



# Gay Buddhist Fellowship

FEBRUARY / MARCH 2004

## Attachment and Aversion

BY STEVE PESKIND

Steve Peskind, co-founder of the Coming Home Hospice, the San Francisco Shanti Project, and the Buddhist AIDS Project, has practiced meditation since 1973. He spoke to us on December 21, 2003.

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.

Last time I was here—I think was about a year ago—I spoke at length about a relatively new fresh diagnosis with cancer that I'm living with—it's two years as of this month—and some of the vicissitudes and challenges of living with that knowledge, and some of the struggles. It can be considered a "heavy" topic, but it is in fact just real life itself. Many of us, I'm sure, have had more than enough experience already in this life with the realities of living and dying in various ways. Watching *Angels in America* on HBO was a revisiting for me of many of the lessons and some of the angst of the 1980's when I first became really involved in a heart level with hospice work and being there for our comrades "in many distressed disguises," as Mother Theresa would say, and slowly learning to be there for myself. I did a lot of things the hard way. I still do sometimes, of course. This morning as I was sitting and thinking, I realized one of the things in my own practice has to do with aversion and attachment, which are of course at the very heart of our living and our living and dying: feeling viscerally, not just as an idea but as a true body experience, what we all go through when we're living with the challenge of a life-threatening illness or serious illness or injury. Sometimes those two things, aversion, pushing away, and grasping, pulling near, are very strong, and I want to speak to that this morning.

There's the third alternative, as well, which is just letting be, and not pushing and pulling, which can be either passive or neutral, or it can actually be letting go of the need to push and pull. These three dance—day by day, hour by hour, moment by moment. I'm using these words in my practice when they come up and I'm simply watching: plus, minus, neutral, or yes, no, maybe so. I'm attempting and intending to experience these parts of mental experience viscerally, meaning how it really feels in my body. I find an aversion and often act out somatically the experience of pushing away. There's an actual experience of imagining or feeling my hands pushing something I don't want to experience, whether it's pain or a cancer therapy side effect, just away—I want it out of my space. I don't want it there. I DON'T WANT IT THERE. The other side of it, of course, is seeing things that I'm very attached to, the most significant attachment being myself, and my lover Bob, who's sitting right here, my lover and friend of 27 years, and other loved ones whom I'm very close to—I feel very

strong body sensations of wanting to pull them near—literally pull them out of the phenomenal space towards me and close to me. Somaticizing these feelings really helps practice. I wanted to bring that to the meeting today. I recommend that you do this yourself — if you can or it appeals to you. And if it doesn't appeal to you, feel yourself pushing it away! Feel what that is like. I know when I sit with it and just let that particular way of thinking of it come in, I feel this all day long. I can actually feel myself in this on-going dance, not only in an awake state, but in dreaming as well, though in dreaming I'm not usually aware enough or present enough mindfully to be able to work with it the way I can when I'm awake. Pushing, pulling, pushing, pulling—all day long: you, come closer; you, go away; you, get out of my face. Driving is a wonderful place to practice this. It's amazing what comes up with driving. It's like a little private space in a tin box with a motor, and I know for myself that it becomes my body, and I get very protective. I also can get very aggressive, moreso than I would with a person. Anyway, that just came up as an aside to the fact that the stance goes on in every realm of living.

**GBF:** When you say “somaticize,” it brings back a lot of Zen practice. So if you say “somaticize,” it's like making real or developing a sense of feeling the body where it is, so that when you say “somaticize,” do you feel that you reach out so it's not just an awareness?

**SP:** Yes. I will be sitting, and at times when the magic eight ball is always working and things just come up, I can't control the flow of thoughts — one can't — and so

**One of the focuses of the dharma, the main focus, is non-grasping—to realize the more you let go, the freer you are. And death and dying, if anything, is a teaching about letting go if you approach it and welcome it in your heart and life as such a teaching.**

when something comes up that I have aversion to, I will come out of my position and go like this (pushing away). And other times, with something that I have a very strong desire for or attachment to, I will clasp my hands together, which is also an interesting exercise, and try to pull that image or that attraction towards me. You (to Bob) are often in that category as I anticipatorily grieve and appreciate the wonder of our connection. I mention this experience just in itself. Make a fist, if you will, and just feel what it's like to grasp and to hold and to shrink space in

your hand, and then slowly open your hand and feel what that's like. This exercise is so simple. Right now I'm feeling the difference between the grasping and the opening and how this is symbolic of so much. So many Buddhist mudras, in the tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, for example, are based on opening and closing the hand. If you look at the pictures of the Bodhisatvas, for example, Green Tara or others, there's the open hand reaching down on the right indicating the openness and release of letting go. Letting go of attachment is the key teaching of all the Buddhist traditions—Theravadan, Zen, Vajrayana—and this simple exercise can put you in touch with that. This dance of grasping—this is another way of doing pushing and pulling: grasping, letting go, grasping, letting go. One can, of course, push away with an open hand. It depends on the movement and the intention. And a fist is another way of doing that. But these simple exercises of pushing and pulling and grasping are ways to express the Buddha dharma in the body, to make it very vivid.

