



Gay Buddhist Fellowship

FEBRUARY / MARCH 2006 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.

Freedom from a Buddhist Perspective

The Precepts: Our Religious Bill of Rights

BY CATHLEEN WILLIAMS

Cathleen Williams has been in and about the San Francisco Zen Center for 25 years or so, practicing both as a lay student and as a priest. Over the years she has found that the beginning questions of practice evolve into more refined questions that engage her whole life and that involve both her priest and her psychotherapy practice. She spoke to GBF on July 3, 2005.

Today is the day before the 4th of July, and I realized when I set up the date for this lecture that I was going to be lecturing right before the 4th, and I thought, "Since that's the case, why not talk about freedom?" So I've been spending some considerable time thinking about freedom and about its definition in the preamble to the Constitution as "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Then I thought a little bit about the Buddhist definition of freedom, which is non-suffering, and, of course, *not* pursuing happiness. Liberty is a very strange term—a strange term in our time, and maybe it's always been kind of strange. Culturally and politically, freedom's definition is very legalese. How it's defined varies from state to state, and sometimes from national administration to national administration. In our world, liberty is a very changeable condition, often associated with personal actions and the public consciousness. So often liberty seems to be attached to this phrase, "You can't tell me what to do." This is kind of a daunting phrase, and I think that it underlies a lot of unskillful action, personally and politically.

Buddhist liberty is more about the freedom to choose what is in our best spiritual interests, and those are always intimately intertwined with everyone else's spiritual interests.

So here I want to interject a little note. After I'd gone so far, I went back and reread what I'd did, and I went to the dictionary and I looked up both *freedom* and *liberty*, and their definitions were very interesting. I hadn't done this since I was in junior high school. Both of these words have the connotation of freedom from constraint, meaning unbound freedom. And there follows a long list of words, in this British dictionary I used, in which the term "free" means actu-

ally acting outside the law: free love, freeloading, freebies, the unrestrained enjoyment of one's natural rights. Now I don't know what they mean by one's natural rights, although I'm sure there's a legal definition of it, but this is a very interesting way to put it.

What do we call it when people act too freely? In my own experience, it makes me alert and somewhat anxious when I perceive that boundaries are being broken. When someone else feels free to impinge on others, which is often

times when we turn away from the things that are happening that greatly upset us. There's a place of fear that is often not acknowledged—fears that we won't get what we want, fears that something dreadful will happen. I think of these fears as the real mental terrorists. Fear of something is usually the worst suffering. Most of the time we are not noticing these things because we're in them, and when we're in them, or in fantasies of forthcoming events, we're mentally living them in advance and

Taking on the precepts conditions your body and mind. Actually, you have a whole lot of conditioning right from the get go of being a person, of having an ego, of knowing that this is me. You don't understand how deep that conditioning is until you run into it in meditation for the first time and then you find “I I I I” coming up hugely in what's called the waterfall of the mind.

how freedom is taken, bad things often happen. Right now I'm thinking about driving down the freeway watching someone cut in and cut out, cut in and cut out, and drive really fast, and not pay very much attention to what's going on. They just want to get to where they want to go as fast as they can. This is a very concrete example, and of course, there are interpersonal ones too. There's the person who gets mad and dumps their anger all over you. This is another kind of impingement. So freedom is kind of a double-edged word in lots of ways.

To be at liberty—what does that mean? Often we think of this, as I said, in the political sense, that we have certain constitutional rights, the right to gather, like we're doing now, freedom of religion, the right to bear arms, freedom of the press, and so forth in the Bill of Rights. We kind of take these for granted in a sense in this country, although maybe not so much lately. However, here's another question: Does external liberty equate to internal liberty?

Practicing Buddhists have to consider the nature of freedom because in our hearts and bodies, this is the state that we long for. We want very much to be free, not to hurt, and this is the Buddhist premise, that there is with practice freedom from suffering. Nevertheless, we are at times barred from considering our best spiritual interests. Often we are mentally roaming around on what we would like to happen, thinking of nice things that have happened or wondering if we will be at liberty to pursue the nice things we want to occur. I don't think this is something we need to be ashamed of especially. But we need to notice it. We also need to notice the negative

we're in the other side of this, which is in fear and defenses; these are all-absorbing when they come. It's hard to get enough distance at first to see how and why we suffer in our minds, and when we do get a little distance, maybe the whole thing is kind of overwhelming, the first time you recognize how much you're suffering. It's very easy to panic and run away because the organism sort of automatically withdraws from pain. It's very easy to check this out: just light a match and hold it to your finger and see how you do internally.

