

gay Buddhist fellowship

DECEMBER 2008 / JANUARY 2009 NEWSLETTER

The gay Buddhist rellowship supports Buddhist practice in the gay men's community. it is a focum 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.

Healing Internalized Self-Hatred: Meditations on the Lotus Sutra

BY ROGER CORLESS

For over 20 years, Roger Corless was a professor of Buddhism and Christianity at Duke University. After settling in the Bay Area in the late 1990's, he became a frequent contributor to the GBF newsletter. He was also the author of several books, including *Vision of Buddhism: The Space Under the Tree.* He died in January of 2007. This article originally appeared in the GBF newsletter in December of 2003.

hen the Dalai Lama was told about practitioners hating themselves, he was surprised. Since we are all Buddhas, he replied, how can we hate ourselves? Self-hatred was apparently outside his experience as a Tibetan, but for many Westerners, especially LGBT persons, self-hatred is an all too familiar condition.

The Parable of the Lost Heir in chapter four of the Lotus Sutra tells how a runaway son becomes impoverished and loses confidence in himself but comes to realize, experientially, certainly, and without any doubt, that he is rich beyond his dreams, that is, that he is a not a limited, confused, suffering being condemned to innumerable rebirths, but a Buddha. If we reflect on this parable we may be able to move towards a similar realization for ourselves.

The chapter begins with an account of the context and the occasion for telling the parable by four disciples, led by Mahakashyapa as spokesman. The disciples represent the establishment of early Buddhism, the status quo. They have been around a long time; they have seen it all, "been there, done that, got the tee-shirt," and have concluded that they are too old to change.

Sitting here all this time, our bodies tired, we have merely been mindful of emptiness, signlessness, and wishlessness, taking no delight in the Bodhisattva-Dharmas, in their samadhis of playfulness, in their purification of Buddha-lands, or in their maturation of living beings.

The Buddha has just predicted that another of their number, Shariputra (another representative of the status quo) will attain, complete and perfect enlightenment, becoming equal to the Buddha.

Suddenly, then, the old disciples gain a new sense of purpose, hope, and self-worth, and they begin to see how they can re-frame their practice of Dharma: not as labor, or work, but as play. They are also taken out of their own selfish concerns and encouraged to assist in the liberation of all living beings, to, as they say in Twelve Step programs, work with others. They say they feel as if they had been given an unex-

pected gift of "limitless precious gems." This gift is the realization that, had they not been supported by something beyond themselves, by the higher power of the Dharma and their own Buddha Nature, they could not have practiced at all.

When we have a low sense of self-esteem, we are often in a Catch-22 bind. We hate ourselves, but we are self-absorbed in the self that we hate. One way out of this bind is to reflect on our interconnectedness with all other beings and, indeed, all forces in the universe, without which we would not even be at all. Where are we, and what are we doing? It may seem sim-

tionally hurt ourselves and others; we do so because we do not know what else to do. Buddhism calls this *beginningless unawareness*. By *beginningless* it does not mean that, no matter how far back we trace it in linear time, we never find its beginning, but that, no matter how *deeply* in we go to find its origin, we only get deeper in, never clearer. Samsara, cyclic existence, is always changing, fascinating but endless, full of beauty and ugliness but, we eventually realize, nothing but a wearisome energy sink. Samsara promises more than it gives. The only certainty is that we get older, and we may begin to feel that we

Where are we, and what are we doing? It may seem simple. We are sitting in a chair, reading this article. Where did all this come from? What are the causes and conditions that allowed this to happen? Can we see, as Thich Nhat Hanh often asks, the trees, the clouds, the water, the air, and so forth, in a book we are holding in our hands? How is it that we can read? Who taught us? Who taught them? Where did the English language come from? Reflect in this way and you will begin to experience interdependent arising, the knowledge that this moment is part of the mutually inter-reflecting jeweled Net of Indra. The more we experience this, the less lonely, and the more energized, we feel, and the more we will naturally reach out to love and assist other beings.

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Leaving the Father

We are not told why the son ran away, just that he was young, and he ran. So it was because of, perhaps, what we call the foolishness of youth. According to Buddhism, we are all, until we actualize our Buddhahood, young and foolish. We do not inten-

have lost something, that, in some way, our life is a failure.

Many of us begin our lives with great ambitions and hopes. We are going to be president. At some point in our youth, if we are lucky, everything seems possible and most things probable. But, as Wordsworth said, "Shades of the prison-house begin to close / Upon the growing Boy" and the sparkle goes from our eyes. Reality strikes, as we say, and reality is not on our side. But appearances are deceptive. Just at this point in the parable, the son "accidentally approached his native land."

The Father seeks the Son

"His father, from the first, had set out seeking his son but in vain." A great deal is packed into this short sentence. Buddhism is often presented, in the west, as a matter of naked self-will. Sit on your cushion and grit your teeth. Don't move a muscle, or you'll never be enlightened! Subdue the passions; become insipid; ignore the beauty of the world; it will only entrap you! This is exactly the interpretation of Buddhism

which the Lotus Sutra opposes. It calls it the Way of the Shravakas (the immediate disciples of the historical Buddha), and the purpose of the parable is to enlarge our view of the Dharma, showing us its compassion, joy, and vitality.

