



Gay Buddhist Fellowship

FEBRUARY / MARCH 2008 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.

Anger: The Second Arrow

BY ANDREA FELLA

When I was told the topic was anger, I thought, "Oh great, this is one of my favorite subjects." I have a lot of experience with aversion and anger. I have worked with it extensively in my practice and have found a lot of opening and freedom through this practice of exploring aversion and anger. So I always love to share what I've learned along this topic.

Anger is a form of aversion. Aversion takes many different forms. Basically it's a form of reactivity to things that are unpleasant. For instance when we meet something that is unpleasant, we typically don't like it and want to get rid of it in some way, either by taking ourselves out of the situation or by pushing the thing away from us. The two main movements, I've found, in aversion are basically either fear, to take ourselves away—this feeling of wanting to take ourselves out of here—or anger—the wanting to lash out at what we don't like in our environment. There are many, many different flavors of aversion: frustration, hostility, dread, anger, rage, irritation. There are so many different levels of this movement of mind, to want to push away something unpleasant. In most of my examples today, I will focus on anger.

At one point the Buddha was talking to his monks, and he said that someone who is enlightened, who has experienced awakening, experiences unpleasant experience. And someone who has not awakened (they call this a run-of-the-mill worldling), experiences unpleasant sensation. And the Buddha asked his monks, "What is the difference between these two?" And they responded, "Please tell us and we will remember it as you've instructed us." So he said, and I'm paraphrasing here, "When a run-of-the-mill worldling experiences unpleasant sensation, they beat their breast and moan and wail and suffer greatly, saying 'Woe is me; why me?' It's as if a man being struck by a dart strikes himself with another dart," so adding to the first unpleasant sensation a second unpleasant experience. And actually we do more than add a single second arrow. We typically add a third, and a fourth, and a fifth. For instance, if you cut yourself with a knife, there's the physically unpleasant experience of being cut, but then there could also be some reactivity like, "How could I have been so stupid to not see where the knife was going to go if it slipped?" And then we get angry with ourselves because we've called ourselves stupid. And then we get sad because we got angry with ourselves, and then we feel frustrated because we've seen this pile of reactivity. And we just pile it one on top of the other. So the Buddha continued with his monks and said, "When an enlightened person experiences unpleasant sensation, he experiences unpleasant sensation. It stops there."

So really, the story of aversion is the story of reactivity to unpleasant experience. It begins there; it begins with this unpleasant experience. Now we can

actually witness this in our practice. We can see that our reactivity is born out of unpleasantness and mushrooms in this way. We can begin to see where our reactivity begins. But often in our practice, we don't see that. What we see instead is a full-blown rage. We wake up; we become aware that we are enraged. And we need to learn how to practice with that as well.

I think that aversion is a very natural experience. It is a form of reactivity, but it's a very natural thing. So I want to just encourage you to think of it as a normal thing in the mind. It's not really something to think of as a bad thing necessarily. It serves a function for us. And I think it actually has its roots in biological experience. So even an amoeba, for instance, in a noxious environment will pull away from the noxious aspect of it. And an amoeba will move towards food. There's a kind of natural response to move away from unpleasant and toward pleasant. But in our brains we seem to have taken this to a kind of extreme and react to things that are not necessary to react to. But it can be born out of some very deep experience, from childhood for instance. The kind of reactivity we learn in childhood—that we need to protect ourselves in some way—was functional at that point in our lives. Then, as we get to be adults, that pattern has become habituated. It's become a groove in our minds, a way that we've learned to respond to a specific situation. And yet it is no longer so necessary. This is the kind of reactivity we can learn to unwind through our meditation practice.

I think that aversion, and anger particularly, can serve as a signal for us. It's something that needs to be paid attention to.

What I'm suggesting by saying "anger needs to be paid attention to" is that instead of focusing outward at what we're angry at, we should turn the attention back on the experience of anger itself. What does it feel like to be a human being who is angry? That shift is a huge shift for us. It is a movement of mindfulness, a movement of our practice: to turn our attention toward what the actual experience of anger is.

When I did this early in my practice, anger was actually the doorway through which I entered practice in the first place. It was an out-of-control experience for me. I knew I needed to do something. I was basically non-functional at times because the anger got so strong. I could see that the anger was overwhelming, and I was pretty focused on the person that I was angry at. I could see, actually, as I began to do this mindfulness of the anger, that there was a belief that somehow the anger I was experiencing would harm the person that I was angry with, that it would teach him a lesson. It would somehow get out there and do something to him. Now, my circumstances at the time were that I was in the Peace Corps, on a little tiny island in the South Pacific, about 7,000 miles away from California, where the person I was angry with was living. So it became kind of clear that that anger was not going to travel 7,000 miles. But it was eating me up.