How not to suffer—this is the question. How to address the suffering around you—this is the next question. How to incorporate the answers into your practice and your life, take them inside yourselves and show them in your action and speech—this is the third question.

These questions are a big part of Zen and Buddhism generally. Sometimes I hear that Zen is a purely meditative practice. This is not true. Practice begins with some desire to wake up. At first it might be around getting enlightenment. Well, I actually started like this. I wanted a big experience. I was so hot on the Big Experience that I was looking for that I ignored all the vital supports that promote steadiness, good will and insight into unskilled actions. I had to learn to arouse *boddhichitta*, which is not only the desire for freedom but the desire for everyone else's freedom too, and which is not only a spiritual desire but also a very important training in humility.

In any case, you must start where you are, because your mind is the field from which good and bad spring. The mind is never empty. It's your practice and your dedication that determine the outcome.

When I began to meditate, that was all I did. I didn't have any intent or sense of the morality that actually infuses meditation; I just sat down and tried to make my mind a blank. Well, you all know how successful that is. Has everyone tried to make their mind blank? Minds don't work like that. So three years later, I did lay ordination, and at that point I formally took precepts. Now at the time I did precepts, there wasn't any preparatory precept class. You went through a ceremony in which you formally took precepts, and from that point on you were supposed to be practicing them. So when I took precepts, it was kind of words on paper, which I knew about because I had been a Catholic and I certainly was familiar with the concept of sin, confession and having to make it right—there was a point at which you had to make it right, be reborn, and then go on. And that didn't fit for me anymore, so I converted, so to speak, to Buddhism. So a little later, after this lay ordination, I started trying to incorporate these precepts, very clumsily but with good will. I consented to this because I am a very stubborn person, and I have to be shown, but I had read what Buddha said, “Don't do it because I say it; do it because you find it works for you.” This is the thing that led me to Buddhism before anything else. “Don't do it because I say it; do it because it works for you.”

Well, I wanted to know it all for myself. And in fact, if

have to follow the rules. If you don't, you're bad, or you've done something bad. In this sort of muddle of self-judgments, I didn't understand that in the larger sense, taking on the precepts conditions your body and mind. Actually, you have a whole lot of conditioning right from the get go of being a person, of having an ego, of knowing that this is me. You don't understand how deep that conditioning is until you run into it in meditation for the first time and then you find “I I I I” coming up hugely in what's called the waterfall of the mind. It's all about me.

Consider the precept against stealing. The first thing is that it's not what you steal. It's the act itself that actually is the habit. Taking the small inconsequential thing has the same weight as taking the Mona Lisa. The precept is, “Do not take what is not given,” which covers everything you don't own personally or that is not available by convention, like toilet paper at a public toilet. (This is conventionally available to you, so you can use it.) But if you think about the number of times you take without asking, casually from friends or at work, it's kind of a shock.

Let's follow stealing a little more. The stealing mind is interested in what it can get for itself. It's not free from desire or attachment to what may be stolen. It's not at liberty, let's say, to consider other people except as sources of theft. So there's no freedom here, but definitely a mental habit. Our mental habits define us, and like all habits

We want to wake up both our minds and our hearts. My image of the unawakened heart is something with layers of hardened callous on it, which is calloused because of what we go through in life. And practice is like the razor that shaves the callous off, and then you get to the place where you can actually feel with your skin again, and feel what it's like to do these unskillful things. So as you take on restraint and become aware, there's a certain softening that happens for you.

I couldn't know it, I wouldn't do it. So I found out. And I think now the thing that I found out the most was that in order to have any inner freedom, I had to consciously take on restraint, and the very act of taking precepts led me to know just how willful I was in the use of body, speech and mind. And that was really kind of a shock for me. So just on the most basic level, just don't do these things: don't lie, cheat, steal, kill, talk about others, defame the dharma, screw around and deliberately make people feel bad, be covetous. I took them as rules at first, and I had the experience of rules we all have: if you want to be good, you

they're really hard to break. It was about the time that I started to refine my habits that I realized how ingrained they were. The more I recognized how my mind ran, the less free I felt. However, I did have this theory that getting enlightenment meant that I could have the freeing effect without the preliminary work. You might also think so. And let me immediately say, this is not the way it works. You can't sit on the cushion and hope for an experience that will then change everything. This happens, but it's rare. Norman Fisher, whom you may have heard of, met a guy in Seattle whose wife had just died.

