November 23 **Open discussion**

November 30 **Losang Monlam**

Losang Monlam is a monk and spiritual program coordinator for the Tse Chen Ling Center for Tibetan Buddhist Studies in San Francisco. He will lead us in a traditional Tibetan Buddhist meditation at 10:30 and give a dharma talk at 11:00.

Miss a Dharma Talk?

You can listen to it on the Internet.

Audio files of Dharma talks are available on the GBF website.

How to Reach Us

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

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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 November 2, 2003.

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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