



Gay Buddhist Fellowship

FEBRUARY / MARCH 2005

The Gay Buddhist
Fellowship supports
Buddhist practice in the
Gay men's community.
It is a forum that
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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.

The Kindness of Strangers: The Dharma and Tennessee Williams

BY PHILIP MOFFAT

Phillip Moffitt began studying Raja meditation in 1972 and Vipassana meditation in 1983. A member of the Spirit Rock Teachers Council, he teaches Vipassana retreats throughout the country and is the founder of the Life Balance Institute. He writes the Dharma Wisdom column for *Yoga Journal* and is the co-author of *The Power to Heal*. He spoke to GBF on May 25, 2003.

Today's topic is the dharma and Tennessee Williams. We're going to just take one little snippet of Tennessee Williams as our focus for this dharma. There are so many other things in what he wrote that lend themselves to dharmic understanding, but what we're focusing on today is *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Has everyone seen the movie or the play? Let's see how many hands. A few of you haven't. So *A Streetcar Named Desire* takes place at the end of World War II in New Orleans and there's a great social change that's occurring in the country, particularly in the South, which had been very stratified and protective of a certain class of people. The end of the war brought a lot of changes to that part of the country. I know something about this because that's where I grew up—in the South. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, there's a woman who suddenly appears uninvited to stay with her older sister and her new husband in a working class neighborhood of New Orleans. The resolution of the story is what happens with this woman, whose name is Blanche. Those of you who are movie buffs know that Marlon Brando played the lead both on Broadway and in the movie. In the course watching her try to make a new life for herself in this place where she is not welcome, we see the destruction of a human being. She just completely loses it. She is humiliated and shamed, she ends up being raped by the husband of her sister, and all of her secrets are revealed. In the course of this, she is shattered. At the very end, she's being taken to an asylum after having had a nervous breakdown, and she ends this whole process with one of the great lines in American theatre: "I have always depended on the kindness of strangers."

So the dharma talk today is about the truth of how we're all dependent on the kindness of strangers. In universities, Blanche is typically taught as an image of someone self-destructing, and the play is taught in the context of a social structure collapsing. What's not usually referred to is the fact that she was also

very typical of a kind of Southern woman, the last of which are only now dying out in the South. They had a kind of role to play in an artificial society. They were “protected.” They were supposed to be frail, ladylike—regardless of their actual behavior—and they were supposed to hold a certain image, a certain myth that plagued the South, this myth originating in many ways with the existence of slavery and the great denial that was required for slavery and then the continual suppression and total racism that occurred after the end of the Civil War and up until really modern times in the South. And so Blanche is part of that class of women that were the plantation owners, that were at the top of their society, which had lots of rules and mannerisms in which politeness and appearances were what ruled the day. And so part of her collapse, from

what empowers: it’s what gives dignity; it’s what gives meaning. So in any situation with a unilateral “I am dependent on the kindness of strangers, I have always been dependent on the kindness of strangers,” without that sense of exchange, you have something that has no life in it, that has no dignity, that is in fact a lie, a denial of life.

And then the third statement Williams was making with this is that, in fact, she is the one who is the stranger: she had no one that she was genuinely related to, so she was a stranger to all. So it’s just the opposite of what she said. “I am the stranger, and I have not been met with kindness.” That’s the real statement in this. Tennessee Williams had an abusive alcoholic father and an alcoholic mother and was tormented all the way through school, so he understood these levels and was able to capture them.

If we deny our dependency on the kindness of strangers, we fall into tribalism. In our society, as is true in societies all over the world, there’s a tremendous tendency to fall into tribalism, to shut out. As soon as we do that, we are beginning to live a lie. It’s just not true. We are interdependent. It’s just the truth.

that point of view, is the actual realization of a lie. Her collapse points to a truth that is not named, which is something Tennessee Williams was quite brilliant at doing. In the whole Southern society, language had to be indirect. You could not say. So therefore you had to say by your silence or by pointing to something that stood for something else. Highly symbolic. I refer to it as Southern Gothic language. So many great American writers came from the South because, in my view, they grew up seeing these different layers existing at one time, this artificiality, this kind of code speaking, and lo and behold, they saw a kind of drama around that and they developed a sensitivity to that drama and a sensitivity to language that allowed them to capture it. Faulkner, Thomas Woolf—you can go on and on with writers that fit into this.