The man was in such agony from this that the tumult it stirred up brought him to an experience that we would describe as one of great clarity, but he had never practiced before and he had no idea what it was about or what to do. So when he came to Norman and told him about this, about this sorrow and grief about his wife's death and this clarity that had been brought to him, this amazing mental opening, the first thing that Norman said to him was, "Now that you have this, you have to put the underpinnings underneath it; you have to practice; you have to take on what is ethical and also correct in this practice; it can't just be "boom," and that's it.

For most of us, it's a brick by brick experience. For actions, there are consequences. This is a really hard lesson to learn. Maybe the most common reaction to actions is to cast blame on to others. Taking responsibility for our habits is a huge step in practice and really our first step to freedom. Yes, there's a way to not let yourself know you're stealing; there's a way to make it perfectly okay and justify everything to yourself. You can gloss over what you did. You're at liberty to do that, actually, and every time you do that, the habit rut gets a little deeper, so you produce more consequences.

So our thief—what does he lack? Well, he lacks generosity. He certainly doesn't practice it, but generosity is the positive action, the action that opens the heart. Of course, you can give money; you can do concrete things

of the vow against harsh speech and that includes gossip, name calling, angry words. Tibetans have a practice, which I think is really useful here. They take a time vow. They take a vow not to do this for a certain period of time, which can be short—it can be an hour, or it can be a month. And then they mindfully avoid it.

When I was writing this, I was thinking, "This is really hard to do, because everybody is so used to talking about everybody else." You know, the effect of religious practice is that it changes you. It actually changes you. It's kind of like being alcoholic. It's realizing you want to stop this addiction of alcohol and go into AA. One of the first and most difficult things is that you lose all your drinking buddies. All the people that you went and drank with and considered your friends are now no longer in your group because you're not doing the same thing anymore. Right? Some of you are in AA, and you've probably gone through that and you know what it feels like, and it's kind of a lonely feeling. You're with this new group; you're with this sangha, but you don't know these folks so well yet, and you don't know that they support right speech in a very deep way, and so you feel a little funny about doing it; you feel a little funny about hearing the gossip about somebody and just not responding to it. You might feel a little funny about not passing on a really good thing when you hear it, and it's hard. It's hard to do and it takes practice; that's why

Take confidence from the depths of your heart, especially on this crucial point, the principle of cause and effect. Do as much good as possible, thinking, "Today I will strive for good and do my best to avoid the negative."

that are generous, but even more you can open your heart because the stealing habit has been overcome. And stealing and acquiring spring from the anxiety that there's never quite enough. This is true of all the precepts. In all the things we do, there's some basic fear that underlies those kinds of actions.

Mostly here I have been speaking about the negative precepts, the ones that we vow not to do. Well, there are positive precepts also. We take them as an antidote. On one level the positive precepts are a vow never to commit the ten negative precepts. However, it's not just enough to happen not to do something when you think of it. You commit to avoid that action whatever happens. If you catch yourself doing something that is unskillful, you admit it and then you refrain.

I want to say this is very tough. Right now I'm thinking

they call this practice, right? Because we have to practice. And then there's this place where you usually have some withdrawal: you have the desire for alcohol, and you also have the desire to go back to your group and to talk freely the way you used to talk because it feels comfortable. But that's counterproductive for us, actually.

So this is the point where you think back to how it was before, or you fall back. And in relation to speech—and many of the precepts are about speech; as a matter of fact, four of them are about speech; that's how important speech is—you have to see what the effect of the speech is. And if you've ever been in a situation where gossip has come and you've passed it on, and someone has heard about it—the person who was being discussed—and has been very hurt and upset and angry about it, then you know just how painful and harmful this can be. Or, you've

been the subject of gossip, and it's come back to you, and it's been rather painful. That's the effect of speech. It's hard. It's really hard to do.

So you have to remember and accept the consequences of being drunk, if you've been drinking, or having this smart, vicious mouth, and go the whole round again. But I think the nice thing about precepts is that you can always start again. You can always say to yourself, "Well, okay, I did this, and now I see what's happened, and I don't think I want to do this again." You might think that saying some-

Real freedom comes with responsibilities. Opening the heart and taking on these responsibilities is the Buddhist path. May all beings be happy, and may we have real freedom throughout all the worlds.

thing nasty isn't as bad as being drunk, but actually I think it's sort of on the same level. What would you do with great insight if you were still having a lot of judgments? It can happen; you can have great insight and still have judgments.

