



# Gay Buddhist Fellowship

APRIL / MAY 2008 NEWSLETTER

## Generosity

BY PAM WEISS

**Pam Weiss is a Buddhist meditation teacher, executive coach and trainer of coaches. She practiced Zen for almost twenty years, including several years of monastic training, and is now training with Jack Kornfield through Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Northern California. She leads a weekly meditation group in San Francisco on Wednesday nights at the Unitarian Universalist Church, teaches classes inside organizations, and offers retreats internationally. She happens to be married to Eugene Cash, another Buddhist (and Diamond Approach) teacher. She spoke at GBF on December 9, 2007.**

It's nice to be here again. For the last several weeks in the Wednesday night group that I lead in San Francisco, we have been talking about *dana*, which is the Pali word for giving or generosity. It seems like an appropriate thing to speak about during what we call the "season of giving," which mostly looks like, "Can I get up at 4 a.m. to get in line at Target on Black Friday?" The "season of giving" has lost its real feeling or intent, so it seems useful to remind ourselves what this is really about.

Many of you may be familiar with the Buddhist concept of *dana*. As the teachings were translated from Asia to the West, one of the traditions that was brought along was the idea that the teachings themselves are priceless—meaning that there can be no monetary value assigned to the value of waking up to who or what we are. That idea has come to the West in the tradition of offering *dana* for the teachings. Most of you are familiar with the *dana* basket; it's not unlike the basket that goes around in a church, for those of you who grew up in a different tradition. But the meaning of it is not just about putting money in the basket. There is a beautiful teaching behind the spirit of the *dana* basket.

Some years ago, when my husband first began teaching in the Buddhist tradition, he would talk about "getting paid by *dana*." At one point, I remember my mother responded to his saying this by tugging on my sleeve and asking, "Pam, who is this Donna?" She imagined that he had some kind of sugar mama paying him! Like her, I think there is a lot of confusion about what the teaching of *dana* is really about.

In Asia, Buddhist practice was divided: there were the monks and nuns who lived in a monastery or in the forest and practiced long hours of meditation, and then there were lay people, who supported the monks and nuns. For lay people, the primary practice was generosity. And giving to monks and nuns was (and still is) considered a great honor. In addition to making monetary contributions to the monastery, there is also a tradition of giving food. I have a friend who practiced at a monastery in Asia, and when she left, she wanted to make a contribution by

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.

paying for a meal. She was stunned to find that all the meals were already paid for through the end of the year! There was a long waiting list to give.

So today, I'd like to explore the practice of *dana* with you. As I said, for the past three weeks, I've been giving talks on *dana*. As I've been studying and practicing with *dana* myself, it's brought a quality of delight into my life. One of the ways that *dana* is understood is that it is not a

## **Generosity, like kindness, patience, or equanimity, is a quality that we can incline our minds towards. It is something we can actively cultivate in ourselves.**

burden, that the act of giving is joyful. Probably all of you can remember a time when either something was openly given to you or when you gave with real open-handedness. Either way, it is a joyful experience.

But it doesn't always feel that way! This points to two aspects of working with the practice. Generosity, like kindness, patience, or equanimity, is a quality that we can incline our minds towards. It is something we can actively cultivate in ourselves. But as is often the case when you work with a particular quality in that way, a lot of what comes up is the opposite. Often a lot of what you notice are the edges—where generosity bumps into stinginess. We feel the places where we don't feel generous. And that's useful too. So it's not that working with *dana* is just about pushing yourself to give. It's about inclining the mind, heart, and body toward increasing generosity, but also about discovering those places in us that don't want to give. Then the question is: Can we be generous with the stingy parts of ourselves?

Louis Hyde, the author of a book called *The Gift*, explored the practice of generosity across multiple cultures. Based on his research, he describes the difference between “true” and “false” giving as being determined by our intention. He says that giving from obligation is not true giving. Giving from a sense of gratitude—that's true giving. And so we have to be willing to be honest with ourselves about whether we're giving because we feel we should, or because a real uprising of gratitude comes up out of us and extends into the world.

In the Tibetan tradition, there's a description of the “near and far enemies” of generosity. The “far” enemy, the opposite of generosity, is stinginess. The “near” enemy is called “giving with a receipt.” This means giving with the expectation of getting something back. I don't know about you, but I often don't realize that I'm expecting something back until I don't get it! If I give someone something, or a compliment, or my time and energy, but I don't get anything back—there is no “thank you,” or maybe the person is even rude—then I get to realize that I was expecting something in return. It's a really wonderful place to notice, “Ah, I had an expectation.” It doesn't mean the expectation is wrong, but to see it is very useful.