So her line, “I have always depended on the kindness of strangers,” is a triple statement. It’s not a single statement. First of all, in the play and the movie you realize that in fact strangers had never helped. She has already been let down by strangers, in fact. Secondly, you cannot choose dependence, so you can’t say, “I am dependent on the kindness of strangers,” as though you have the right to demand or to expect it, and yet in her class, who she represented, there was a great deal of this kind of expectation, a kind of passive-aggression, a kind of demand that is just there, just as when she showed up at her sister’s place uninvited. We depend on the kindness of strangers because we in turn are prepared to offer kindness to strangers. In any social structure there is an exchange, and the exchange is

So at the very end, Blanche, in her collapsed state, finally said a kind of truth. Although she was misstating in many ways, even in the misstating she had finally said something true about being dependent on the kindness of strangers, something true about all of us, something true about the society that she was part of, something that’s just as true for us today. Her problem—and we’ll see how the dharma is revealed through that—was that she was so weighted, so unprepared as an individual, or as a type of person, to enter into, to be part of any kind of an exchange in love. And so therefore she couldn’t live the truth about dependency. So in some way all of us are Blanche. Each of us is very much dependent on the kindness of strangers. An easy example of this is what happened on 9/11. Some strangers who felt as though *we* were the strangers took 3,000 lives. There was no kindness, maybe no kindness perceived in either direction. A more typical example—and one very much unnoticed because it’s too scary in our society—is that just recently in the Midwest there was food poisoning around a butcher shop/grocery store, and more than 100 people were poisoned by this food. What happened is that these two employees had been in a fight and one employee poisoned the food because he thought the other guy would be blamed for it. He had no consideration for all of those who would eat the meat, who were strangers. The people who prepare your food in restaurants, the people who make your medicine, are strangers. There was a well-publicized case of the pharmacist who was diluting the cancer medicine in Missouri. We are all

dependent on the kindness of strangers. It's a very scary truth. Likewise, in our emotional well-being, walking down the street, being in any kind of a situation, we are all affected deeply by how strangers treat us, not just in terms of threatening us or hurting us, but in the manner of being either received as a human being or treated somehow as less, not as good as, inferior to. That can be for any reason whatsoever, for color, for sexual orientation, for gender, for geographic origin, for religion, for your role in earning a living. So there are many different ways that there can be this lack of kindness, and it affects us all.

So from a dharma point of view, we always start with "this moment is like this." We are committed to living in the present, even if the present moment is very unpleasant and we really think, "I wish this would end; I wish I'd never found myself in this situation; I can't stand this"—the call is still to live in the Eternal Now, because all of life is in this moment. The Buddha described it as clinging or grasping, clinging to something present to continue, grasping at the past or the future, trying to have something unpleasant go away or not happen: this is the cause of suffering. To be able to stay in the moment requires courage and a willingness to be vulnerable, not vulnerable in a collapsing or falling into hopelessness, but vulnerable to say, "The truth is, I am dependent on the kindness of strangers, who are not always going to be kind." This is the irony. There would be no courage or vulnerability if they were always going to be kind. The fact that there is this pain and pleasure, gain and loss, these terrible twinges, as the Buddha referred to them—it's not a mistake that life is like that. Life is simply like that. It prompts us to the possibility of our liberation from the everchanging flow of life, that there is a way to live in this moment that is not free of the fluctuations that happen to us.

So one of the skills that's required is to be able to integrate the truth that we are the stranger, and at same time we are also the Marlon Brando character. We have the power to be kind and not kind to others, and if we perceive ourselves as not having been kind or as vulnerable to unkindness, it's much harder to be willing to be kind, because we're not necessarily rewarded for kindness to strangers. From a Buddhadharma perspective, you don't do it for reward; you do it because the act itself is the reward, because you are connecting, because you are living the truth of our mutual dependence. Marlon Brando in the movie could not do this because he was too frightened. He was too hostile to a class; he could only see the world from his perspective, so he lacked a cultivation of the heart. He is portrayed as a very invigorating, very enticing character. It's not like he's a totally bad person, but he has a closed heart, and he has such a closed heart that he can make someone completely the other to the point of raping this fragile woman.