As a person with an illness, I have become more aware, in many ways, of my body, and I'm going to be getting more aware, which scares me, partly, and I also see it as an opportunity. With respect to the illness itself, cancer is a lot like AIDS but not the same. And it's different for everyone. AIDS is different for everyone, the experience of living with it. Cancer is similar in a sense of being invaded and battling inside forces that you can't see and using very powerful medicines which themselves are toxic, often, but done with compassion. Chemotherapy has a very bad reputation in our world for side effects and the way the chemicals are used, but I also try to remember and consider the compassion of all the people who helped make those chemotherapies possible. Once at Zen Center, Thich Nhat Hanh, a Zen Buddhist teacher from Vietnam, held up a bowl of rice and he invited all the people in attendance to consider a bowl of rice and what was really in the bowl of rice in terms of inter-being with everything: the farmers who grew the rice and planted the rice, the rain, the sun, the air, the intentions of the harvesters, the people who delivered the rice and processed it, the people who cooked the rice. There's the whole world. And the way he speaks is entrancing. He is so present. When he speaks of mindfulness, he's living mindfulness. It was a powerful experience for me, needless to say. I think of that with the chemo bags. Each time I get chemotherapy, I try to look at the bag that way and realize how much research, how many people experimented on themselves to produce a good chemotherapy that actually can stall the progress of cancer in the body. They can't cure it yet—I know that—and that's a hard knock if you're attached to survival. But they can really really give it a hard time! Some of the chemicals work for some; some don't. This year, until two weeks ago, I had chemos that did not work. All year I was losing ground—until about two weeks ago. I wouldn't be here today if it hadn't changed. I entered hospice just

before Thanksgiving as a client, as one who was going to get ready to go because I was having very bad side effects and the cancer symptoms were starting to manifest more strongly, including pain, and nausea mostly. Nausea is no fun! Pain is not so much fun either. But there were some good palliative medicines available to help stabilize me at that point. Then I fortunately was able to try a drug that was just approved by the FDA this year, and it worked very quickly for me, which was very fortunate and has given me more time.

**GBF:** I wonder if you would address the relationship between the Buddhist letting go and the more New Age idea of opening to what you want and being clear about your desires, creating your desires.

**SP:** Manifesting your desires? The laws of manifestation? Well, it's pertinent to this situation, that's for sure. I have to be very clear, or I should say it's an invitation for me to be clear, to know what my desires are, in terms of living and dying. Two weeks ago was I very tired and weary of the effort to survive. I had had six chemotherapy protocols, six different drugs, three radiations, including two experimental but very effective whole brain radiations, one surgery which saved my life at the beginning of the cancer. I was diagnosed at a very late stage. I didn't have lung cancer—how could I get lung cancer? I think I shared this the last time I was here. I couldn't believe it: I'm a total non-smoker. Of course, it's not just smokers who get lung cancer. About 50% are nonsmokers. I remember telling my doctor when I was diagnosed, "I can't get cancer. I go to Whole Foods. This doesn't make any sense." Surprise on me. I have to admit it still feels a little bit like that. If I ask myself why, I don't know. I don't know how, and I don't know why. And that is the truth of death and dying and impermanence for all of us. We don't know, none of us. Ten out of ten of us still die, and we do not know when or how exactly it's going to happen. Don Juan's advice to Carlos Castaneda, which was a strong influence on me at a certain time when I was just going into college, "to keep death as an advisor," was very good advice, and it's very hard to do it. Denial is a wonderful thing. If anyone tells you it's not, it's baloney. Denial is terror management in a certain sense. It's a way to keep the harsh realities at bay, and we all like to live in this bubble of immortality and not really consider the reality of death. It's impossible for me to imagine that "I"—my favorite mantra, "I I I I"—am going to disappear. How can "I"—which from a Buddhist perspective is a false construct anyway, in any sense of reality, the essence of reality—how can I imagine itself disappearing when it is so invested in perpetuating the illusion of continuity of self? We are—I'll speak for myself—I'm very invested in this "I" continuing. I'm attached to my story, my biography, and just gentle mindful looking at your biography is also a very useful exercise to do in light of dying. All of your cherished identities—your name, your rank, your different

roles, son, lover, gay man, Buddhist—all of these descriptive words are up for grabs. They're really up to be changed, drastically, and to be let go of—which leads me to your question. Desire and wanting relatively good stuff—love, food, shelter, clothing, protection, safety, real connection with another human being, be it as a friend or a lover—these are natural relative desires of the human realm, and practices to manifest that more clearly and