*Dana* is the first of the *paramitas* or perfections—a series of beneficial qualities to be cultivated in our life and prac-

tice. The *paramitas* are specifically targeted for non-monastics, for people who are living in the world. It's wonderful to see that the very first quality on the list is opening the heart, opening the hands, opening and releasing.

The Buddha said, “I teach one thing and one thing only: suffering and the end of suffering.” The first of the Four Noble Truths is the truth of *dukkha*—of suffering, of stress, of anxiety—the truth that there is difficulty in the

world. The Second Noble Truth is that there is a cause for that difficulty, which the Buddha describes as clinging. We cling or hold on to wanting things to stay the same (if we like them) and wanting them to go away (if we don't like them). You may have noticed that living from that perspective—of trying to hold on to what you like and trying to get away from what you don't like—doesn't work very well. It may work for a short time, but for most of us, we inevitably bump up against being around people we don't want to be around and losing things, people, experiences, and moods we don't want to lose.

Because the truth is that everything is moving, when we try to hold on we get what one teacher calls “rope burn.” You can see for yourself this is true: Does your own grasping and holding on to what you like actually make you happy? Is your own effort to get away from what you don't like ever really successful for more than a few moments? As the Buddha suggested, Don't believe me; check it out for yourself.

If the Buddha is right, then it makes sense that the initial or primary antidote to clinging and grasping is giving, opening, releasing, letting things pass through. Because things are moving anyway, it makes sense to let them move. We can line up with how things are, or we can fight it. We can say, “No, I want it my way. I want it to go left, to go right, to go up or down.” If we do that, it's OK, but then we will suffer. It's in this spirit of alleviating suffering that we can understand the benefit and usefulness of inclining the mind, the heart, and the body toward opening, releasing, and letting things be. When we allow things to move, then we also become witness to our aliveness. It's like water. When water flows, it's clean, fresh, and alive. When it gets stuck, then it sits in a pool, collecting algae and mosquitoes. Then there's suffering and dis-ease.

Traditionally, the teachings describe three levels of giving. The first and most obvious level is giving “stuff”—giving things, or putting money in the *dana* basket or giving it to someone on the street. This is a wonderful, rich practice. The second level of giving is referred to as giving the *dharma*. This means giving the truth. That's what the word “*dharma*” means, truth. So giving at this level means giving your willingness to be with what is: it's offering your time, your attention, your kindness. It's the difference

between putting money in someone's cup and stopping to say hello and ask how they are.

The third level of giving is giving fearlessness. I'm not sure I fully understand what this means, but I think it means giving beyond the edge of what we think we can give. It doesn't necessarily mean giving more money than you want to give, but rather, What would it mean to give in a way that would challenge my sense of self, my wish to protect myself? What does it mean to step past that? This is more difficult to do. One example of this kind of fearless giving is Martin Luther King. He gave fearlessly. It's interesting that he initially didn't want to step into the historic role he played in our world. He had to be encouraged, even pushed into it. Seeing this, it becomes clear that giving fearlessly includes understanding interconnectedness: seeing the truth that we don't give (or do anything else for that matter) by ourselves.

The story of the Buddha is similar. Apparently, after the Buddha woke up he didn't want to share his understanding because he didn't think anyone would understand. Fortunately for us, there was divine intervention! One of the gods, who was able to see into the mind of the Buddha, zipped down from the heavens and encouraged the Buddha to teach, telling him, "There are beings with little dust in their eyes." In other words, there are people who are a little confused, but not completely; people who could benefit and even awaken through his teaching. This is what inspired the Buddha to go forward. So even the Buddha didn't do it by himself. He had to be nudged, encouraged to step forward.

Looking for examples of fearlessness is inspiring to us. It gives us a sense of what's possible for us as human beings. Gandhi is an example. Nelson Mandela is one of the prime

on guilt. Here are his own words about his experience, which speak beautifully to his deep understanding of our interconnectedness:

When you spend a great deal of time in darkness, in solitary, where everything blends into one, if you're fortunate, you'll begin to see things more vividly than you've ever seen them before. It may take days, weeks, months, or years, but you'll begin to see things as they really are. You'll begin to see yourself as you've never seen yourself before. Because when you can't see outside, you can only look inside. In a very real sense, going to prison was the best thing that ever happened to me. Without it I never would have been able to find myself. I would have been a baldheaded, mean-looking ex-prize fighter talking through a screen of conditioning, anger, and bitterness.