So our last struggle is not to fall into our shadow in that way, not to be unkind in our words and our deeds to others. Spiritual teachers of all stripes have forever acknowledged this problem of the stranger. Bhikku Bodhi, in his

talking about the Buddhist teaching on the eight-fold path, says, "If compassion is initially difficult to arouse towards beings who are totally strangers, one can strengthen it by reflecting on the Buddha's dictum that in this beginning of cycle of rebirths, it is hard to find even a single being who has not at some time been one's own mother or father, sister or brother, son or daughter." Hard to find a single being. You may or may not believe in these cycles of life, but if that is too far afield for you, you never know when the person you are walking by on the street today is going to be the one who saves your life tomorrow, or who is kind in just some small way. You never know. And you never know when someone affected by your kindness will in turn be kind to someone else that you would really wish to receive kindness. So there's interconnectedness: each moment that we make a move towards kindness, we're adding to the kindness of the universe *and* we're increasing the likelihood that more kindness, in some cyclical way in this lifetime, future lifetimes, however you wish to see it, will come back. Pabongkha Rimpoche says, "If you gain equanimity towards enemies, dear ones, and strangers, through contemplation, you can then extend it to all sentient beings. When you have such an equanimity towards them, you will not categorize them into enemies and friends. It will stop you doing such evil, such worldly actions, as trying to subdue enemies."

Teacher Thich Nhat Hanh has a primary teaching coming from the Buddhist teaching that we are mutually interdependent, that there is no separateness, that separateness is an illusion caused by the mind focusing on this body form and these thought forms. Thich Nhat Hanh uses this phrase which no one has used but he uses it constantly and very beautifully, "we inter-are." Our very being-ness is we inter-are. Here's a poem he wrote:

You are me
And I am you.
Isn't it obvious
That we inter-are?
You cultivate the flower
In yourself so that I will be beautiful.
I transform the garbage in myself
So that you will not have to suffer.
I support you, you support me,
I am in this world to offer you peace.
You are in this world to bring me joy.

A very different orientation towards human interaction than what is prevailing in the myth of dog-eat-dog and survival of the fittest.

How do we incorporate this in our everyday life? Not as some sentimental belief or something that we practice when we come into sangha. When we're at work, or when we're driving our cars and there's no place to park, when we're having to be exposed to political actions that we really disagree with, how do we hold this sense of the web of inter-are in all these circumstances?

My teacher Achan Sumedo, who is part of the South-eastern Theravadan lineage coming from Achan Chaa, is probably the foremost Western teacher in this lineage, and he talks about his experience when he was in his early thirties going into a remote section of Northern Thailand to be a monk and living under very harsh conditions ten or eleven years. In the monastery, you are senior based on when you arrived. So here's this guy with a master's degree from Berkeley, who's 6'3" or 4"—a really huge guy—and when he got there, they put him in with the children, the boy monks, because they were his superiors; they were his senior. He felt like such a stranger in that situation. At first he said he really closed down around that, and then he realized, “What does this matter? Why would I continue to perceive myself as a stranger? This is just like this.” And so he found a kind of freedom from being a stranger.

The most well-known Christian story in terms of the stranger is Jesus' teaching of the good Samaritan. The way it goes is that there was an injured Jew who was lying by the road and two people of his own ilk passed him by,

live a lie. It's just not true. We are interdependent. It's just the truth. It's the heart's truth.

Once we make that fall into tribalism, it becomes easy to transform another from a thou into something less than, and then to justify hostility, ill-treatment and inequality. When we fall into that them v. us—they are the stranger—we are then subject to fear and we're much more easily manipulated by a political demagogue. You all know the truth of this from your own life experience.

There is also a claim of independence that is false and that leads to so many wrong decisions, in a family unit, in a community, in a country, on a world level. We see that all the time as well.

On the other hand if we deny we are the strangers, if we live it the way Blanche lived it, then we forever stay the stranger. We deny and come to a type of entitlement: “Well, my life is harder because of my story, because of some sort of thing that made me the stranger.” And therefore we deny to ourselves the full living of our lives. Blanche was living a lie in her life that a whole stratum of her society was living. It was the same lie that said, “Those

The work of the dharma is mundane: it's everyday life. . . . It's not some moment of total enlightenment, some future moment. You are not in that future moment. There is no you that is ever going to be in such a future moment. That's the Buddhist teaching of *anata*. The only moment that you can make a difference in someone's life is right now.

just didn't see it as their business to be kind: they didn't know him. We do it all the time. How many times do we go by someone—maybe they need help, maybe they don't, but we're not sure. Maybe it's too dangerous. How many times do we walk by? So two people of his tribe did not offer help. Then along comes this Samaritan who stops, takes care of him, takes him to an inn where he pays the innkeeper some money and says, “Take care of this man until he is better, and if I haven't given you enough money, when I come back through I will pay what's extra.” I could have made the whole dharma talk on this one story because it's got so many different aspects, but the point of the parable is “who is thy neighbor?” Is it the one that you identify with by color or by profession or neighborhood or heritage or some sort of orientation? Or is your neighbor the one that had the open heart to you? And likewise, to whom are you a neighbor?