**Simple kindness—sometimes called loving kindness, sometimes called compassion—makes all the difference in the world. If you're coming towards an experience and your self and other people and dogs and insects—all sentient beings—with kindness, they can tell. All living beings, sentient beings, can pretty much tell the difference between kindness and harm. And I would ask you all to be mindful of that, how you treat yourself and your own challenges, as well as other people. Kindness generally opens people up. . . . Harm closes things down.**

potently are good. The question from a Buddhist perspective is attachment. There's nothing wrong per se with the realm of desire. And the negative desires or aversions are a form of desire negatively expressed. Hatred is the most extreme form. Fear, anger, aggression—those come up too; they don't just disappear unless one has cleansed one's mind enough—whether in the way of the arhat or the bodhisattva—for them to be minimized, or gone altogether, but until that happens, they are part and parcel of life, grist for the mill as one teacher calls it, and they need to be honored and gone into and investigated rather than averted and ignored and pushed away. Pushing away and not paying attention won't get you very far, other than a stronger aversion, stronger habits. The law of manifestation, as far as I can reckon, is not anti-Buddhist. There's a lot of criticism about this, particularly when it seems to interfere

with Buddhist teaching. This comes up often with Soka Gakkai and some forms of practice of Nichiren Shoshu, which is a Pure Land Buddhist practice. My introduction to Buddhism, actually, besides studying, was getting Shakubukued on Santa Monica Beach. Shakubuku is the proselytizing, very enthusiastic way to recruit to new people, and part of the promise then was that you could get anything you want by focusing your mind and chanting the first lines of the Lotus Sutra, according to Nichiren Daishonin, who is the founder of that sect. Again, the key word is attachment.

**Trust your karma and the intention that brought you here this morning to be with a Buddhist group, as brothers. Trust that—that you will get the help that is available to you, the help that you need, help in the spiritual physics that we’re all living in, the spiritual physics of love, real love, wisdom, the ability to see clearly and understand what is going on more clearly, and compassion, which I am experiencing as being toward everyone all the time. The compassion of the universe is after us, is towards us moment by moment.**

I brought a book today which I really really appreciate because it responds very clearly to many of the questions we all carry around with us as Western Buddhists, sometimes getting confused by the different flavors—that’s kind of a light word—the very strong traditions under the Buddhist umbrella. This is called *One Dharma* by Joseph Goldstein, and it’s a great book for reference and for getting a grounded perspective in dealing with Buddhism as it is playing out in the West. He quotes the Buddha with respect to attachment and what might be called false refuge. When we take refuge in these things that we are manifesting as what’s going to make us happy, that we’re

going to find true happiness and freedom through having, rather than through being—to the Buddha, after his awakening, that seemed very foolish. “It was the Buddha’s reflection on impermanence that inspired the Bodhisattva, what we call the Buddha before his enlightenment, and his quest for awakening. As he sought to discover that which is unborn and undying, he asked, ‘Why, being myself subject to birth, do I seek what is also subject to birth? Why, being subject to aging, sickness, death and sorrow, do I seek what is also subject to aging, sickness, death and sorrow? Subject to change, why do we seek what is also subject to change?’ Although on some level we may see and understand the futility of seeking fulfillment in things that by their very nature don’t last, we often still find ourselves living our lives waiting for the next hit of experience, whether it is the next vacation, the next relationship, the next meal, or even the next breath.” I can see getting very attached to the breath, if one’s breathing is in jeopardy. “We lean forward and so stay forever entangled in anticipation. Reflecting on and directly observing impermanence reminds us again and again that all experience is simply part of an endlessly passing show.” That is the key, to keep that in mind, as we’re engaging life, relatively speaking. I use the word “relative” because another very helpful Buddhist teaching is the distinction between relative and absolute or ultimate perspective. From the ultimate perspective, there is perhaps nothing to gain at all, or nothing to do – or perhaps there is on the path of cultivating the union of awareness and emptiness which is expressed in Zen and Mahamudra and Dzogchen teachings of Zen and Vajrayana—but the point here is that the dharma is available to us to use as a tool and one of the focuses of the dharma, the main focus, is non-grasping—to realize the more you let go, the freer you are. And death and dying, if anything, is a teaching about letting go if you approach it and welcome it in your heart and life as such a teaching. I don’t claim to be able to do that a lot of the time. Sometimes I can, but sometimes I get very caught up in the drama of “me” and what I’m going to lose, and what a pain it’s going to be to go to elementary school again if that’s what I have to do. I don’t know. I haven’t a clue. That’s the other thing that’s so wonderful about being in the state of not knowing—the mystery of it all. We know so much, we think, technologically, and for God’s sake, we have broadband and DSL, and nanotechnology isn’t far away and all these things. I was looking at the newspaper last weekend, and I never read the ads, but I did last Sunday because I was feeling good and I was feeling lustful for stuff. I was looking at these plasma TV screens.