There's a story the Buddha tells about anger. He says anger is like picking up a hot coal to throw at somebody and you have the belief that you're going to hurt that person, but you burn yourself in the process. And I was experiencing that in spades.

So how do we turn our attention to the anger? How do we practice with aversion? One of the most effective ways

The kind of reactivity we learn in childhood—that we need to protect ourselves in some way—was functional at that point in our lives. Then, as we get to be adults, that pattern has become habituated. It's become a groove in our minds, a way that we've learned to respond to a specific situation. And yet it is no longer so necessary. This is the kind of reactivity we can learn to unwind through our meditation practice.

Something that's going on that needs to be attended to. But our typical way of attending to things that we get angry about, or are aversive to, is to focus on the thing in the world. When we experience anger, we typically focus on the thing we're angry at, the person we're angry at. And when I speak of anger as a signal that something needs to be attended to, I'm not speaking about paying attention to something "out there" that we need to fix. Because that's typically how we respond—that we need to fix something—either by taking ourselves out of the situation, or by doing something to our environment to try to change it, or trying to change another person.

that I've found in working with aversion and anger is to turn the attention to the physical experience in the body, what's going on in the body. There are so many different experiences we can have when we're angry. The body can get tight, hot, churning. There can be feeling of tension, of pressure in the body, maybe a clenching in the jaw. There are a lot of physical experiences we can have when we're angry. The point, or the reason it's skillful to turn our attention to the body when we're angry, is that so much of the anger is fed by the thoughts around the anger. "He did this. She did that. They shouldn't have done this. Why did they do that? I'm

going to do this to them because they did that. I could have done it better.” All of those thoughts actually feed the anger and make it stronger.

Turning our attention to the body does a couple of things. First, it keeps us in the present moment. It keeps us experiencing what’s happening here and now. It’s not repressing what we’re experiencing. It’s not turning away from what we’re experiencing. It’s not saying, “I’m not going to experi-

retreat. I got to pay attention to the thought that would trigger the manifestation of anger and see the whole thing come into being. And one time I saw the thought, and then in the next moment I saw just the beginnings of this movement toward a kind of a feeling of self-righteousness. And that felt warm and full; it was very pleasant. And very quickly it moved into hot and pressured and very unpleasant. But I thought, “Oh my gosh, that was like the hook.” That split

I thought if I started paying attention to anger, it would get worse; it would get stronger. But that’s not the case. If you pay attention to the thoughts around the anger and think about the anger, it does get worse. But simply paying attention to the physical experience, in a non-judgmental, non-reactive way, actually allows the experience of anger to flow through us. It allows that to live its life. All the emotions have a life. They have an arising and a passing, like a wave.

ence this anger.” It’s allowing you to be there, experiencing it, but it’s not engaging in the content or the story around the anger. It doesn’t feed the anger to pay attention in this way.

Mindfulness is a beautiful tool for us. It has this capacity, or this quality, that when we pay attention to unskillful states of mind (anger, hostility, frustration), it creates the conditions for it to appear less frequently in our lives. Now this kind of seems a little counterintuitive. At least it did to me when I first started paying attention. I thought if I started paying attention to anger, it would get worse; it would get stronger. But that’s not the case. If you pay attention to the thoughts around the anger and think about the anger, it does get worse. But simply paying attention to the physical experience, in a non-judgmental, non-reactive way, actually allows the experience of anger to flow through us. It allows that to live its life. All the emotions have a life. They have an arising and a passing, like a wave. And if we bring a mindful attention to our emotions it allows them to live their life in a natural way, to come into being, to crest, and then to flow out. This mindful awareness to the body allows the emotions to manifest in this way in our experience, to feel the full fruition of it and then to flow out.

In this early experience of anger that I described when I was first paying attention to the anger, it was pretty clear that the bodily experience of anger was really unpleasant. Physically unpleasant. There seemed to be this movement, this desire to be angry. I could see that kind of pull or movement to be angry. And I thought, “Why am I doing that when it’s such an unpleasant experience?” On a two-week retreat, something happened fairly early into the retreat that made me angry. It kept coming back over and over again so I got to pay attention to anger in a very detailed, specific way on that

second of pleasant sensation might be part of the reason why we go there. There’s that feeling of being so alive and present and in power, imbued with the sense of being, in the split second before it turned into full-blown anger. So that was very interesting to me, this observation of anger.

