



Gay Buddhist Fellowship

AUGUST / SEPTEMBER 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.

No Time to Waste

BY 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. She gave the following talk at GBF on March 5, 2006.

I'm very glad to be with you here today. My teacher told me once, "Talk about what's right in front of you." And so I will be talking today about something I've talked about before: the deep consideration of how to live our life in the face of the fact that it is temporary. We have this gift of life, this opportunity to live this life that is given to us, and we don't know for how long. And we don't know what happens next. But we do therefore want to be awake in this life, to actually be here, to be present, to be aware, and not to sleep through it. We want to really deeply consider what can we do to make the gift of this life a gift for all of those around us. I went recently to a poetry reading, and the poet, Kay Ryan, read this poem.

As though the river were a floor,
we position our table and chairs upon it,
eat, and have conversation.
As it moves along we notice—as calmly
as though dining room paintings were being replaced—
the changing scenes along the shore.
We know, we do know, that this is the Niagara River,
but it's hard to remember what that means.

When I heard it, I reacted to it physically, and the neighbor sitting next to me, whom I didn't know was Kay's partner of thirty years, said something to me at the intermission, that she noticed that I had had a physical reaction to Kay's poems, not just to this one, but to this one in particular. And I said, "Yes, the Niagara River was really like a kick in the gut because the day before yesterday, a very dear friend and my dharma heir informed me that he had a diagnosis of inoperable cancer." And Kay's partner told me, "Kay wrote that poem when I was diagnosed with cancer." And I have to say that that's what is right in front of me, John's imminent death. So I really can't talk about anything else. But I think that he is making of his death a gift to everyone. He was scheduled to teach a class at Zen Center on Dogen Zenji but decided when he got this diagnosis about a week before the class was to begin to teach a class on the dharma of death, which to me is an extraordinarily courageous thing to do, to sit up

there with his impending death, to teach about the dharma of death. And he's done a great job, together with another person who practices over at Hartford Street with him. He's teaching by the way he's responding. His total attention is on how to take care of everyone around him as he's dying, how to see that the prison network that he is active in that teaches dharma—he goes to teach dharma and harm reduction and nonviolence at San Bruno, at the downtown jail, out at San Quentin—is passed on to other people and that he gets clearance for the person who's going to replace him. This is the kind of thing he's doing, frantically, being sure that his affairs are all in order and that his partner will inherit the house and not have any interference from his family and all this kind of stuff. He's just totally putting his energy into how to take care of everybody around him. It's quite extraordinary. It's a teaching in itself.

I've always liked this poem by Mary Oliver, and I'll say more about it after I read it.

When death comes
like the hungry bear in autumn;
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from
his purse

to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;
when death comes
like the measles-pox;

when death comes
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,

I want to step through the door full of curiosity,
wondering:
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

And therefore I look upon everything
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,
and I consider eternity as another possibility,

and I think of each life as a flower, as common
as a field daisy, and as singular,

and each name a comfortable music in the mouth
tending as all music does, toward silence,

and each body a lion of courage, and something
precious to the earth.

When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.

I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it is over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

I particularly like the line “I want to be full of curiosity.” I deeply hope that I can meet my death in that way. Nobody knows what happens next. Among the handouts for John's class, there was one with a quote from Socrates: “To fear death, gentlemen, is nothing other than to think oneself wise when one is not, for it is to think that one knows what one does not know. No man knows whether death may not even turn out to be the greatest of blessings for a human being. And yet people fear it as if they knew for certain that it is the greatest of evils.” We don't know. We have, of course, in our culture many descriptions of what we think may happen, all the way from Heaven to Hell and anything in between, from nothing to everything. We don't know. But I think that the most important thing in the face of that not knowing is to *know* that we don't know and not to meet it with fear but with curiosity.

One of the great virtues of Buddhism is said to be generosity, or *dana*, or giving. But the teaching is that a monk doesn't give material things because a monk is homeless and a mendicant. But a monk gives fearlessness; a monk gives the dharma and a monk gives fearlessness. When I first read that, I said, “Oh, I don't know anything about fearlessness. How can I give fearlessness? I'm a monk and I don't know how to give fearlessness. So I need to study this business of fear and fearlessness.” So far, as much as I've studied it, I don't think fearlessness means not ever experiencing fear, but I think it does mean something like not being cowed by it, not being overcome by fear, just noticing, yes, there's fear, and maybe turning toward it and actually breathing with it and feeling it. Allow it to arise and to subside and don't allow it to chase us around, making us run off and hide or distract ourselves with foolish activity. We want to *choose* our life in the face of the certainty of our death. There's another quotation from the Mahabharata, the great Indian classic, where the sage is asked, “Sir, of all the things in life, what is the most amazing?” And the sage answers, “That a person seeing others die all around him never thinks that he will die.” And I must say, that first week after John told me, I just simply could not let it in. The grief was too much, so I couldn't allow myself to even think about it. But the thing is not to deny it or turn away from it, but to recognize it, let the fact of the limited nature of our life be an encouragement to live it well, to live it in a way that benefits everyone, to not get caught up in fear and self-clinging and forget our con-