**GBF:** 50 inches.

**SP:** Yeah! Wow! Talk about size! The flat screens and computers hooked up to plasma monitors right to the Internet and, oh, man, these are like the finest toys, not to mention digital cameras and cell phones with TV monitors. So I was reading ads for an hour. And I was watch-

ing myself, to some extent, reading ads for an hour, and I was reminded again about what I just read from the Buddha. It's so easy to be seduced by this culture. This culture is seducing us 24 hours a day, seven days a week, whether it's on the Internet or on TV or in newspapers. I was without a computer for two weeks—these last two weeks my computer crashed and we rebuilt it. That was kind of nice. I was surprised that I could live without the Internet for two weeks. And five years ago I didn't even know what it was. So I invite you to look at things you think and feel you can't live without. In hospice, at Shanti and other places that I've worked, we did an exercise where we asked each person to take five cards and on each write down five things or people they were most attached to and to rank them—one, two, three, four, five. We had five rounds of the Angel of Death, and sometimes the Angel would be in wonderful death drag, whatever that is. The Angel of Death would go around a circle of volunteers in training and one by one take a card away from them. And we would ask people how they felt. And they didn't like it. And by the time they got to cards number two and one, you could feel the tension in the room. In fact, one of the people had to scream. People were getting really upset; they were identifying with the exercise, and they were also realizing the truth of the exercise, that this wasn't just theoretical. And that's perhaps a point that I can end with. There are another couple of points. Bob is laughing because he knows how much I love to talk. It's true. I'm attached to words, too. These teachings that the Buddha is offering us through all the different forms of Buddha dharma are not theoretical. They can be taken that way, intellectually, which is fine, and you can understand them more deeply that way. But they need to be lived and experienced to make a difference in the quality of your life and your death. People who have had experience disappearing already before dying through meditation or through service or whatever their yoga is that they have practiced wholeheartedly—they will have perhaps, and it is a perhaps, more freedom and less fear in approaching the final dissolution of the body. I often say, when I'm talking about this stuff lately, that it's not just words. Sitting is a good thing. It's not just a good idea. It really makes a difference if you sit every day and practice letting go and visiting with your mind and heart in a gentle releasing way.

Two other lessons I would like to pass on at this point in my life are that simple kindness, sometimes called loving kindness, sometimes called compassion—they often get mixed together with other definitions—makes all the difference in the world. If you're coming towards an experience and your self and other people and dogs and insects — all sentient beings—with kindness, they can tell. All living beings, sentient beings, can pretty much tell the difference between kindness and harm. And I would ask you all to be mindful of that, how you treat yourself and your own challenges, as well as other people. Kindness generally opens

people up, depending on the kindness. And opening up feels more inclusive and warm and participatory in the great dance of inter-being that we're all part of. Harm closes things down, contracts, closes us up to experiencing things as they are. It makes a huge difference. I can feel it with nurses in the chemo infusion center. I can feel which ones have been really frazzled all day, and they get really frazzled, some of them, and they just want to get you done. They want to get your I.V. in, and they don't want any problems with the I.V., and it's, like, poke! This is the extreme example, but you can tell. Your whole body can feel that. That's harm and kindness at the same time. And that often happens. That can be schizo-making, but it happens a lot. And we do this a lot. We have good intentions, but don't we don't do it mindfully, or skillfully, maybe, is the word. So kindness and harm are things I'm very aware of.