Because of the physical experience of anger, and also the mental experience of anger (they’re both unpleasant), it can be difficult to turn our attention sometimes. It can be a challenge to stay in that space of unpleasant experience. But when we start to do this in a non-reactive way, when we bring our attention to anger in a non-reactive way, we do begin to see this quality that the mindfulness has to kind of lubricate the anger and to allow it to flow in the way we can see causes us less suffering. So we start to see that bringing mindful awareness to our anger actually is less suffering than it is when we are caught up in our anger.

It’s really helpful paying attention to anger and to aversion. And as you pay attention to anger you’ll probably start to see the subtler forms of it: the pushing away, the resistance, the not liking the experience, the aversive side of it. It’s really helpful to simply recognize it in our experience, just to recognize that aversion is happening, anger is happening. That simple recognition is very, very powerful.

What I’m talking about here can be practiced on the cushion, but also in our daily lives. In fact, the majority of my work with anger has been in my daily life, and not so much on the cushion. In fact when I first started the meditation practice I was dealing with so much anger, I realized the meditation was a place where I could take refuge from the anger. I could take a break from anger sitting on the cushion. So I didn’t try to explore it too much in the meditation itself, but in my daily life it was running rampant. So I really dedicated

my mindfulness practice in daily life to observing anger. This can be a major work in our daily lives. And this recognition tool, recognizing that “this is anger,” is very powerful.

I’ll tell you a story of how this functioned for me in those early months of my practice. I didn’t have much training at that point. I was in the South Pacific, and there were a couple of books on meditation, but most of them were not very accessible. But a friend sent me a book called *Everyday Zen* by Joko Beck, and in that book she talked about picking some

have the skills to know what it meant to bring the attention inward. All I was doing was recognizing, simply recognizing. And over the course of several months of this, I began waking up even earlier so that it was more of an irritation than even anger.

And then one day, I was in my kitchen and I was cutting an apple, and I saw a thought go through my mind about the person I was angry with. We were at a fruit stand at the Sacramento River delta, and I could see the connection with what I

And in that moment of seeing, the mind realized it had a choice: go down that path where I’m going to experience suffering through the anger, or let it go. My mind said, “I’m not going to do this. I’m going to let it go.” It’s kind of like what happens when the body touches a hot pot on the stove and releases it even before you’ve actually felt the heat. The mind let it go because it knew if it went that way, it would suffer.

projects to be mindful about in your daily life. I wasn’t particularly inclined toward sitting meditation practice at this point, but I liked this idea of bringing mindfulness practice into my daily life, and in particular to the anger because that was out of control. So I chose the anger as a project, something to bring my mindfulness to, as Joko Beck had suggested. I said to myself, whenever I get angry I will pay attention to it. And what I discovered as I did this was that initially I wouldn’t remember to pay attention. And my anger at that point was such that it didn’t tend to just go away; it tended to get bigger and bigger and bigger.

At some point I would remember that I’d told myself that I’d resolved to pay attention to this anger and I would be in a full-blown rage. About all I could do at that point—and again I had very little training, but I knew that I was angry—was to recognize it. And just that recognition, “Yup, I’m angry. Boy, am I angry,” was about all I could do. And I’d be thinking, “So what I do with this? What does it mean to be mindful of this?” And after some period of time of just going, “Yup, angry again,” I thought I guess I just go back to work. I was often sitting at my desk when I would observe my anger, at the computer.

Over the course of months of doing this, I began to see that this resolve to wake up for the anger began to wake me up earlier in the process of anger so that instead of being a full-blown rage at the time that I became aware that I was supposed to pay attention, it would be more of the “normal” anger. That was a little bit easier to tolerate than the full-blown rage. I could see that the rage was much more challenging. With the normal anger, it was much easier to say, “Yup, I can sit with this for a few minutes.” I didn’t

was doing (cutting the apple) and the thought. I could also see, in that moment, this momentum of the mind to jump on that thought and think more thoughts in order to get angry. I wasn’t angry in that moment of the thought appearing. I wasn’t angry yet, but I could feel this freight train of desire to get angry.

