



Gay Buddhist Fellowship

OCTOBER / NOVEMBER 2007 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.

Buddhism and Reincarnation

BY 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. He gave the following talk at GBF on April 1, 2007.

Reincarnation is a subject we typically don't discuss. There seem to be two schools of thought or poles in Western Buddhism when it comes to the subject of reincarnation and Buddhist cosmology in general. On one end are what you could call the skeptics, for whom Buddhism is not a religion but a philosophy, a way of life, a path of liberation, even a psychology—a treatment for suffering. Probably one of the best, most articulate spokesmen for that point of view is Stephen Bachelor, who wrote an excellent book called *Buddhism Without Beliefs*. He argues this way: Look, why don't we all just start with accepting what we all know to be true anyway, which is that we don't know what, if anything, happens after we die. Any view, including the view that there is no afterlife, belongs to the realm of speculation. It is true that Buddhism comes to us wrapped in a very typically extravagant Indian cosmology, but every innovation of the Buddha is about how to live this life, and this moment. The Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Noble Path—those elements of Buddhism are experiential; they're about right now. They're even scientifically studyable as we have learned with the work of John Cabot Zinn and others. So for us, Buddhism can be dharma practice—period, end of story. It's more about what we do than about what we believe, and as such it will never contradict science. We may not get our answers to deep questions that are maybe unanswerable, but it won't contradict science. Actually it could contradict science: If science ever discovers that clinging doesn't lead to suffering after all, we're screwed. Otherwise, we're fine.

On the other end of the spectrum would be someone like Robert Thurman, author of *Infinite Life*. He argues very differently. He says, Look, you can't sep-

arate Buddhist cosmology from Buddhist practice so neatly without doing damage to Buddhist practice. I'll give three examples of what he means. They're a unified whole, he says. Just look at the third Noble Truth, the cessation of suffering, which is the heart, the point, of Buddhist practice to begin with. If there is no life after death, the cessation of suffering is absolutely guaranteed for all of us in the

commend. They're both very opinionated, and it's lively debate that's worth reading.

American Buddhists tend to be on the skeptical side, and I think that what attracted me personally to Buddhism was that I don't have to believe anything. I don't have to go with a catechism. I'd like to talk a little bit now about what the Buddha taught about reincarnation.

The very traditional belief in India [is] that meditation is not just a tool for achieving inner peace or compassion; it's a tool for exploring the nature of reality. If you become sufficiently focused and concentrated, the Divine Eye opens, that is, you can acquire paranormal insight into the nature of existence.

very foreseeable future. We are going to die. It's going to happen. So we can relax! If you're in a hurry, you can commit suicide; there is no penalty for early withdrawal at all. If you're not, we can ameliorate our suffering here and now through sex, drugs, alcohol, *American Idol*. So, all seriousness aside, his point is that for thousands of years, what has motivated generations of practitioners to give their lives one-pointedly to dharma practice has been the conviction that we face going forward an infinite series of future lives, each of them characterized by dukkha, pervasive unsatisfactoriness. We're in a fix. He says, the idea that there is no life after death does not increase your existential anxiety; it decreases it. If you take his ideas seriously, you can see what he means. So, the seriousness of practice is based on the idea that we are infinite beings.

A couple of other examples: the law of karma, he argues, a basic foundation of Buddhist ethics makes no sense without reincarnation. Third, the Bodhisattva Vow, this beautiful ideal of transcendental compassion—you know, "Beings are numberless; I vow to save them all"—well, you're not going to do that in one lifetime, and if you don't believe in reincarnation, he argues, then the Bodhisattva vow is mere sentimentality. It's poetry perhaps, but it's not serious.

And finally, he also argues that our nature as infinite and immortal beings is not unknowable, that every enlightened being, including the Buddha, has said that this is true and promises that we can realize this for ourselves. I'll get to that later on when I talk about the Buddha. So anyway, those are the two kind of poles of Buddhist practice. They had a debate in an issue of *Tricycle Magazine*, which I rec-

He did have definite views, as far as we know, on the issue. It started with the night of his enlightenment. On the night of his enlightenment, there were three watches of the night. During the first watch, his Divine Eye opened up, as they say in the Sutras. Divine Eye refers to the very traditional belief in India that meditation is not just a tool for achieving inner peace or compassion; it's a tool for exploring the nature of reality. If you become sufficiently focused and concentrated, the Divine Eye opens, that is, you can acquire paranormal insight into the nature of existence. This is simply assumed throughout Indian history. So, that happened to him during the first watch of the night, and what started to happen is that his past lives began to unfold. One life, two lives, three lives—it goes on to 100,000 lives, eons of world contraction and world expansion, back to beginningless time—he saw that he had been going through all of these different lifetimes in every realm of existence.