Again, it takes such courage to live this way. If we deny our dependency on the kindness of strangers, we fall into tribalism. In our society, as is true in societies all over the world, there's a tremendous tendency to fall into tribalism, to shut out. As soon as we do that, we are beginning to

negroes are happy with what they have; that's just the way they are.” “We're so rich and so entitled,” when in fact it was a richness that was coming from the exploitation of other people against their will. There was no exchange; there was a kind of stealing in the very structure of that society. Therefore, there had to be these code words to avoid having it revealed. These were not inherently bad people. They were people who were doing something based on a lie; they were denying kindness to strangers; they were exploiting strangers; they were justifying on the basis of strangeness this exploitation.

So how do we interact in our society in terms of kindness to strangers? In the notion of the public good, there is the embracing of the kindness of strangers. In the last thirty years there has been a steady deterioration of the belief in the public good, and it's been replaced by all sorts of other code language—the marketplace, privatization, whatever it is—but there is this basis underlying the destruction of the public good. When we pay taxes, if everyone has to pay taxes, we are united in that experience. So therefore, we are not strangers to each other as citizens because we're all taxpayers. So we already become

a kind of tribe. That's very important. Likewise, because we have paid, we are in an exchange, and we have the right to expect something back. This is very important in terms of having a society that is reflective of the dharma. Likewise, there has been so much trouble getting money for education in schools throughout the country. You may have read about it in the newspapers: schools are having to close early, and they don't have money for textbooks because people aren't willing to educate the children of strangers. But those people are going to become the doctors, the taxi drivers, the whatever of all of these people's lives. We inter-are. How could it be otherwise? And plus, we pull in this unkindness that will travel around because we inter-are. So it matters on a societal level, and it matters on a personal level. It's a great challenge to practice inter-being. The needs of another are endless and so there is no fulfilling the needs of another, and yet we're called on to have an open heart to help when and where we can and where it's appropriate, and that's hard to do. How do we keep our boundaries, not get taken advantage of, not be co-dependent, not breed dependency—all of these phrases that have become part of the vogue—and yet at the same time be kind to strangers? It's not in the big acts but in the little acts of your life that this will show up. You practice it every time you remember throughout your day to receive the moment from this orientation: that in this moment it is my intention to be kind to others. Likewise, when you feel that you're the stranger, how do you meet those you perceive as being not strange—you're the stranger fitting into their world in some way—how do you meet that? How do you allow yourself to be vulnerable and not get paralyzed about feeling vulnerable? How do you not get your feelings hurt, not feel totally demoralized and worthless because in fact you're not treated with kindness? And yet, the task is to not do it—to just show up, to be willing to trust that there will be kindness from strangers even in the face of it not being there. The Dalai Lama is such a good example of someone who holds that balance both ways so well; it's a very difficult thing to do.

The last thing about kindness to strangers is that it's very easy for us to treat ourselves as a stranger, or some aspect of ourselves as a stranger, and not be kind to that aspect of ourselves, to somehow feel entitled to judge that aspect and be thoroughly negative towards that aspect of ourselves. It can be something in our behavior, in what we value, a skill we lack, how we look, how we are. Anything. And we can be so totally unkind to ourselves. We can so easily miss the fact that everybody in the world is a stranger and is a stranger to themselves. We are each isolated in our experience even as we interdependent-are. And this isolation gets magnified when we're dealing with ourselves and we can be incredibly unkind. From the Buddhadharma perspective, when you are unkind to yourself, you are being violent to a human being. You don't get a pass because you call it me and mine. There's no pass. The commitment in Buddhadharma is to non-harming. To approaching each person, including yourself, with loving kindness and compassion and equanimity. So it's quite a challenge.

