



Gay Buddhist Fellowship

OCTOBER / NOVEMBER 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.

Depression and Buddhist Practice

BY 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. He gave this talk at GBF on May 18, 2008.

Good morning. The topic that I wanted to talk on today is depression, which seems a little incongruous to me. I have been celebrating since the Supreme Court victory [legalizing same-sex marriage in California]. I have been elated about it. On the other hand, depression is a really relevant and important topic for our community and for the whole culture for a number of reasons. Depression is really important in American culture. We have good epidemiological data to show that the incidence of depression in America rose tenfold from the beginning of the 20th century to the end of it. It really spiked after World War II. Today about five percent of the population is suffering from a severe depression, and about ten million Americans are currently taking anti-depressants. So much of these chemicals are now in the US that I have read that in some places the tablets are starting to contaminate the water supply. I don't know where. It is also a disorder characterized by a tendency to relapse just like addiction. Every time you have an episode of severe depression, your chances of having another one increase by sixteen percent. It's as if somehow the brain learns to go there more and more easily as time passes.

Do gay men have more depression than the general population? It is debated, but according to a report compiled by one group, the Medius Institute, based on a review of more than three hundred studies, gay men face a lifetime risk of depression that is roughly three times higher than the rest of the general population. I don't know whether this is true. It is disputed by some. But what I do know is that, of the gay men I see, across the board—young, old, couples, single, HIV positive, HIV negative—depression is by far the most common issue that I have seen over the last 20 years.

The other reason I wanted to talk about it at the GBF is that what is really fascinating to me is that the latest developments in the psychological treatment of depression over the last ten years are making the treatment look more and more like Buddhist practice all the time. It is interesting to me too because Buddhism has had the reputation until fairly recently in this culture of being kind of a life-denying, depressing spiritual tradition probably because when the liberating language of Buddhism

is translated into English, I am not sure it translates all that well. It often sounds like the way the depressed people talk about themselves: I am empty; I have no self; I am nothing.

This says something about the human mind. The human mind has an amazing talent for generating suffering and can even turn something like emptiness into the sense of a solid identity that is something to suffer over. It is an amazing capacity of our minds, which brings me to cognitive therapy. Cognitive therapy came into existence in the late 60s, early 70s, and it is the first treatment for depression that actually works, that actually has some value. It's based on a very simple old idea. The Stoic philosopher Epictetus said, "People

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are disturbed not by things, but by the view that they take of them," and the idea is that our moods are not created by what is happening so much as by what it means to us, by what we think about it, our opinion of it, how we deal with it in our minds. Researchers began to notice that depressed people think in very pessimistic and self-denigrating ways. What if we studied that, really got specific about how depression works, the cognitive side of it, and then designed interventions to help people think in more optimistic ways? Would that help? And so that was basically the project of cognitive therapy.

There's a whole bunch of different ways of looking at the cognitive theory of depression, but here is a brief summary of what they found. Depressed people tend to explain painful events in three pessimistic ways. The first is permanence, meaning that the causes of unpleasant events are seen as long lasting rather than temporary. I mean it will be like "I am all washed up and I can't go on" rather than "I am really exhausted today." The second characteristic is pervasiveness, as in "I am not attractive to anyone" as opposed to "He is not interested in me." The third characteristic is personalizing, meaning that when disappointments occur, depressed people blame themselves as in "I got this cold because I don't take care of myself" rather than "It's cold and flu season and bodies get sick." So when anything bad happens, the tendency is to go to self blame. So when we explain our difficulties as personal, permanent, and pervasive, the result is the sense of learned helplessness. When we make universal explanations for our disappointments, we tend to give up on everything when disappointment strikes in one area, which explains the kind of paralysis and stuckness that characterizes depression, the sense that "everything is hopeless, so I might as well not even get out of bed." Another common characteristic of depression is rumination. The word rumination originally meant chewing the cud. It is like grinding on the same negative thoughts over and over again, self denigration or victimhood. So the summary of all this is that pessimistic explanatory style, coupled with rumination, is the recipe for severe depression. So what do we do about this? What cognitive therapists have people

do is notice when your mood changes what you were thinking just before the mood change and begin to focus on what you were thinking, what kinds of thought were running through your head, because the kind of thoughts that create depression tend to be unconscious, not in the Freudian sense of repressed, but in the way that breathing is unconscious. The thoughts are there, but we have been thinking these thoughts since we were kids usually and they are still there in the background, and we don't know we are doing it. They are automatic, and so they affect moods without our knowing it. So the first thing is to begin to relate to our thoughts rather than from our thoughts, to begin to make our thinking process an object of

study rather than simply to respond to our thoughts. And then what happens is you can begin making a list of your top ten tunes. Most of us don't even have ten, but we have several themes that we use that are negative. Write them down and begin to get them explicit and then begin to study them. Is this thought rational? Is it correct? So the primary tool of work in cognitive therapy would be disputation, disputing your cognitive distortions or your automatic thoughts and hopefully replacing them with more optimistic thoughts.