In the second watch of the night he saw that he wasn't unique, because then he began to see all other beings, or innumerable other beings, rather, going through lifetime after lifetime after lifetime according to their karma. This is where understanding of how karma works came to him. In the third watch of the night, and I think this is what made him the Buddha, he turned his attention back on himself and inquired, "Who is the knower of all this? Who is the seer of all this?" and realized the ultimate truth of emptiness, and the strange paradox, unique I think to Buddhism, which is "Reincarnation there is, but no one who reincarnates." I wish I could explain that. Right! So later, as he began to teach, he taught his followers, the

monks and nuns, how to remember their past lives. This was actually something that he thought was teachable, just as he had done it. I'll read a brief passage from one of the sutras, from the middle-length discourses. He says, "When his concentrated mind is purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability, he directs it to knowledge of the recollection of past lives. He recollects his manifold past lives, that is one birth, two births, three births," and he goes on and on and on, five births, twenty births, 100,000—many eons of birth. He goes on and on and on. "There I was so named of such a clan, with such an appearance, such was my nutriment, such my experience of pleasure and pain, such my life term. And passing away there, I reappeared elsewhere, and there too I was named of such a clan," and so on it goes like that. The point of this is that for these people, these early Buddhists, the idea of reincarnation was not considered an unverifiable idea. You could verify it through your own experience, because you could remember your past lives if your mind was sufficiently one-pointed. The more spiritually advanced you are, the farther back you can go. A Buddha can go back infinitely; a beginner can go back one or two life times, and then there's everything in between. What interested me about discovering this for myself was that in a certain sense, history repeated itself in the 20th century in my profession. When a lot of therapists, psychotherapists, used hypnosis, they started to discover that when they hypnotized clients and asked them to return to the origin of their symptoms, sometimes they would begin talking about past lives, even if they didn't believe in them, even if they didn't consciously believe in reincarnation. A lot of people began to

very prominent therapists have become committed to the idea that this is real. Brian Weiss was a Yale-trained psychiatrist who wrote a book called *Many Lives, Many Masters* based on one of his own cases. He became a believer, and he began as a skeptic. There are Jungian analysts like Roger Woolger who treat the whole subject from a Jungian point of view. There are just hundreds of books like this out. So, it's quite a little industry out there.

So is any of this evidence that reincarnation is real? I'd like to summarize, briefly, the arguments that people use in favor of that proposition, and the arguments against.

The pro people say, "Look, the lifetimes that people remember are clearly not wish-fulfilling fantasy." People don't remember that they're Napoleon, or the high priestess of Atlantis. They typically remember lives in which they were dirt poor; their lives are often grim, mundane, tragic. Why would people want to make up this stuff? It's not wish-fulfillment. Second, when people connect with trauma from these past lives, their symptoms clear up when they have a cathartic reliving/reworking of these memories in exactly the same ways that if you go through childhood traumas from this lifetime, it'll work out. So, it's therapeutic. It seems to have substance to it, so wouldn't this be evidence that there is something real about what they are remembering?

The skeptics say, well, first of all, there has been no systematic study of the efficacy of this therapy, but assuming that all these anecdotes are true, look, people can be regressed through hypnosis and remember their alien abductions too, or the fact that everyone in their family but them were members of a Satanic cult. Memory and hypnosis is very tricky. It can get powerful and focused, but

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discover this independently. There was a famous book called *The Search for Bridey Murphy* about this in the 1950's. So, now this has become somewhat of a subspecialty in my profession. Right now, for a small fee, you can go to a lot of therapists in this town and get regressed to your past lives. I would say the majority in my profession consider this sketchy at best—some would call it outright quackery—but many people—I would say a minority—of

you're also more suggestible under hypnosis, and it's been shown, experimentally, that you can implant false memories. So people get relief from their symptoms by remembering these other things that most of us wouldn't believe. It's generally accepted now in the court systems that evidence from hypnotic regression is not admissible unless you get corroborating evidence from another source, so is there any corroborating evidence?