At the end of the interview, the interviewer says to him, "So, paradoxically, prison made you free." And this is where Carter really shows how wise he is. He responds by saying:

No, not free. But awake. Freedom doesn't really exist, because it implies separation and everything in this universe is connected. There is no separation. This is Nicaragua. This is Israel. I see and feel everything on this earth. When someone is facing execution, I know it. I feel what that person is going through. When bombs drop, I feel the pain and suffering of the people.

For our wisdom to mature to a place of fearlessness requires wisdom: the ability to see things as they really are. This includes seeing the truth of impermanence: that everything is moving, and that if we try to hold on, we'll suffer. It also means seeing the truth of our interconnectedness: the truth that none of us can do anything by ourselves, that we

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examples of our time. Aung San Suu Kyi is a beautiful example. Each of these great bodhisattvas shows us our potential and offers hope and illumination.

Recently I found a very moving example from an interview in *The Sun* magazine that I'd like to share. The interview was with Ruben "Hurricane" Carter. Some of you may know Carter's story from the Denzel Washington movie called Hurricane. Hurricane Carter was an intelligent, successful black man who was unapologetic about who he was. He was arrested in relationship to a murder that occurred in his Chicago nightclub and ended up in jail for almost twenty years. And for twenty years, he fought to be released. When he eventually was let go, the judge said that the sentence was primarily based on racism, not

are, in fact, inextricably connected to one another. And it means seeing the truth that, ultimately, everything is given. We didn't create any of this—the chairs or cushions or flowers or even our own bodies. It has all been given, freely.

When we understand the fluidity of life, our fundamental connectedness with life, and the generosity of life itself, we expand. We're able to move out of our small sense of "I, me, mine," and are able to open and connect. I hope this provides inspiration to all of us as we move deeper into the madness of the holiday season and offers an invitation for us to remember the true meaning of the holidays, which are holy days. Then perhaps, in the spirit of true generosity, we can open our hands and our hearts to let holiness in, and to let it flow out again. ■

# “There Is No Way Not to Be Who You Are, and Where”

BY WES NESKER

**Co-founder and editor of the international Buddhist journal, *The Inquiring Mind*, Wes Nisiker has practiced Vipassana meditation for 30 years. He's the author of *Buddhist Nature: Evolution as a Guide to Enlightenment*, *Crazy Wisdom, A Romp through the Philosophies of East and West*, and *If You Don't Like the News, Go Out and Make You're Own*. The following is a reprise of a dharma talk that first appeared in our newsletter in December of 2002.**

I'd like to begin with a couple of poems. I'm a poetry lover and one in particular grabbed my attention and has been my sort of theme poem for this last few months. It's by a Japanese poet named Ikkiyu.

Long Life: The Wild Pines 1 and 2

Passion's red thread is infinite  
like the earth,  
always under me.  
Now I'm 70.  
Still alive.  
Looking up every night.  
and snapping my fingers at time and the promise of love.  
Listen! I'd like to give you something.  
But what would help?  
Self, other, right, wrong,  
wasting your life arguing with it.  
Face it! You're happy!  
How many times do I have to say it?  
There is no way not to be who you are, and where.

It's like a mantra: there's no way not to be who you are and where. Such a great line.

And this poem is by Hafiz, the Sufi who came about a century after Rumi and who has become popular recently. I like this one. It's called “Tripping Over Joy.”

What is the difference  
Between your experience of Existence  
And that of a saint?

The saint knows  
That the spiritual path  
Is a sublime chess game with God

And that the Beloved  
Has just made such a Fantastic Move

That the saint is now continually  
Tripping Over Joy

And bursting out in Laughter  
And saying, “I Surrender!”

Whereas, my dear,  
I am afraid you still think

You have a thousand serious moves.

Both those poems are really about the same thing—the inevitability of things being the way they are, and us being who we are. At the core of the Buddhist teaching is the concept of *annata*: that this self with a small s is not something that I own, that it is living through me in some very very deep way, and that embracing ourselves is really all we can do. We might be able to come to some new kind of freedom within this personality's constraints and within the constraints of being human, some kind of ease and freedom with that that's living through us, but we really have very little choice.

In recent months, I've been very taken with the sense in the dharma of the persistent nature of the difficulties we face in this incarnation as earthlings. Maybe it's because of the world situation. Just a few years ago, everybody was making a lot of money and just chugging along and everything was going to be great, and then everything changed with the collapse of the economy and the election—the selection—of the Bush Administration and this drum beat for war.