There are three books that I recommend to my depressed clients, the ones who can benefit from self-help books. Most self-help books are bullshit, but this one is called *Feeling Good: the New Mood Therapy* by David Burns. It's a thick book but easy to read. It's been out since 1980 and it has the advantage of being one of the first or one of the only self-help books that was actually made the object of research. Depressed patients were given this book and told to read it and do the exercises. That's it; that was their whole treatment. And people got measurable improvement in depressive symptoms after twelve weeks. I find it very helpful in teaching people cognitive therapy.

So what is the outcome of cognitive therapy? Does it work? Here is what they've found: Outcome studies show that both antidepressant drugs alone and cognitive therapy alone effectively break up depression. Combining them both together works slightly better than either alone, which is why the combination is generally considered to be the standard of care these days for severe depression, but the studies also show that patients who go through cognitive therapy have a much lower rate of relapse than those who just take antidepressants because they've learned skills they can use over and over again without the use of drugs or psychiatrists later in life.

So that is basically a brief summary about what cognitive therapy is. The Buddhist practices began to come into cognitive therapy when researchers were looking for better ways to prevent relapse because relapse in depression is very strange. The first episode of a severe depression usually has a cause that you know about: You lost a job or a relationship, something bad happened, someone died, and you went into a depression.

But later episodes take less and less to cause them, and people later will be saying, “I am really depressed, and I don’t have the slightest idea why. Life is going really well for me, so what is causing that?” The theory that the researchers have come up with is this: causation works both ways. In other words, these ideas, these cognitive distortions, can cause depression, but if you have a transient episode of a bad mood or a bad day, what can happen is if you have got these neural pathways already laid down and these habits of thought are already there, then this transient bad mood can trigger all that, which then rebounds on the bad mood, making it worse and a downward spiral gets going that can set off a severe depression even if life is outwardly seemingly going very well. So that is really kind of scary: the more you have been depressed, the easier it is to get depressed because our minds sort of become used to it. They go there more easily. So what do we do about this? Well, mindfulness practice turns out to be a very useful tool for preventing relapse in depression. It has actually been studied, and it lowers the rate of relapse, for several reasons. The first is that if I am feeling a bad mood or feeling some dissatisfaction, and I can just sit with it, breathe, come into the body, get out of my head and just be with what is, then transient unhappiness comes and goes and it doesn’t have to trigger all this thought. Mindfulness becomes a way of reconnecting with the body or reconnecting with the awareness within which the experience arises, and then we don’t have to go into this cascade of negative thinking.

This discovery that cognitive therapists made really was discovered 25 centuries ago by the Buddha, but he used different language. Do you know about *vedena* practice? The Buddha said that every moment of experience is characterized by one of three *vedenas*, or feeling tones. Every moment of experience is either positive, negative or neutral, and you can do a *vedena*

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practice as a mindfulness practice—to meditate and to observe what you are feeling or what you are sensing or thinking and with each moment of experience, note the *vedena*. He said that is fine. It is not suffering simply to notice the passing sensations like clouds in the sky, but suffering begins when we go from the *vedenas* to what he called—I love this word—*papancha*. *Papancha* means mental proliferation. We go from attention to bare experience into the story of me, or the story of

“Oh, God, I am getting depressed again. Here we go. Why am I so weak? Oh, no.” The whole cascade of thoughts begins, and that is the point in the cycle of dependant origination where suffering originates, and that is the point at which you can intervene. So these ideas are 25 centuries old, and we discovered them about ten years ago. We are catching up. One of my clients who began to do this work said to me, “Oh, my God! Peace of mind is an oxymoron. If you’re looking for peace in the mind, you are looking in the wrong place.” The mind is a tool for solving problem, and it tends to focus on problems and unfortunately to create them.