I’d spent a lot of time in the previous months paying attention to rage, to anger, and seeing how unpleasant it was. And in that moment of seeing—there’s the thought, the momentum, or the intention or inclination toward anger—the mind (and I didn’t do any of this; this wasn’t a conscious thing; this is really the process unfolding in a natural way) realized it had a choice: go down that path where I’m going to experience suffering through the anger, or let it go. My mind said, “I’m not going to do this. I’m going to let it go.” It’s kind of like what happens when the body touches a hot pot on the stove and releases it even before you’ve actually felt the heat. The mind let it go because it knew if it went that way, it would suffer.

And in the next moment I stood there and waited to get angry, because I had seen all of this. I had seen, “Oh, I have a choice; I don’t have to go down that road,” but I didn’t believe it. I thought there was an intricate, linked connection between the thought of this person and the anger and that there would be no way that that thought could arise without the anger arising. So I stood there waiting to get angry. But I did not get angry. I was completely blown away by the power of that mindfulness to insert itself into the process, this habit of mind, of seeing my mind wanting to get angry. I saw how powerful the mindfulness was around that. That was the moment that I got hooked on this practice. That was it. I had really seen the power of mindfulness through this daily observation of anger.

Now, I'm not saying that I never got angry again. In fact I worked with anger with this person for years after that point. But I could see that this was the route. This was the way out of the anger. It had the capacity to take me beyond the anger.

One of my teachers, Carol Wilson, says that when we're experiencing aversion, and likewise anger, there's something unpleasant in our experience. But often when we're experiencing aversion we're not really aware of what the unpleasant thing is that we are reacting to. When we're angry, we're usually aware of what we're angry about, although sometimes I've seen myself, particularly on retreat, get into these aversive states of the mind. I remember one time doing walking meditation and seeing somebody's shoes sitting at the end of the walking path, and there was aversion to the shoes. But I could see that the mind was colored with aversion, that we get into these states where the mind is colored with aversion. For myself I've seen this happen when I get really hungry; then everything is aversive. And finally when I began to see that, I realized I could just experience it, the physically unpleasant sensations. And for some reason, I used to become very reactive to those physical, body experiences and now I can pretty much just be with that experience. I just know, "Yup, this is that state." It no longer tends to go into lashing out at others. It stays with the unpleasantness, and I don't end up reacting out toward others.

So, looking at our experience, what is the actual root, the source, of the aversion? Is there something going on? Sometimes when we are working with strong habits of mind, and this is true for any kind of strong habit of mind (anger it was for me, self-hatred it was for me), we see that there tend to be these ruts in our mind. And when we get anywhere near these ruts of mind, it becomes almost impossible to avoid

strong enough to meet the anger. And I found that it was helpful to turn my attention to something neutral in my experience. What I'd do is notice the anger, I'd recognize it, and it was almost like I'd speak to it for a moment. I'd say, "Yup, I see you anger. And I also see that right now is not a good time to pay attention to you directly because I know I'll get caught. So I'm going to pay attention to my feet on the ground." I also kind of made a bargain with it. I'd say, "I'll pay attention to you as my mindfulness grows stronger." This was a way to put the anger aside without aversion. If we do this "taking our attention away to something neutral" in a way that's aversive, then that will just feed the aversive habit. But if it's a simple putting aside—"not now"—and going to a neutral sensation, that can be a very powerful practice over years. And I did this for years. Again, I noticed I'd break into the cycle of anger earlier and earlier. In this case I began noticing that the bouts of anger were getting further apart. I'd notice that I was angry, tell myself, "Not now," pay attention to something neutral in my experience, and just stay there for a while. The bouts of anger became further and further apart.

And then one day I remember walking to my house and I realized that I hadn't been angry at this person in a very long time. And I thought, "I wonder where it is." And even having this person in mind at that moment, I couldn't generate the anger. I thought, "Is it gone?" I couldn't find it at all. And it has never come back since that recognition. In fact, what has replaced it is a sense of kindness and care for that person. Just that recognition, "Yup, I'm angry," putting it aside, coming to something neutral—that practice itself was extremely powerful.

I'm not saying I don't get angry at all. But that particular anger at that particular person is gone from my life. Completely eradicated. I can't even summon it up anymore. I can

Sometimes when we are working with strong habits of mind, and this is true for any kind of strong habit of mind, we see that there tend to be these ruts in our mind. And when we get anywhere near these ruts of mind, it becomes almost impossible to avoid dropping right into them.

dropping right into them. At times with very powerful states or habits like that, it can be challenging to bring mindfulness to them because the state or habit is stronger than the ability to be mindful of it.