nection with everything and everyone, but to live our life in a way that makes of it a gift for everyone. Whatever we have found to be beneficial to us, can we offer that to others? Whatever has given us great joy, can we find a way to share that with others? Can we take the gift of this life and spread it around to all beings? This, of course, is the bodhisattva vow: “Beings are numberless; I vow to awaken with them. Delusions are inexhaustible; I vow to end them. Dharma gates are boundless; I vow to enter them.

For me, that is the essence of practice: to wake up and see how we are fully connected with everything, and how we can be of benefit to everything and everyone around us. What is the way we want to live this life? What is hindering us from living this life in the way we want to live it?

The Buddha way is unsurpassable; I vow to become it.” This is the bodhisattva vow; this is the ideal of Mahayana Buddhism: recognizing our total and complete interconnection and interdependence with everything that is, vowing to honor that by waking up ourselves for the benefit of all, sharing this life with all. And I don't know anyone who exemplifies that vow more than John does. Many of you probably know John King. He helped Issan Dorsey start the Hartford Street Zen Center and helped found the Maitri Hospice, and he's just a beautiful guy.

So knowing that life is brief, how shall we live it? This actually was the *koan* that brought me to practice, because I had a friend forty years ago who had a terrible headache one evening when we were sitting around and having coffee together, and she went to the doctor the next morning and was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor and was in a coma within about a week or ten days from which she never recovered. It was stunning to me because we were both 40 and had small children and our whole lives ahead of us, or so I thought. So it became clear to me through Pat's death that I didn't know how long I would live and I'd better figure out *how* to live. How do you live your life when you know you don't know when it's going to end? This became my big question, and for me that question was answered when I met Suzuki Roshi and met the Dharma and said, “Well, this looks to me how you live your life, however long it's going to be. I want to be like Suzuki Roshi.” For Suzuki Roshi, everyone—*everyone*—was acceptable. He was teaching us to see Buddha in everyone, to see the awakened being in everyone. And it looked like he could do that. I couldn't understand how he could, but it looked like he could. And I wanted to be like that. I'm still working at it. Maybe we'll get there. We don't know, but it's a good direction to go. It's the direction I want to go with my life. My

questions for you are, “What is the direction *you* want to go in with this gift of life? What's the most important thing for *you*? How will *you* spend this precious life?”

There is a verse that's on the *han*, which is the wooden block that we hit with a mallet that makes a sound that you can hear all over—it's a kind of penetrating sound that calls us to meditation hall in Zen. This verse is often written on the *han*, and it's often chanted the last thing at night by monks: “May I respectfully remind you, great is the matter

of birth and death. All is impermanent, quickly passing. Wake up. Be awake each moment. Don't waste this life.” For me, that is the essence of practice: to wake up and see how we are fully connected with everything, and how we can be of benefit to everything and everyone around us. What is the way we want to live this life? What is hindering us from living this life in the way we want to live it? Do we get caught up in distractions? Do we get caught up in seeking temporary ways to sort of blot out whatever difficulties we have in life? Or do we turn toward difficulties and take care of them? Do we turn toward the fears and be with them with kindness and gentleness? Do we turn toward those who are having difficulty and see if there is a way we can help them? Do we turn toward ourselves when we are in difficulty and give ourselves encouragement and care?

Here's another poem of Mary Oliver's. (You know I like her a lot.)

The Summer Day

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean—
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up
and down—
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes
her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.

I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass, how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

No one else can answer that question for you. You need to answer for yourself: what is it *you* plan to do with this precious life? What feels most important to you? Each of us needs to take a close look and decide what's the most important thing for us and put our energy and attention there, really do what we want to do, really care about what we care about, put our care and attention and energy where our care is. As I say, nobody knows what happens next, but there is somehow a feeling that *something* hap-

after we wash, we empty the water towards, rather than away from, our body. This expresses respect for the water. This kind of practice is not based on any idea of being economical. It may be difficult to understand why Dogen returned half of the water he dipped to the river. This kind of practice is beyond our thinking. When we feel the beauty of the river, when we are one with the water, we intuitively do it in Dogen's way. It is our true nature to do so. But if your true nature is covered by ideas of economy or efficiency, Dogen's way makes no sense.