The problem with most of these memories is that they're so vague and generic, you know, "I was a French peasant." You can't ever identify whether the person you remember being ever actually even existed. In the famous case of Bridey Murphy, there was a big sensational book in the fifties about a woman, a Chicago housewife, who was regressed and remembered being Bridey Murphy, an Irish woman in Cork. Well, no one was ever able to verify that anyone named Bridey Murphy ever existed, so how can you say you have proof that you're the reincarnation of someone you don't even know ever existed?

So the question they raise is: What about corroboration? Do people have memories of former lives as people that you can verify actually existed, people they didn't know about or couldn't have known about before? Well, there are a lot of cases in which that is claimed. The foremost researcher that I think is the most interesting, and—if anyone has respectability it's this guy—is Ian Stevenson, a really fascinating guy, a psychiatrist at the University of Virginia who, thanks to a really generous grant from the inventor of Xerox, was able to spend a forty-year career investigating the so called veridical memories of little children who remembered former lifetimes. His research team and he collected over 3,000 cases of this claimed phenomenon. His first book, *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*, is probably the most boring book I have ever read: It reads like a legal brief. It's got tables of who said what, who verifies what, who corroborates what, who contradicts whom. It's fascinating because the cases are so interesting. He reports cases in which little children

names. All of this really astounding stuff is claimed, and Stevenson argues that this is suggestive of reincarnation. There's a website if you want to look at his stuff. An editor from the Washington Post went with him on his last research trip, and this gives a good feel of what he was looking at, how he worked.

If anyone had scientific respectability in this field, it is Ian Stevenson. He died just in February. Carl Sagan made it clear he thought reincarnation was bunk, but he said scientifically the evidence here is interesting, it is well documented enough that it merits further study. My own reading of the evidence, for what it's worth, is yeah, that it is suggestive, it is interesting. I don't think that it is strong enough to convince anybody who isn't a believer already or wants to be, but it is interesting. It is very much worth reading. So, if anyone wants to study this question, "Is there any kind of scientific evidence for this?" Ian Stevenson is the man to investigate.

I wasn't sure I was going to do this, but I think I will, since I am among friends. I have been studying this stuff for about a year, and I think that I would like to talk about my own personal experiences that led me to do this. On a meditation retreat, a couple of years ago, I was having a great retreat, blissed out, quiet, peaceful. But on the last day, suddenly I was flooded with anxiety. I couldn't sleep. I didn't know what I was anxious about, and I couldn't figure it out. I went home and I was horrified. I found that this anxiety continued in my regular waking life after that, and I didn't know what I was anxious about. I mean I could come up with stuff—money, aging, the usual things

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begin to speak foreign languages that they have never learned. They talk about living a life some hundred miles away that no one in their family knows about. They go there, to that village—most of these cases, the original cases, were in India or Sri Lanka—and they would recognize their former spouses and children, name them by

to be anxious about—but none of them really captured it. I remember talking to Jim Fisher about it; I was trying to figure out what the hell was going on.

My spiritual advisor at Spirit Rock, Howie Cohen, said, "Look, meditation practice, especially intensive practice, is a purification practice. Something is coming

up that isn't finished. You need to go back and finish it." But it took me months before I, because of my life, could get back to Spirit Rock and sit quietly and begin focusing on what this was. The minute I got there, there it was again—really intense. It was hard to meditate, hard to focus. Walking meditation was a little easier. On the

to the meditation hall thinking, "Well damn! I got my money's worth this time!"

When something like that is going on, you just go with it, but critical faculties returned later and I began to ask myself, "What does this all mean?" Do I believe today that I am the reincarnation of this Polish Jew who died?

I can't authentically doubt that fundamentally there is a transcendental aspect to our experience. We really are part of some vast, vast life. We are connected with each other in ways we can never understand, and we are part of something inexpressible, fundamentally joyful, infinite, inconceivable to the mind, but deeply familiar to the heart.