I found this for myself around anger, the same anger I talked about earlier; it continued on for years. And I began to get the tools and techniques for working with it, with mindfulness, paying attention to the body. But I discovered that as often as I'd do this—bring the mindfulness into it—at some point I'd lose the mindfulness and end up in the anger again. And so I began to see that the mindfulness wasn't quite

remember that I was angry, but I cannot summon it up. So this practice of bringing mindfulness to our anger can be really powerful. Not only can it make our lives easier, but it's also a doorway into insight into impermanence, into suffering, into the emptiness of experience. I've found for myself that paying attention to these difficult states of mind has been a huge doorway toward those deeper insights. It's not a lesser practice to pay attention to these things. It doesn't really matter what we pay attention to with mindfulness. Anything we bring our attention to is the right thing to be paying attention to, and that mindfulness will lead to very deep, liberating insight. ■

GBF

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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.



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:
mailinglist@gaybuddhist.org

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

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

February 3 Discussion on Gay Sangha

Clint Seiter and Carl Wolf, long-time GBF sangha members, will share their thinking about the meaning and role of gay sangha in our lives. There will be an opportunity for group discussion during the talk.

February 10 Lee Lipp

Lee Lipp, Ph.D., has a therapy practice in San Francisco and supervises at Haight Ashbury Psychological Services. She has been a member of Thich Nhat Hahn's Order of Interbeing, practicing Zen and Vipassana, since 1990. She is the Diversity/Outreach Coordinator at the San Francisco Zen Center. She teaches "Transforming Depression" classes in venues that include Spirit Rock Meditation Center, Insight Meditation Society, Zen Hospice Project, Tassajara Mountain Center, and the San Francisco Zen Center. She is presently teaching for the San Francisco Mental Health Association and the San Francisco Department of Mental Health.

February 17 Joanna Macy

Eco-philosopher and visionary Joanna Macy has developed an international following over the course of 40 years as a speaker and workshop leader on Buddhism, general systems theory, and deep ecology. A respected voice in movements for peace, justice, and ecology, she interweaves her scholarship with four decades of activism. She is author of many books including *Thinking Like a Mountain*, *World as Lover*, *World as Self* and *Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect Our Lives, Our World*. <http://www.joannamacy.net/>

February 24 Open Discussion

March 2 Susan Moon

Susan Moon is a writer, teacher and until recently the editor of *Turning Wheel* magazine. She is the author of *The Life and Letters of Tofu Roshi*, a humor book about an imaginary Zen master, and editor of *Not Turning Away: The Practice of Engaged Buddhism*. Her short stories and personal essays have been published widely. She is the mother of two grown sons. Sue has been a Zen student since 1976, practicing in the lineage of Suzuki Roshi at Berkeley Zen Center, Tassajara Zen Mountain Monastery, Green Gulch Farm, and now with Zoketsu Norman Fischer's Everyday Zen sangha. She has received "lay entrustment," a lay version of dharma transmission, from Norman Fischer.

March 9 Lin Maslow

Gensha Lin Maslow is a zen priest in the tradition of Shunryu Suzuki, ordained by Chikudo Lewis Richmond in 2006. Deciding he just wasn't a theist at age 17, he abandoned his Jewish religion of origin, searching for a more direct and enriching spiritual practice. He began practicing Zen Buddhism at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center in 1980. There were several years of deep involvement with the Radical Faeries in the 80s. He practices with the Vimala Sangha in Mill Valley (for more information, see vimalasangha.org), where he aspires to attain nothing (except a partner, when the time is right, like now). He is a hospice nurse.

March 16 Jennifer Berazon

Jennifer Berazon is a singer/songwriter, teacher and activist. She has made eight albums. Beginning in 1995 she started her journey into meditative trance music and wordless chanting and singing, which she will share with us. In her musical career she has explored music as a spiritual practice from cross-cultural, traditional, Buddhist and contemporary perspectives. She teaches at the California Institute of Integral Studies, in the department of Philosophy and Religion. She has been involved in Buddhist practice for many years. For more information, see <http://www.edgeofwonder.com>.

March 23 Evan Kavanagh

Evan Kavanagh has been practicing Vipassana meditation since 1995. He has led meditation groups in the 12-step tradition and is a graduate of the Spirit Rock Dedicated Practitioners Program. Evan has served as the Executive Director of Spirit Rock Meditation Center since 2000. His professional work has included serving as the executive director of the Western Alliance of Arts Administrators Foundation. Evan and his husband Andrew live in San Francisco, where they were married in 2004.

March 30 Open Discussion

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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