There is also the holding out by identifying oneself with the stranger, so you can choose to be a stranger in your society and therefore justify your aloofness because "I'm the stranger here, I don't fit in" and therefore you don't have to own your responsibility to deal with things that are wrong; you don't have to own your own vulnerabilities, and so forth. But also you can be a stranger in your own life in holding out. I don't know how many of you know the Leonard Cohen poem about the stranger. "I told you when I came I was a stranger. And he talks like this. You don't know what he's after. He's just some Joseph looking for a manger. The dealer looking for a card so high and wild he'll never have to deal another."

It's very enticing in our spiritual journey to be some Joseph looking for a manger, to be some dealer looking for a card so high and wild he'll never have to deal another. Lots of times in dharma talks, that's what we want to hear about. We want to trip off on that possibility of enlightenment, of this kind of *feel good*. The work of the dharma is mundane: it's everyday life; it's how you are with each other when we end here in just a couple of minutes; it's how you are for the rest of this day, at work; that's where the dharma happens. It's not some moment of total enlightenment, some future moment. You are not in that future moment. There is no you that is *ever* going to be in such a future moment. That's the Buddhist teaching of *anata*. The only moment that you can make a difference in someone's life is right now. You won't be here in some future moment, so it's now, it's now, and it's *through* the Now, this Eternal Now, that we actually find ourselves at least in the space where there is that sense of a Joseph looking for a manger, that sense of possibility of a card so high and wild we never have to deal another. It's not around, but *through* your life experience as it is.

So this kind of a talk is not necessarily easy to listen to because it's a call for you to show up in the parts of your life where it would either appear to be boring or to be unrewarding because you're only going to be stuck with having to take care of someone and somebody you don't want to, or you're going to have to submit your own vulnerability to people who aren't going to be very responsive to it, so who wants to do this? Pay attention to that resistance. It will come in the form of boredom, being spaced out, too much to do right now, "He doesn't understand my situation." It's all just the resistance of the reactive mind. Any time you show up in the now, you are walking the path, you are in Buddhadharma.

May you be safe from internal and external harm.

May you have a calm clear mind and a peaceful loving heart.

May you be physically strong, healthy and vital.

May you experience love, joy, wonder and wisdom in this life just as it is.

And may the merit of our practice this morning be to the benefit of all who are strangers and to the liberation of all beings. ■

GBF

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Spirit Rock Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Retreat Led by Arinna Weisman and Larry Yang

Tuesday, April 19 - Sunday, April 24 (5 nights)

There is a special delight in coming together in our lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered community to awaken our hearts. We will cultivate mindfulness, loving kindness, patience and perseverance in safety and community. Our practice helps us to see and know our strengths and our negative habits more clearly. We have the capacity to let go of our obstacles to love and peace. One of the themes of this retreat will be an exploration of our sexuality.

Cost \$460 - \$310, sliding scale. Fee is for room and board. Teaching and staffing of the retreats is by donations made at the end of the retreat. Please pay at the highest level of the sliding scale that you can afford. This allows others who need to pay less the opportunity to attend.

For more information call the info line (415) 488-0164 x 370, or you can register for this retreat by downloading the registration form and liability waiver at http://www.spiritrock.com/PDFs/4_19-24_05RegLiabWaiv.PDF. Print these forms, fill them out and mail them along with your deposit to the Registrar, SRMC, PO Box 909, Woodacre, CA 94973. ■

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. ■

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. ■

Calendar

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

February 6 Ji Sing Norman Eng

Ji-Sing Norman Eng is the former facilitator of Q-Sangha 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."

February 13 John King

John King is a Zen priest in Suzuki Roshi's lineage. He has been shusho (head monk) at Tassajara, and his practice is primarily with inmates in the S.F. jail system and at San Quentin.

February 20 Open discussion

February 27 Meditation Sunday

Ray Dyer, GBF member and longtime bodyworker in San Francisco, who for years volunteered massage every week on the AIDS Ward at San Francisco General Hospital, will lead us in an exploration of how mindful touch uses the same focused awareness that deepens meditation.

March 6 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.

March 13 Carol Osmer 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.

March 20 Open discussion

March 27 Blanche Hartman

Blanche Hartman is the former co-abbess of the San Francisco Zen Center. She is a dharma heir of Mel Weitsman and has been practicing Soto Zen since 1969.

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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Join the discussion at:

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