Another reason that mindfulness is very helpful with this process has to do with something that psychologists call cognitive defusion or de-centering or disidentification. The Buddha referred to it as “knowing thoughts as thoughts” in the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. When I read that, my first thought was, “What the hell does that mean? What else would I know thoughts as?” But it turns out that this is a very deep insight because most of us don’t know thoughts as thoughts in the important areas of life. We think they are something else. And this is so subtle that we miss it all the time. Let me try to explain what I think he meant. If I walk by a pile of stinking garbage, I am unlikely to think, “Oh! There is a pile of stinking garbage. What a loser I am!” Why? Because I know that the pile of garbage is not me and it is not mine. I don’t identify with it, right? If I go to a restaurant, I don’t try to eat the menu because I know that the word hamburger on the menu is not that thing I want to eat. The map is not the territory. Ideas are not the thing to which they refer. This is clear; it’s obvious, right? We all know this. However, if I say, “I am a loser,” and I mean it and say it with conviction, there is no space between me and that thought, is there? It is self-referential. I am describing the essence of Tom

Moon. I have the identity of loserosity. There is no space between me and the thought. We think we are talking about something real; we think we are talking about an essence. We do this all the time when we think about ourselves. We will mistake the map for the territory. What if there is just a simple shift of attention, and because I am doing mindfulness practice, I am able to say, “Ah! The thought ‘I am a loser’ is arising in my awareness.” It is the same thought, but now I

am relating to the thought rather than from it. I am relating from a different standpoint, and I am not locked in my head identified with my thinking. As my spiritual mentor at Spirit Rock says, “This simple shift of attention is the difference between suffering and freedom.” It is very subtle but very, very powerful, at least in the long run.

This is really difficult. It is easy to explain but really difficult for most of us to do because in our culture we identify with our minds. We think most of the time that we are our minds and that we think our thoughts. I mean to most of my life, Tom Moon is in here, an inch or two behind my eyes, sort of looking out through my eyes, in this skin-encapsulated ego, little homunculus, little guy in there, pulling the levers, thinking my thoughts, right? That’s who I am. I can think I have a body because we generally are dis-identified from our bodies in this culture, but I am my mind. I am my thoughts. There is not much space between us and our thoughts much of the time. So it is very hard for us to get the idea of seeing thoughts as like clouds passing in the sky. It sounds kind of mystical to us. Yet when we start to meditate, one of the first things we discover is that we cannot control our thoughts. People say, “I can’t meditate” all the time, and what they mean is that when they sit down to meditate and are trying to focus on the breath, the mind just goes off on its trip, and then they open their eyes and look around and everyone else seems to be totally realized. And they think, “Well, I can’t meditate.” They don’t know that everyone else is doing the same thing, that the first thing we get is that we don’t control our thoughts. The thoughts arise like everything else, like sensation, like digestion. There is no thinker in there thinking these thoughts. This was the mind-blowing insight of no self. This is a process that happens according to causes and conditions, and it is not me and not mine anymore than this stinking pile of garbage. This is true of true thoughts as well as false

is cost effective. It is a cheap way to help people deal with all kinds of the emotional problems and hypertension and so on.

The second book—I said I recommend three books—is one which just came out last year. It is called *The Mindful Way Through Depression*, and it is basically an eight-week course in mindfulness directed towards prophylaxis against depression. It has a CD in the back with meditations led by John Cabot-Zinn, who started all this in the West, and I have been recommending this one too. Once people learn to dispute their thoughts and begin to become skeptical with their minds, they begin to catch on to the fact that their minds are not objective maps of reality, and they become a little more amenable to doing some mindfulness work. And this works. I am really finding that it helps people get out of their heads and more into their lives.

So it is really interesting to me that this is going on. This is an important development as far as I’m concerned, but I don’t think that Western psychology has caught up with Buddhism yet. We are way, way behind what they knew 25 centuries ago. For one thing *meta* meditation has not really yet been fully incorporated into cognitive therapy, and it is so valuable. *Meta* meditation means loving kindness or loving friendliness, and it was a practice taught by the Buddha for evoking compassion for oneself and others. Mindfulness was considered a wisdom practice, and then *meta* is a compassion practice. That’s the bird that flies to freedom with both wisdom and compassion. So since depression generally involves such self-denigrating thoughts, doesn’t it stand to reason that the regular practice of sending love and kindness to yourself and others might help with that. Eckhart Tolle has a great quotation in *The Power of Now*—a number of you have probably read that book; it’s a really great book. He says, “You have probably come across mad people in the streets incessantly talking or muttering to themselves. Well, that is not much different from what you