If we are completely lost in beginningless unawareness, how could we ever know that there was a way out? *The Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana* proposes that the Dharmadhatu (Dharma Realm, one of the terms for Pure or Buddha Mind) "mysteriously moves" towards ignorant and suffering beings, using the analogy of perfume in clothing. The perfume draws our imagination towards the source of the perfume. Similarly, our minds, the treatise says, are not *absolutely* pervaded by darkness and unawareness, they are also perfumed with enlightenment, and this perfume entices us to practice, to move towards its source. The treatise stops short of personalizing the Dharmadhatu. The Lotus Sutra is more bold, symbolizing the Buddha as a father who seeks his son for "ten, twenty or even fifty years."

In the Pali texts, the Buddha says that anyone who sees him sees Dharma. The Mahayana expands on this to say that he showed himself in order to disclose the Buddha Mind in the manner most suitable for teaching humans. The practical result of the teaching is the assurance that we are always, although we may not realize it, assisted by the very Buddha Mind towards which we strive. Our isolation, our necessity to "work out our own salvation" totally unaided, is an illusion produced by our beginningless unawareness. Pure Land Buddhism takes this teaching to term and proclaims that, while remaining foolish and ignorant, we are enfolded in the compassionate concern of the Buddha.

The Father in Majesty

The father in the parable has also been wandering, seeking his son, and finally he settles "midway in a city." The Buddhas come to meet us "in the middle," that is, between all opposites and all extremes. The middle is really dimensionless; it is right here, right now, so close that we miss it, as we look elsewhere, outside the mind and outside the present

The father has become immensely rich, but he doesn't think of himself, but of his son. "If I could only get my son back, I'd make him heir to my wealth. I'd be contented and happy and have no further worries." That is, the Buddhas think of us, and how they can help us, not of themselves. They don't deny themselves; they're not like "martyrs" who say "Oh, don't worry about *me*. I'm not important, am I?" The martyr complex is a form of self-centeredness. The Buddhas have lost all thought of self; they have no personal agenda. Achaan Cha, a famous Thai teacher, said that meditation was not to have nothing *in* one's mind but to have nothing *on* one's mind.

But when the son sees the father, he is not overjoyed but terrified. He sees a grandee on a throne, surrounded by attendants and immense wealth. It is too much for him, and he runs away. He is convinced that he is unworthy to be in the presence of such a person.

We may feel a similar sense of unease and distance when looking at the paintings of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. The description of the father in majesty is that of the visualization of a Buddha or Bodhisattva. We might slightly re-write the passage as follows:

In front of me, I see a Bodhisattva seated on a Lion-seat. His feet are resting on a jeweled footstool, and he is reverently surrounded by Brahmans, Kshatriyas, and commoners. Necklaces of real pearls, their value in the millions, adorn his body. Attendants and servants, holding white flywhisks, wait on him right and left. Above him is a jeweled canopy hung with flowers and pennants. Fragrant water is sprinkled on the ground, and expensive flowers are scattered about. Precious objects are placed in rows, which are passed out and taken in on leaving and entering.

Since we, the practitioner, are, we think, nothing like this, we may have no sense of connection, and we may even be afraid. After all, we are viewing a powerful authority figure. What is your reaction to authority figures? Do you, on seeing them, automatically think that they intend you harm? Do you

We are always, although we may not realize it, assisted by the very Buddha Mind towards which we strive. Our isolation, our necessity to "work out our own salvation" totally unaided, is an illusion.

moment. The middle is that instant of clarity in our practice when, whether we are formally seated on a meditation cushion or going about some business, the ice desert breaks (as Zen Master Hakuin puts it) and the mind manifests in its native clarity, compassion, and power. The Buddhas are already there (here) and they know it. We are there (here) and don't know it, or know it only fleetingly.

expect them to criticize you? When the phone rings, do you think "Oh, no! Trouble!"? If we have a low sense of self-esteem, we will assume that we will be criticized, for that, we think, is all that we deserve. Even if we do not expect to be criticized, we may find ourselves tongue-tied and nervous in the presence of somebody famous. Mahayana Buddhism tells us, however, that we are all Buddhas. Our wisdom and compas-

sion are infinite. If we can realize this, we can face authority figures with equanimity. We and they are, ultimately, equal.

Since the son's mindset is fearful, he completely misunderstands the intentions of the servants whom the father, recognizing the stranger as his long lost son, sends to invite him into his presence. They have good news, but he assumes it is bad news.

The poor son in alarm shouted in resentment, "I have committed no offense. Why have I been seized?" The servants, with even greater haste, grabbed him and dragged him back. The poor son

tells him that he will give him a job worthy of his talents—shiftshifting, as we might literally translate the characters. The job is that of cleaning out the toilets, in a time well before the flush toilet. It is euphemistically called "removing nightsoil," and it was dirty and smelly work. If we say, "I feel like a piece of shit," then shit-shifting seems like appropriate work.