I went to Yosemite National Park, and I saw some huge waterfalls. The highest one there is 1,340 feet high, and from it the water comes down like a curtain thrown from the top of the mountain. It does not seem to come down swiftly, as you might expect; it seems to come down very slowly because of the distance. And the water does not come down as one stream, but is separated into many tiny streams. From a distance it

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pens next. One of the first things I read in *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, when the book first came out, a book by Suzuki Roshi, the founder of San Francisco Zen Center, was called "Nirvana the Waterfall":

If you go to Japan and visit Eihei-ji monastery, just before you enter you will see a small bridge called Hanshaku-kyo, which means "half-dipper bridge." Whenever Dogen-zenji dipped water from the river, he used only half a dipperful, returning the rest to the river again, without throwing it away. That is why we call the bridge Hanshaku-kyo, "Half-Dipper Bridge." At Eihei-ji when we wash our face, we fill the basin to just seventy percent of its capacity. And

looks like a curtain. And I thought it must be a very difficult experience for each drop of water to come down from the top of such a high mountain. It takes time, you know, a long time, for the water finally to reach the bottom of the waterfall. And it seems to me that our human life may be like this. We have many difficult experiences in our life. But at the same time, I thought, the water was not originally separated, but was one whole river. Only when it is separated does it have some difficulty in falling. It is as if the water does not have any feeling when it is one whole river. Only when separated into many drops can it begin to have or to express some feeling. When we see one whole river we do not feel the living activity of the water, but when we

dip a part of the water into a dipper, we experience some feeling of the water, and we also feel the value of the person who uses the water. Feeling ourselves and the water in this way, we cannot use it in just a material way. It is a living thing.

Before we were born we had no feeling; we were one with the universe. This is called “mind-only,” or

was 1,340 feet high!

We say, “Everything comes out of emptiness.” One whole river or one whole mind is emptiness. When we reach this understanding we find the true meaning of our life. When we reach this understanding we can see the beauty of human life. Before we realize this fact, everything that we see is just delu-

I don't think fearlessness means not ever experiencing fear, but I think it does mean something like not being cowed by it, not being overcome by fear, just noticing, yes, there's fear, and maybe turning toward it and actually breathing with it and feeling it. Allow it to arise to and subside and don't allow it to chase us around, making us run off and hide or distract ourselves with foolish activity. We want to choose our life in the face of the certainty of our death.

“essence of mind,” or “big mind.” After we are separated by birth from this oneness, as the water falling from the waterfall is separated by the wind and rocks, then we have feeling. You have difficulty because you have feeling. You attach to the feeling you have without knowing just how this kind of feeling is created. When you do not realize that you are one with the river, or one with the universe, you have fear. Whether it is separated into drops or not, water is water. Our life and death are the same thing. When we realize this fact, we have no fear of death anymore, and we have no actual difficulty in our life.

When the water returns to its original oneness with the river, it no longer has any individual feeling to it; it resumes its own nature, and finds composure. How very glad the water must be to come back to the original river! If this is so, what feeling will we have when we die? I think we are like the water in the dipper. We will have composure then, perfect composure. It may be too perfect for us, just now, because we are so much attached to our own feeling, to our individual existence. For us, just now, we have some fear of death, but after we resume our true original nature, there is Nirvana. That is why we say, “To attain Nirvana is to pass away.” “To pass away” is not a very adequate expression. Perhaps “to pass on,” or “to go on,” or “to join” would be better. Will you try to find some better expression for death? When you find it, you will have quite a new interpretation of your life. It will be like my experience when I saw the water in the big waterfall. Imagine! It

Sometimes we overestimate the beauty; sometimes we underestimate or ignore the beauty because our small mind is not in accord with reality.

To talk about it this way is quite easy, but to have the actual feeling is not so easy. But by your practice of zazen you can cultivate this feeling. When you can sit with your whole body and mind, and with the oneness of your mind and body under the control of the universal mind, you can easily attain this kind of right understanding. Your everyday life will be renewed without being attached to an old erroneous interpretation of life. When you realize this fact, you will discover how meaningless your old interpretation was, and how much useless effort you had been making. You will find the true meaning of life, and even though you have difficulty falling upright from the top of the waterfall to the bottom of the mountain, you will enjoy your life.

Since I first read that, shortly after the death of Pat, my good friend who had the brain tumor, it's been a kind of resting place for me when I feel myself concerned about death. I don't know what happens next, but I somehow have a very deep feeling that this lifetime is just like one wave on the ocean and that we are, in addition to this wave, also the water of the ocean. Every wave is also the ocean; every drop of water falling down the waterfall is also the river, and every river returns to the ocean. While we are here, as we are, alive, as a human being, in this moment, how we live our life is the most important thing, and each of us must give full attention to how we live our life. ■

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The Fall Retreat Dates Set

GBF will have its annual fall retreat during the weekend of October 13-15. We will return to the beautiful Vajrapani Institute in Boulder Creek, California. The retreat will start Friday evening and will conclude after lunch on Sunday. Watch out for registration information in a future issue of the newsletter.