third day it was so unbearable I couldn't sit in the hall anymore. I started doing walking meditation, but more like a run. I was charging up the hill behind the meditation hall, and I thought, "What is going on?" And this is what happened: As I was walking up the hill, I looked up and, for a thousandth of a second, I saw a soldier with a gun, and then it was gone. It was like a little hallucination. I thought, "What was that?" Then I saw myself in snow and basically a flood of memories began to come back about a former life in which I was a Polish Jew shot by the Nazis at the age of 24 in a pit. I remembered my father, my grandfather, an uncle, me, and it came back as if this was memory, not fantasy, and it was very strange. I sat down and intense emotion began to well up. I felt horrified for a long time, and then deep grief began to come up—just sadness for myself and for all those millions of victims of that horror—just overwhelming suffering. I started to cry, cry, cry. And then it was as if a little voice inside me said, "Tom, it's over. The Holocaust is over. All those hapless souls who died have moved on. And mercifully none of them remember; most of them don't remember what happened, so even suffering of that magnitude comes to an end." In fact, this voice inside me—I didn't hear it, but it said to me, "Even suffering of that magnitude is a drop of water in the ocean of consciousness, the ocean of blissful consciousness, which you fundamentally are." And then, I mean, I just sort of dissolved, lost body consciousness and just dissolved into this deeply blissful state. For a long time the anxiety left and never returned, and after a while I sort of came back to myself, and I got up and walked down

Do I believe that? I would say no. I would say I don't know for sure. Maybe, maybe not. The psychologist in me knows how tricky memory is. Other explanations are possible. I would say that this man that I was is part of my history now, that he is connected with me in the same way that my childhood memories are. That is subjective. What it means, I don't know. I think that as a Westerner who has a mystic in me, obviously, and a scientist in me—those war within me, and I think it will never be resolved, but I can live in this "don't know." I like that side of the Steven Bachelor argument, that we can live in "don't know." But the second part of the experience—I've had this kind of experience since I was 19—that I cannot doubt—I can pretend to, but I can't authentically doubt that fundamentally there is a transcendental aspect to our experience. We really are part of some vast, vast life. We are connected with each other in ways we can never understand, and we are part of something inexpressible, fundamentally joyful, infinite, inconceivable to the mind, but deeply familiar to the heart. Impersonal only in the sense that it's closer than personal can ever be. I don't know what I'm talking about exactly. I think it was Arthur Koestler who said we are all condemned to be "peeping Toms at the keyhole of eternity." I love that. It may be that enlightened beings don't have to peep through the keyhole, but people like me, beginners on the path, certainly do. But I do believe that when we look, sometimes we see. So, I don't know about reincarnation, but this other—the belief that we are a part of this other large life feeds my daily practice, enters my daily life, and for that I am deeply, deeply grateful. ■

GBF

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Registration for the GBF Annual Fall Retreat Is Now Open

GBF will return to the beautiful Vajrapani Institute for its 16th Annual Fall Retreat, October 12-14, 2007. Vajrapani is a Tibetan Buddhist retreat center nestled in the Santa Cruz Mountains. We will enjoy noble silence, sitting and walking meditation sessions, and vegetarian meals prepared by the friendly Vajrapani staff.

This year's retreat will focus on sangha. In keeping with our "teacherless sangha" model, members of our own community will facilitate and offer their talents and gifts. Don't miss this opportunity to deepen both your practice and your connection to the sangha!

Cost including food and lodging is \$150-\$200, sliding scale. The registration deadline is Monday, October 8. A limited number of extra-cost private cabins are available, as well as a few private rooms in the dormitory.

The registration form is available online at <http://gaybuddhist.org/retreat.pdf>. GBF offers scholarships to make its retreat affordable to more people. For details, refer to the registration form or contact Michael Murphy (GBFRetreat07@netzero.net).

GBF Thanksgiving

Come celebrate Thanksgiving Day with the Gay Buddhist Fellowship. This will be a time for GBF members and friends to come together and celebrate sangha over an abundant meal. Kei Matsuda and his partner Chuck have once again graciously offered up their home for the festivities. The gathering will start on Thanksgiving Day at 4:00 p.m.

GBF members planning to attend should call Kei and Chuck in advance to help coordinate dishes. Their telephone number is (510) 237-5091 and their address is 7341 Pebble Beach Drive, El Cerrito, California.

See you there.

GBF Participates in Micro-Loan Projects

Last June the GBF Steering Committee agreed to set aside money from the GBF treasury to participate in the micro-loan projects sponsored by the Kiva organization. Through Kiva, GBF has made \$100* loans to the following individuals:

Florencia Mejia, Ecuador
Rosa Quispe, Bolivia
Samuel Kiururi, Kenya
Nicholas Merkoski, Kenya
William Were, Kenya
Sophal Sim, Cambodia
La Suong, Cambodia *\$125 loan

For further information how these loans will be used, check out Kiva's website at www.kiva.org. There's also a great group shot of GBF members at this site, under the loan recipients' bios.