The Buddha's first noble truth is so unique and so profound; it's saying that this is where you start: you have to start by accepting that this life is not an easy condition. First of all, there's death and the preknowledge of our own death, which is something that we're all given as humans: the inevitability of old age and sickness and not getting what you want. When you strip it down to the bare facts, it's not a very pretty picture. We're always trying to put a good face on it, to make it seem like it's a beautiful thing that serves some higher purposes, and that's not to say that there aren't joy and some moments of real happiness and ease, but they are fleeting like everything else. The core truth of existence in this form is *dukkha*, or unsatisfactoriness. Sometimes it's translated as suffering, but a better translation is unsatisfactoriness, or unreliability. So fragile, our existence. So I have this litany of the stark naked facts, and I think it's really helpful. Most people say that when they hear and actually embrace the truth of this, it is a very soothing, relieving, because it's an antidote to our idealism, that we're going to somehow get it all right and live happily ever after, which is a myth of our culture—we're going to get it all together and it's going to stay together, and of course, it's contrary to all evidence that this is ever the case. So I'd just like you to consider with me just for a few moments the bare facts.

First of all, we didn't ask to be born, or at least we don't remember asking. We wake up sometime in early childhood and suddenly realize that we're in a body, we've got a life to be lived, and we've got an identity and there it is. When we're born, we're born with this most powerful instinct, which is to stay alive, the survival instinct. We want nothing more than that, to stay alive. So we don't choose to be born and we can't choose to die. It's like Nature trapped us in this life.

We don't get to choose who we will be in this lifetime. We don't get to choose our bodies. I don't remember any catalog of choices. You know, would you like eyes in the front and the back? Would you like to swim, fly or walk as your primary means of locomotion? You get the standard bipedal midsize mammal form that we humans get. We don't get to choose our personality. The geneticists say that when we're born, we're born with a certain mixture of neurochemicals and genetic makeup that gives us a certain temperament. We're

true happiness can be found by eliminating the false sense of self, the false idea that we alone that are doing this. This is our common condition, and the more we understand that, the more that we see this is the human condition living through us and not our personal drama. We can shift our focus and actually find much more ease with our personality and with our life we have to live.

It's always a very difficult concept, the concept of *annata* or no-self, that is taught by the Buddha, but it really is what he means: this is not a self-existing entity that belongs to us. The body is kind of a loaner. He says in one point in one of the sutras, "This body does not belong to me or anyone else; it has arisen due to past causes and conditions." Now he didn't know the specifics of evolution, but he understood that we didn't create this form, this condition of human existence, that it comes from a great stream of causes and conditions and circumstances that we have nothing to do with, and it is that understanding that begins to even give us some ease

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either born with a tendency to be withdrawn or aggressive, or reward-dependent or novelty-seeking. There's a number of different types of temperaments that they've named. And then the psychologists tell us that whatever isn't set at birth will be firmly in place long before we have any choice in the matter at all, which means we didn't get to choose our parents, the dear ones who will set our lifelong neurosis for us. So we don't get to choose our body, and we don't get to choose our personality. We're not free to be who we are. We are forced to be who we are.

Then consider that once you get this body, you have to feed it a few times a day to keep it going. That means you have to work, think or schlep to make money to feed yourself. You fight gravity everytime you get up in the morning, every time you take a step. You're not told exactly why you're here or what you're supposed to be doing while you're here, and you're given just enough awareness to know that you do exist and that someday you will die, which you very much do not want to do.

These are the facts of life. As my friend Wavey Gravey says, "If you don't have a sense of humor, it's just not funny." I think actually Nietzsche put it best. He said, "God's only excuse is that he doesn't exist." But there's a great relief in recognizing these truths because first of all it means we weren't singled out for punishment. We share this condition with each other, and misery loves company, for sure, but it also just gives a realistic sense of what we are doing in this life. And the Buddha said that the only

about the temporary appearance of this form, this life. I'm very interested in evolutionary science. I never was interested in science when I was young, but since actually starting to practice meditation and study Buddhism, I've become extremely interested in evolutionary psychology, evolutionary biology, because it's such a powerful message of *annata*, of no self. You realize that this whole life was shaped by millions of years of life stream adjusting to different environmental conditions. There weren't legs before land arose out of the oceans because legs were unnecessary. You also begin to see how young a species we are. If you look at the story of evolution, in biological time, we're just babies. We're just starting. We just got these big brains, and they didn't come with a very good instruction manual. We're really just learning how to use them. When you think that Lao Tse and the Buddha and Socrates were 2,500 years ago, and Darwin and Freud and Einstein are basically our contemporaries, you realize that we are just coming to a new understanding of who we are and how we can better control or override the instincts that we've inherited and come to some new, some real consciousness. We can maybe live up to the name *homo sapiens sapiens*, twice-knowing humans, which now I think means we have to hear something at least twice before we get it.