Another aspect of experience that I'll end with is that who we are, our Buddha nature—there are so many words for it, descriptive words, “raids on the unspeakable,” as Thomas Merton, the Christian monk, said—Buddha nature, nature of mind, ultimate truth, primordial wisdom—these are real. These descriptive words are pointing to an aspect of our own experience which is true in all of us, our Buddha seeds of all of our awarenesses. We're greater than AIDS and cancer and any other hardship, relative hardship, in our life will ever be. That aspect of us, that quality, that essence, is here, all the time, in my experience, my take on the situation, although there has been some argument about that. I believe that it is true. I have seen people who are not practitioners—this is another notion people have, that you have to be a very good practitioner to die well or to go through the process well because if you haven't practiced how do you expect to do that on your death bed, right? Well, that is a good point. Practice really does help, if you practice well and authentically. But I have seen people open up and transform to letting go on profound levels without much practice at all, but somehow or for some reason they are ripe to be there at that time in their life, and the message here is to please, trust your karma and the intention that brought you here this morning to be with a Buddhist group, as brothers. Trust that—that you will get the help that is available to you, help in the spiritual physics that we're all living in, the spiritual physics of love, real love, wisdom, the ability to see clearly and understand what is going on more clearly, and compassion, which I am experiencing as being toward everyone all the time. The compassion of the universe is after us, is towards us moment by moment. It really feels like that to me, sometimes.

So those are a few thoughts for a Sunday morning before the Solstice. The shortest day of the year is tomorrow, the longest night of the year tonight. The Solstice is tomorrow morning, and for me that is an important holiday because spring and rebirth are happening already with the first rains, and that makes me happy. I'm glad about that. I like that cycle very much, to be on that side of the cycle, especially. ■

# GBF

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## Learn about the Dharma with Dharma Daddy

A study group on *The Vision of Buddhism* (St Paul MN: Paragon House, 1989) facilitated by the author, Roger Corless (aka Dharma Daddy), will start in February and meet monthly, usually on the second Wednesday of the month, until we finish the book or have run out of energy. Participants are asked, if possible, to prepare for the first meeting by reading the Introduction (pages xvii - xxi) and The Life of the Buddha (pages 3 - 15). The book may be purchased through any bookstore, or on line from the publisher or [amazon.com](http://amazon.com). If Dharma Daddy is organized, he will have some copies with him to sell at an attractive discount. The first meeting will take place on **Wednesday February 11** between 7 p.m. and 8:30 p.m. at the home of Bob Seidle-Khan, 352 Waller (at Fillmore), who has kindly offered his space until further notice. A donation of \$5 per class is suggested for those who can afford it. Call Roger at (707) 748-7217 for further information. ■

## 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 Weipert at (510) 540-0307, or email him at [GDWiepert@aol.com](mailto: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.

## February / March GBF Sunday Speakers

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**February 1**      **Open discussion**

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**February 8**      **Don Weipart**

Don Weipart is the coordinator of GBF's Gay Prisoner Outreach Program.

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**February 15**      **Diana Elrod**

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

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**February 22**      **Ji-Sing Norman Eng**

Ji-Sing Norman Eng is the facilitator of Q-Sangha and the "Minister of Buddhist Spirituality" at the Metropolitan Community Church of San Francisco. His main spiritual teacher is Thich Nhat Hanh ("Thay"), and he was ordained by Thay into the "Order of Interbeing" (Unified Buddhist Church) in 2003 with the Dharma name of "True Wonderful Happiness."

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**February 29**      **Blanche Hartman**

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

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**March 7**      **Venerable Losang Monlam**

Losang Monlam is a monk and spiritual program coordinator for the Tse Chen Ling Center for Tibetan Buddhist Studies in San Francisco.

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**March 14**      **Noah Levine**

Noah Levine is a teacher in training with Jack Kornfield at Spirit Rock Meditation Center. He teaches a weekly group in San Francisco and regularly teaches daylongs at Spirit Rock. He also teaches meditation in juvenile halls and at San Quentin prison. He is the author of *Dharma Punx*, a personal memoir that recounts his life's transition from street punk drug addict to recovering addict and Buddhist practitioner.

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**March 21**      **Open discussion**

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**March 28**      **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*.

In order to maximize the amount of time for our Sunday dharma talks, the Steering Committee has decided to eliminate the five-ten minute break after the meditation period. Instead, we will now just stand and stretch in place and then continue the meeting. Of course, anyone who has to go to the bathroom may do so, but you are encouraged to go before the sitting.

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### Miss a Dharma Talk?

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

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### How to Reach Us

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

**415 / 974-9878**

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World Wide Web Site

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

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GBF Newsletter

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### 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](http://www.groups.yahoo.com/group/gaybuddhistfellowship)**

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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