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thoughts. They arise, they stay for a while, and then they pass away. And so when we begin to pull back and dis-identify from thoughts, then the mind can’t grab us as much, and what has been discovered in research is that when people who have depressive episodes are taught mindfulness practice and do it on a regular basis, they have fewer relapses. It actually works as a treatment, as a prophylaxis against depression, which I think is really fascinating. It’s now being taught. You can learn mindfulness-based stress reduction at Kaiser because it

and all other normal people do except that you don’t do it out loud. The voice comments, speculates, judges, compares, complains, likes, dislikes and so on. It is not uncommon for the voice to be a person’s own voice and many people live with a tormentor in their head that continuously attacks and punishes them and drains them of vital energy. It is the cause of untold misery and unhappiness as well as disease.” You know what I am talking about? Psychologists these days are calling it the inner critic. Some people call it their butt-kicking

machine, but it is there. Most of us have it. It is interesting that it is a culturally specific too. This constant self criticism is not shared in other cultures. Do you know the story of the Dalai Lama when he heard about low self esteem in Americans? He was meeting with Americans, and he and his retinue were trying to understand what that concept could possibly mean. Isn't that interesting? They couldn't figure it out. They said, "Do you have this? Do you have this?" They all

is always about the future; it's always about the awful thing that is going to happen any minute now or tomorrow. The ultimate refugee from anxiety and from depression is here; it is to be in the present moment. I think that is what the Buddha was saying. These truths are so immensely simple, and we have mystified them. We have made them really complicated.

For me, doing this work with depression has helped me understand some of the ideas in Buddhism that have seemed

Eckhart Tolle has a great quotation in *The Power of Now*: "You have probably come across mad people in the streets incessantly talking or muttering to themselves. Well, that is not much different from what you and all other normal people do except that you don't do it out loud." The voice comments, speculates, judges, compares, complains, likes, dislikes and so on. It is not uncommon for the voice to be a person's own voice and many people live with a tormentor in their head that continuously attacks and punishes them and drains them of vital energy. It is the cause of untold misery and unhappiness as well as disease."

thought, "How could you not esteem yourself?" In feudal cultures, such as traditional Tibet, people knew where they stood, and they knew where they were. It is in our individualistic kind of atomized cultures that we are on our own and we develop these inner critics ostensibly to protect ourselves, and it is a kind of design flaw in our system, I think.

So *meta* mediation is a really treatment for this. Sylvia Boorstein says that *meta* practice really means teaching your mind some manners. You know, we have very, very ill-mannered minds. We judge ourselves and others, and cognitively the reason *meta* meditation works is that we can only think one thought at a time. If I am sitting here thinking, "May I be happy; may I be peaceful," I am not thinking, "What a jerk!" I mean the thought may come back, but if you keep returning to the *meta* practice you begin to lay down these neural pathways. The inner critic is just a habit too. The two *meta* phrases that I have given to depressed patients because I like them the most myself are these: "May I love and accept myself exactly as I am right now." Doesn't it change your state just to even think that thought for a second? Because we are all leaning into the future, trying to get better all the time. So take a moment and say, "May I love and accept myself exactly as I am right now," and then say this to others. It brings me back into the present; it reminds me that I am not a human reclamation project. The other one that I like is for anxiety: "May I be safe from inner and outer harm and may I know the safety of this moment." This moment right now is safe. Anxiety

difficult to me, especially the doctrine of *anatta*, or no self. What do you mean there is no self? I think I am beginning to understand this a little bit, and I began to understand this when I saw a client who was researching his mental maps and began to realize that all the stuff he had been taught in his traumatic childhood, all the ideas he carried around in this head were just that: they were a tissue of ideas and had nothing to do with reality. This is good news, right? But he was anxious. He thought, "If I am not this, then who am I?" What is familiar is familiar. We cling to even negative identities just because we know who we are. We get so afraid of the unbearable lightness of being, the reality of emptiness. So the Buddha said, "Non-identification with anything has been declared by the blessed one. For in whatever way one conceives, the truth is other than that." That doesn't mean all of your ideas are false. It just means that they're ideas. The word hamburger is not the thing I am going to eat. Our ideas about ourselves are not the living reality that we can contact in practice, and I think when you begin to understand this, some of the mystical sayings in Buddhism begin to become very obvious and clear. I will end with this one. This is a famous one from Kalu Rinpoche. He said, "We live in illusion and the appearance of things. There is a reality. You are this reality. When you understand this, you will see that you are nothing, and being nothing, you are everything. That is all." I have begun finally to feel, "Ah! I get it a little bit." The emptiness that the Buddha talked about is the emptiness of liberation, not of nothing. ■

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GBF Thanksgiving Celebration

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.