GBF Practices Socially Engaged Buddhism

GBF has made \$500 contributions to the New Leaf Outreach to Elders program and the Buddhist Peace Fellowship. Because of the success of our year-end request for dana, the Steering Committee found that GBF was able to support other organizations whose work is in keeping with our mission to cultivate a social environment that is inclusive and caring.

The gifts also allow us to deepen our ties with the LGBT community and the movement for socially engaged Buddhism. The New Leaf Outreach to Elders program provides a range of social services to LGBT elders, promoting independent living and improving quality of life. The program offers information and referrals, support services, friendly visits for the homebound, educational and cultural activities, holiday events, group outings, and women's and men's social/recreational activities and groups. Outreach to Elders has a Geriatric Mental Health component that offers in-home, senior-specific counseling services and medication management.

The mission of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship is to serve as a catalyst for socially engaged Buddhism. Through its worldwide network of 4,000 members and 45 chapters and its programs, publications, and practice groups, BPF links Buddhist teachings of wisdom and compassion with progressive social change. Among other goals, BPF raises humanitarian, environmental, and social justice concerns among Buddhist communities and brings a Buddhist perspective to contemporary peace, environmental and social justice movements.

GBF has also practiced socially-engaged Buddhism for years. Our Hamilton House project has served delicious meals to homeless families every month over the past years and we have an active prison outreach program. The newsletter is sent to about a 100 prisoners and around 400 requests for books, pen pals and literature are answered each year.

More information about Outreach to Elders and the Buddhist Peace Fellowship can be found at www.newleafservices.org and www.bpf.org.

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

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.

Sunday Speakers

August 6 Robina Courtin

Ven. Robina Courtin was ordained as a Tibetan Buddhist nun at Kopan Monastery in 1978. She has worked full time since then for Lama Thubten Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche's Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition. She is now director of Liberation Prison Project, which supports the Buddhist practice of thousands of prisoners in the USA and Australia.

August 13 Wes Nisker

Wes Nisker, the co-founder and editor of the international Buddhist journal *Inquiring Minds*, has practiced vipassana meditation for 30 years. He is the author of *Buddha's Nature: Evolution As a Guide to Enlightenment* and *Crazy Wisdom: A Romp Through the Philosophies of East and West*. In addition to leading a regular sitting group in Berkeley, he teaches classes in meditation and philosophy at Spirit Rock and at other locations around the country.

August 20 Furyu Schroeder

Furyu Nancy Schroeder has been with the San Francisco Zen Center since 1976, was ordained a Buddhist priest in 1986, and is a dharma heir of Tenshin Reb Anderson. She is currently tanto, or head of practice, at Green Gulch Farm.

August 27 Padmadharini and Vimalasara

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. She is actively involved in the spiritual direction of the San Francisco Buddhist Center, where she teaches meditation and leads Dharma courses. Vimalasara, aka Queenie, is a black British lesbian who has been active as a performance artist, writer, and facilitator. She has published a number of books, her most recent being *Detox Your Heart*, about working with strong emotions. Padmadharini and Vimalasara will speak and then lead a Q&A on skillful ways of dealing with depression and anger.

September 3 Open Discussion

September 10 Harv Whitten and Asa Brown

Sangha members Harv Whitten and Asa Brown will speak in the Dharma Duo series.

September 17 Eve Siegal

Eve Siegal, M.S., CMT, is a body-energy therapist, co-active life coach, popular presenter, and Tibetan Buddhist practitioner. Since 1989, she has helped a wide variety of people learn how to transform obstacles into radiant aliveness and personal fulfillment.

September 24 Victoria Austin

Victoria Austin (*Shosan Gigen*—"Sunlight Mountain Honoring the Mystery") started practicing Zen in 1971. She came to the San Francisco Zen Center in 1975, received precepts in the seventies, was ordained a priest in January 1982, and received dharma transmission from Mel Weitsman in 1999. She has been teaching Iyengar yoga for 20 years, is a past president of the San Francisco Zen Center, and is a past tanto (head of practice) at Tassajara. She currently is serving as outreach director of SF Zen Center, helping make dharma accessible in a variety of settings.

How to Reach Us

World Wide Web Site
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

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Send submissions to:
editor@gaybuddhist.org

GBF Yahoo Discussion Group

There is now a GBF discussion group for the general membership (and others) on Yahoo. Join the discussion at:
www.groups.yahoo.com/group/gaybuddhistfellowship

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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