Once the loans have been repaid, the money will be used for other Kiva loans, on a continuous basis. All contributions are used exclusively for no-interest loans to people in third world countries. No overhead costs are involved.

Calendar

Sunday Sittings

10:30 am to 12 noon

Every Sunday at 10:30am we meditate together for 30 minutes, followed by a talk or discussion till 12 noon. Everyone is then welcome to stay and socialize over refreshments till approximately 12:30, after which those who are interested usually go somewhere local for lunch. Our sittings are held at the San Francisco Buddhist Center, 37 Bartlett Street. (Look for the red door near 21st St between Mission and Valencia Streets).

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

October 7 Dharma Duo!

GBF members Jerry Jones and Howard DePorte will speak.

October 14 Discussion Day

October 21 Dave Richo

Dave Richo, Ph.D, M.F.T., is a psychotherapist, teacher, and writer in Santa Barbara and San Francisco who emphasizes Jungian, transpersonal, and spiritual perspectives in his work. He is the author of *How To Be An Adult; When Love Meets Fear; Unexpected Miracles: The Gift of Synchronicity and How to Open It;* and *Shadow Dance - Liberating the Power and Creativity of Your Dark Side*. Dave will be speaking at Spirit Rock later this year on spirituality in relationships and also on synchronicity and timing. For more information, visit www.davericho.com.

October 28 Gil Fronsdal

Gil Fronsdal is viewed as one of the foremost dharma teachers in North America. He has practiced Zen and Vipassana since 1975 and has a Ph.D. in Buddhist Studies from Stanford. Trained by Jack Kornfield, he is the founder and primary teacher of the Insight Meditation Center in Redwood City, California. Gil has an undergraduate degree in agriculture from U.C. Davis, where he was active in promoting the field of sustainable farming. In 1998 he received a PhD in Religious Studies from Stanford University. He is also a husband and father, the author of *Issue at Hand*, the co-editor of *Teachings of the Buddha*, and the editor of *Voices From Spirit Rock*. He has recently published a new translation of *The Dhammapadam*. You may listen to Gil's talks at www.audiodharma.org, or find out more at www.insightmeditationcenter.org.

November 4 Donald Rothberg

An annual favorite at GBF, Donald Rothberg has practiced insight and metta meditation since 1976. A long-time organizer and teacher for the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, he is the guiding teacher for a new Spirit Rock program, the Path of Engagement. He also teaches socially engaged spirituality, Buddhism, and transpersonal psychology at Saybrook Graduate School and is the author of *The Engaged Spiritual Life: A Buddhist Approach to Trans-*

forming Ourselves and the World. You can listen to Donald at www.audiodharma.org.

November 11 James Baraz

James Baraz has practiced Vipassana meditation since 1974 and taught since 1980. He is a founding teacher of Spirit Rock Meditation Center. James coordinates both the Community Dharma Leader program and the Kalyana Mitta Network, and he is the teacher-advisor to the Spirit Rock Family and Teen program. In addition, he is on the International Advisory Board of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship. James leads an ongoing meditation class in the East Bay and is increasingly known for his repeating 10-month experiential course 'Awakening Joy' that has helped develop the natural capacity for well-being and happiness for over 1500 people in numerous countries. For more information, see www.awakeningjoy.info.

November 18 Discussion Day

November 25 Sean Feit

Sean Feit is returning to GBF to lead us in a session focused on the power and beauty of experiential chanting. He has practiced meditation (Zen and Vipassana) since 1993 and Yoga since 1994. He has been leading meditation and chanting practice since 1999, and also teaches yoga and musical instruments. Sean was a monk in Burma in 1992 and has recently returned from practice in India. He is a student of Jack Kornfield and Eugene Cash at Spirit Rock (and has led chanting at Eugene's San Francisco Insight Meditation Community). He leads Kirtan, a Sikh and Hindi devotional singing practice, and says that "chanting is the practice of love made audible". To find out about upcoming events with Sean, contact svaha@riseup.net.

How to Reach Us

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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For address changes or to subscribe or unsubscribe to the newsletter send email to:
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GBF Newsletter. Send submissions to:
editor@gaybuddhist.org

GBF Yahoo Discussion Group

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

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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