So I wanted to say those things because I think it's useful at a difficult time to really touch into the deeper stories and the deeper perspectives on the human condition and who we are. ■

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## **GBF Financial Support to Other Organizations**

It is a GBF tradition to give financial contributions to organizations we want to support. In the past, we've given to the Hamilton House, Larkin Street Youth Center, LYRIC, the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, the SF Buddhist Center, our scholarship fund for participants at the GBF retreat, and to the Kiva Micro Loan Program. If you have recommendations for other potential recipients, please contact Jim Stewart at [jassstewart@sbcglobal.net](mailto:jassstewart@sbcglobal.net).

## **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](http://www.gaybuddhist.org)

For general questions about GBF write to:

[inquiry@gaybuddhist.org](mailto:inquiry@gaybuddhist.org)

To reach our Program Committee with suggestions for speakers and comments, go to:

[www.gaybuddhist.org/programs](http://www.gaybuddhist.org/programs)

Mail correspondence:

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[editor@gaybuddhist.org](mailto: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](http://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

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### April 6 Panel on Spiritual friendship

Ray Dyer, Jim Stewart and Ari Kleiman will share their thinking about the meaning and role of spiritual friendship in our lives and sangha. There will be an opportunity for group discussion during the talk.

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### April 13 ChiSing

Br. ChiSing, M.Div., M.A. is an Interfaith retreat facilitator, spiritual director, ritual artist, musician, and the founder of "Interfaith Mindfulness Ministries." He is a Community College adjunct professor of World Religions. His primary teacher is Thich Nhat Hanh and he was ordained into the "Order of Interbeing" in 2003. He has led retreats in San Francisco, Berkeley and Los Angeles. He is the founder of "Awakening Heart Sangha". ChiSing's vision for ministry is to practice Mindful Spirituality in an Interfaith Earth-based way, with an emphasis on creativity, music and the arts. [www.InterMindful.com](http://www.InterMindful.com)

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### April 20 Sita

Sita has been chanting in different venues for the past 17 years. She started within the Hindu tradition of kirtan and then expanded out to all traditions to reach broader audiences. She is a disciple of Neem Karoli Baba and has performed with Krishna Das, Ram Dass, and Baghavan Das. A native of Ireland, she feels that her voice comes out of her Celtic roots; its powerful resonance harkens to an ancient, earthy form of song. She lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico, but spends several months each year working at Spirit Rock Meditation Center.

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### April 27 Dharma Duo—

#### Harley Shapiro and David Lewis

David has been a practicing Buddhist for over 30 years. At the height of the AIDS epidemic he ran a meditation group for people living with HIV at the Zen Hospice Project and managed several annual retreats at the Esalen Institute. In 2008 he is joining Spirit Rock Meditation Center's Dedicated Practitioner Program, a two-year program of Buddhist study and practice. Harley Shapiro has been a student and teacher of cultural anthropology and photography in Berkeley and San Francisco since 1966. He has traveled, worked, and lived in many parts of the world, including Latin America, the Caribbean, West Africa, India and Asia. He has worked with several HIV/AIDS community service organizations both locally and internationally. From the San Francisco Summer of Love to the present Gay Buddhist Fellowship and Sangha, Harley has had a clear eclectic practice and path.

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### May 4 Eugene Cash

Eugene Cash is the founding teacher of the San Francisco Insight Meditation Community of San Francisco. He teaches at Spirit Rock Meditation Center and leads intensive meditation retreats internationally. His teaching is influenced by both Burmese and Thai streams of the Theravada tradition as well as Zen and Tibetan Buddhist practice. He is also a teacher of the Diamond Approach, a school of spiritual investigation and self-realization developed by A. H. Almaas.

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### May 11 Eric Poche

Eric Poche is the director of volunteer services & training at Zen Hospice Project and the Laguna Honda Hospital Hospice Volunteer Program. Eric has many years of compassionate experience working with those in the process of dying, which he calls "the great teaching of my life". A native of the Bay Area, he has been a student of the dharma for many years, sitting Zen & Vipassana.

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### May 18 Tom Moon

Tom Moon, MFT, is a psychotherapist in San Francisco who works primarily with gay men and specializes in the use of mindfulness as a tool of self-exploration. His column, "The Examined Life" appears bi-weekly in the SF Bay Times. His spiritual home is Spirit Rock Meditation Center.

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### May 25 Jim Wilson

Jim Wilson, the former abbot of the Chogyo Zen Center in New York, has studied in the Chogyo, Fuke and Soto traditions of Zen.

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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