We want to wake up both our minds and our hearts. My image of the unawakened heart is something with layers of hardened callous on it, which is kind of calloused because of what we go through in life. And practice is like the razor that shaves the callous off, and then you get to the place where you can actually feel with your skin again, and feel what it's like to do these unskillful things. So as you take on restraint and become aware, there's a certain softening that happens for you. You look at yourself and how you conduct your life, and then you really begin to understand about karma, that your actions determine an outcome. You understand this because you are paying attention in a different way, and that affects how you act and how other people react to you.

The precepts are often taught moralistically, but I don't think that's so helpful. I think it's more that it's really important to understand that the quality of the action determines the outcome, and that's what you're changing. And so when you do that, inner space opens up, and it's the space that was formerly taken up by unrestrained, very conditioned ego.

So on this day of July 3rd, we have come together to consider the dharma on a three-day weekend on which most people are out doing other things. And how to study and practice in a way that promotes freedom. Today I talked about our precepts as our religious bill of rights. We are all free. We're at perfect liberty to act as we wish. We all, all of us, everyone of us, have the innate capability to choose for ourselves the path that will without fail lead to liberty, real liberty, liberty extending beyond this conventional life.

Take confidence from the depths of your heart, especial-

ly on this crucial point, the principle of cause and effect. Do as much good as possible, thinking, "Today I will strive for good and do my best to avoid the negative." At night before you fall asleep, don't just fall off, think about what you've done during the day. Dedicate the merit to all sentient beings. Resolve to stop negative actions. Real freedom comes with responsibilities. Opening the heart and taking on these responsibilities is the Buddhist path. May all beings be happy, and may we have real freedom throughout all the worlds.

So this is the content of my lecture about freedom. A little aside: Sometimes when I consider the political situation now and how much our fear has conditioned what's going on in the American consciousness, it's a place where I think it's particularly important to look at what freedom is, and what we believe. There's a lot of fear, and we're as much immersed in it as anybody else who is a US citizen now. I think we can all be free from this fear. One thing I've done is I've just stopped watching TV news because there's a repetitious crisis, and it's entered the consciousness. And then I think, "What do I fear actually right at this moment?" and nothing really comes up. In other words, I don't have a fear of getting on planes; I don't have a fear that terrorists are going to come and do something, because those things have not yet happened. But there are certainly large areas in which we think, "Oh, my God, what if it did happen?" Well, what if it did? What if it did? Of course, there would be anguish and fallout—there always is in human life—but there's also change, and I know that from time to time—as a matter of fact, all the time—things change. So the American consciousness that's happening is something that's happening now, but somewhere along the line, there will be a change. Buddhism says things go like this: They will either get better, get worse, or stay the same, and as this happens, these changes, what is our mental attitude towards them? One thing I've noticed is that I'm getting gray in my hair, a lot, and this year when I turned 64, I thought, "I really *am* getting older." And it was a shock. I've been doing this practice for a long time; things have changed a lot for me in the course of the last 25 years, and yet even so, I have this shock. So I think I'm encouraging myself and I'm encouraging all of us when we fall into this culture of fear to take a step back and say, "Is it in the here and now right in front of my face? If it's not, maybe I don't have to be as scared as they tell me I have to be." ■

GBF

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Memorial Service for Mike Hanna Sunday, February 19th

Mike Hanna, an active member of GBF, passed away in January. We were Mike's spiritual family, and we will be dedicating our meeting on Sunday, February 19th, to his memory. We will discuss how we as Buddhists view death—how we view the deaths of others and how we view our own immortality. In our closing circle, we will invite your thoughts as they relate to Mike and his passing.

Steering Committee Needs New Members Now

In the last months, three Steering Committee members who had served for many years have stepped down. There may be other retirements this year.

The Steering Committee meets four times a year for about an hour after the regular Sunday morning meeting. In addition, some business is done by e-mail. The group basically takes care of the business of the Sangha in terms of budget and discusses issues regarding our Sangha's various operations and functions.

Most remaining on the Steering Committee have served for over four years and all are concurrently serving or have served in other major capacities in the Sangha. This has to be changed so that the entire burden of running the Sangha is not on so few. The tasks necessary for the continuance of GBF need to rotate among the current active members. The committee would benefit from some fresh perspectives. If you attend somewhat regularly, consider how you value what the Sangha means to you, what it has given to you, and how you might give thanks through service. It is hoped that volunteers will serve for at least a year, but a term on the Steering Committee is not lifelong, nor does it require much time.