Note to Readers

Send us poetry you have written that is related to or inspired by your Buddhist practice. We will include some of these poems in future issues of the Gay Buddhist Fellowship newsletter. If we receive enough poems we may devote an entire newsletter to poetry. You may submit your poetry either by email or regular mail at the addresses listed below.

How to Reach Us

www.gaybuddhist.org

For general questions about GBF write to:

inquiry@gaybuddhist.org

To contact Program Committee with suggestions for speakers and comments:

www.gaybuddhist.org/programs

Mail correspondence:

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Address changes or to subscribe or unsubscribe to the newsletter:

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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

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 5 Arinna Weisman

Arinna Weisman has studied Insight Meditation since 1979. She teaches in the lineage of the Great Burmese teacher U Bha Khin and was empowered to teach by Ruth Denison. Arinna is the founding teacher of Insight Meditation Center of the Pioneer Valley in Easthampton, Massachusetts, and co-author of *A Beginner's Guide to Insight Meditation*. She was a resident teacher at Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts, and has been teaching since 1988. She and Eric Kolvig were the first teachers to lead retreats for the LGBTIQ Community, and this is her passion, along with growing multiculturalism in our community.

October 12 Dharma Duo

Baruch Golden & Mark Hoffheimer

October 19 Ösel Jennings

Ösel is a meditation master, healer, visionary poet, artist, musician, Zen chef, husband, and endurance athlete. He is currently training at the elite level for the marathon of life. His dharma teachings focus on the development of genuine love for oneself, which can then serve as a catalyst to awaken the heart of Universal Awareness within and so radiate outward to all life and the natural world for the peace and healing of this sacred Planet Earth.

Ösel holds the sacred tantric lineage of Lotus Speech, heralded into this world by the Dharma Lord Nagarjuna in 500CE, who retrieved the Great Perfection of Wisdom teachings of Buddha Shakyamuni from the realm of the Nagas. He has received direct transmission, teachings and empowerments from Buddha Padmasambhava, Buddha Stainless Wisdom and numerous other Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in the Celestial Realms of Awakened Mind, which he has codified into the teachings of Lotus Speech Mandala, called *Perfection Everywhere: the Yoga of Being You*.

He has been requested to give teachings and healing transmission by his Masters. His root Gurus are His Eminence Dzogchen Choying Rabjam, Kyabje Lama Zopa, His Holiness the Gyalwang Karmapa, and Qi Gong Grand Master Le Tian Chen.

October 26 Open Discussion

November 2 Jennifer Berezan

Jennifer Berezan is a unique blend of singer/songwriter, teacher, and activist. Over the course of eight albums, she has developed and explored recurring themes with a rare wisdom. Her life-long involvement in environmental, women's, and other justice movements and her interest in Buddhism and earth-based spirituality are at the heart of her writing.

November 9 Tim Wickens

Tim Wickens began practice in the Theravada tradition in 1991. He has studied with many Western lay teachers (primarily Michele McDonald and Eric Kolvig) and with senior monks and nuns in the Burmese and Thai traditions. He lived and worked for two years at Spirit Rock Meditation Center and has attended retreats around the U.S. and in Canada, England, and Burma, where he spent a retreat as an ordained monk. Tim and his partner, Robert, live in Santa Rosa, where he works as a carpenter and co-facilitates an LGBTQ sitting group. His talk will be called "The Crucible of Self Doubt."

November 16 Suvarnaprabha (Suvanna Cullen)

Ordained in 2001 into the Western Buddhist Order, Suvarnaprabha (Suvanna for short) is director of the San Francisco Buddhist Center. She teaches classes and retreats at the SFBC, workplace wellness and stress reduction through mindfulness at local businesses (stressreductionatwork.com), and occasional meditation classes at the San Francisco county jail. Her humorous advice column, "Ask Auntie Suvanna," is featured in wildmind.org's newsletter. Other writings have appeared in *What Book?! Buddha Poems from Beat to Hip-hop* (1998) and *Challenging Times: Stories of Buddhist Practice When Things Get Tough* (2007). Check out her blog at 2golden.blogspot.com

November 23 Ösel Jennings

For Ösel's bio, see September 19.

November 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