We will have an All Sangha Meeting after the sitting at our regular meeting on Sunday, March 26th, in which we will honor those who serve and discuss service opportunities. We will also collect suggestions for the operation of the Sangha.

February Potluck

Our next potluck will be held on February 19th, at 4:30, at Todd Pope's place, 245 Clinton Park (near the corner of Market and Dolores). For more information email Todd at: gr8flmed@sbcglobal.net

Sign up for the GBF Directory

We are in the process of collating data for a hard copy GBF directory. If you attend a Sunday meeting on Bartlett Street in the next few months, you can check a printout of info we have on you in our database and make any additions or deletions. If you are self-employed and wish to publish what service you offer, along with a brief descriptive phrase, you may, e.g., "massage therapist, shiatsu," "attorney, personal injury." Alternately, you can send information to gbfmail-inglist@sbcglobal.net. You may include your name, land address, e-mail address, and phone number. The directory will be published in late spring of 2006 and will be available at the Sunday meetings at cost, probably a couple of dollars. Thanks to Todd Pope who is collating the data.

Calendar

Sunday Speakers

February 5 Padmadharini

Padmadharini has practiced in the tradition of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO) since 1989 and was ordained into the Western Buddhist Order (WBO) in 2004. Originally from England, she has been in the Bay Area for 9 years, where she works in public policy. She is actively involved in the spiritual direction of the San Francisco Buddhist Center, where she teaches meditation and leads Dharma courses. She has a particular interest in using Buddhism to understand and work with depression, and is currently writing a book on this topic. She brings to her teaching an engagement in social issues including what it means to live in urban situations and practice wholeheartedly. Padmadharini's talk will focus upon the fundamental aim of Buddhism - Enlightenment for the sake of all beings.

February 12 Ray Dyer and Larry Wisch

Ray Dyer has lived in San Francisco since 1979, with a four year stay in Hawaii from 2000-2004. He has been a masseur for 20 years, and an in-home health care attendant for four years, investigating different spiritual paths over the years. The AIDS epidemic of the mid-80's forced him to question his ideas and feelings about death and his place in the world.

Larry Wisch values the universal spiritual principles that are basic to many traditions, including the bare bones Buddhism of the Insight Meditation Society. His meditation practice is somewhat sporadic and includes walks and naps. The fellowship of the GBF and the rotation of the speakers hold his interest.

February 19 Open Discussion

February 26 Kirsten DeLeo

Kirsten DeLeo, M.A., is a longtime student of the Tibetan master Sogyal Rinpoche, author of classic bestseller *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, and a senior educator in Rigpa's Spiritual Care Program. Kirsten organizes and co-facilitates hospice and nursing home volunteer trainings, as well as workshops for medical professionals and the public on healing, aging, illness, bereavement, and death and dying. She has volunteered at the Zen hospice and Maitri in San Francisco for many years and is trained in the Hakomi method of psychotherapy.

March 5 Blanche Hartman

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

March 12 Tom Moon

Tom Moon is a psychotherapist in San Francisco. He works primarily with gay men, and specializes in the use of mindfulness as a tool for self-exploration. His spiritual home is Spirit Rock Meditation Center, where he is a student in the Dedicated Practitioner's Program, a two-year course of study whose goal is to make daily life into spiritual practice.

March 19 Michael Murphy and Bob Siedle-Kahn

Michael Murphy has been a member of GBF since October 2004. His interest in Eastern philosophy, and Buddhism in particular, dates back to his study of Comparative Religion and English as an undergraduate. Graduate study in Transpersonal Psychology deepened his interest in the interface between western psychology and Buddhism, as well as the way that personality both constrains and reflects essence. Michael has a private practice as a psychotherapist in Berkeley.

Bob Siedle-Khan has lived in San Francisco since 1996. He has three children ages 5, 8 and 9. He will talk about the year he lived in Sri Lanka (1990-91), working for the Quakers, teaching nonviolence to the Buddhists, and how that year relates to the rest of his life.

March 26 All Sangha Meeting

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. The Center is handicapped accessible.

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

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www.gaybuddhist.org

For general questions about GBF write to:
inquiry@gaybuddhist.org

To reach our Program Committee with suggestions for speakers and comments, go to:
www.gaybuddhist.org/programs

Mail correspondence:
GBF
PMB 456
2215-R Market Street
San Francisco, California 94114

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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

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GBF NEWSLETTER
PMB 456
2215-R MARKET STREET
SAN FRANCISCO CA 94114

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