Note that the son "first took his salary." Apparently he did not trust his new employers and wanted his pay in advance. Perhaps he had been cheated before and wasn't going to take any ... well, you get the point.

The Buddhas come to meet us "in the middle," that is, between all opposites and all extremes. The middle is really dimensionless; it is right here, right now, so close that we miss it, as we look elsewhere, outside the mind and outside the present moment. The middle is that instant of clarity in our practice when, whether we are formally seated on a meditation cushion or going about some business, the ice desert breaks (as Zen Master Hakuin puts it) and the mind manifests in its native clarity, compassion, and power. The Buddhas are already there (here) and they know it. We are there (here) and don't know it, or know it only fleetingly.

thought to himself, "I am blameless and yet have been imprisoned. This surely means that I will die," and, even more frightened, he fainted and fell to the ground.

The father, therefore, lets the son go, at which the son is "delighted, having gained what he had never had before" and "rose from the ground and went to a poor village to seek clothing and food." Here are the first stirrings of a new sense of self-worth. Being relieved that he was not to be punished, the son views the majestic king in a slightly more favorable light. He had expected the worst, and it had not happened. Maybe he can learn that not all powerful figures are malevolent. It's not much, but it's a start.

Teaching by Expedient Means

If someone tells you that you are a fine person, and someone else tells you that you are worthless, whom do we find easier to believe? Until we heal our internalized self-hatred, we will probably suspect the first person of being out to get something from us and regard the second person as truthful.

The father in the parable descends to the level of the son and

The dramatic tension of the story increases as we are told how the father disguises himself as Chief Shit-Shifter, somewhat above the other workers, but not so far above them as to overawe them.

[The father] removed his necklace of beads, his soft upper garments, and his adornments and put on a coarse, worn out, and filthy robe, smeared himself with dirt and holding a dung shovel, looking frightful, he addressed his workers, saying, "All of you, work hard! Do not be lax." By this device he draws near to his son...

The father is using skillful means, or, as the Chinese translation has it, "appropriate method." This is a fundamental principle of Buddhism, and the Lotus Sutra has a lot to say about it. In some respects, skillful means is a lie, at least a white lie. The father, for example, is deceiving his son by pretending to be a stranger, or a lowly worker. If the father tells the truth, the son will not believe it and may start fainting again. Skillful means is the sort of lie we tell children. There may not really be a Santa Claus, but the fiction that there is a Santa Claus is an appropriate way to teach children about

love and the joy of giving. Children will mature into adults automatically, given the time, but suffering beings remain suffering beings unless they meet with conditions favorable to their maturation. The Dharma is intended to transform, or mature, suffering beings into Buddhas. However, many of us do not really want to mature—it is too much work. We want to be told about ultimate truth while remaining as we are. We want information, not transformation. The sneaky, and glorious, thing about the Dharma is that it appears to supply us with the information we want while actually infecting us with the transformation we need. The Buddha Dharma is *transformation manifesting as information*. That is skillful means.

When the Buddha appears as a human, we are not forced to regard him as a Buddha, that is, as a being who is perfectly liberated in body, speech, and mind. We can regard him as a philosopher. This is the way the Buddha is often viewed by non-Buddhists. While there is nothing in Buddhism to say that this is wrong, there is much that says it is preliminary. Unless we acknowledge the Buddha as Buddha, we cannot believe that Buddhahood is possible, and we cannot see ourselves as Buddhas. On the other hand, we are not discouraged by the apparent unattainability of Buddhahood. Relating to the Buddha as a philosopher allows us some contact with the Dharma and exposes us to the healing infection of its transformative power.

After the son has performed his lowly duties for a while, the father prudently gives him a bonus, saying (with skillful means, i.e., lying so as to tell the truth) that it is a reward for hard work.

I will increase your wages. Whatever you need, be it pots, utensils, rice, flour, salt or vinegar or other such things, don't trouble yourself about it. I also have an old, worn-out servant you can have if you need him.

Then he says something very significant: "I am like your father." The son has acquitted himself well enough that he can now be praised—"Whenever you are working, you are never deceitful, remiss, angry, hateful, or grumbling. I have never seen you commit such evils as I have the other workers"—and the son does not think himself unworthy of the majestic figure's high assessment of him that "from now on you shall be just like my own son." He now feels gratitude rather than fear, but he still "referred to himself as a lowly worker from outside" and "for twenty years ... was constantly kept at work sweeping

the Buddha, but we regard the term as a metaphor—we are adopted, not true, sons and daughters; we are still "outside." With continued practice, our trust in the Dharma increases, but we still perceive a difference between ourselves and the Buddhas.

Spontaneous Realization

The story comes to a rapid conclusion. When "the father knew that his son had grown more relaxed, that he had accomplished the great resolve and despised his former state of mind" and "that his own end was near," the father calls a great assembly and announces "that this is my son, begotten by me...This is really my son. I am really his father. All of my wealth now belongs to my son," to which the son joyfully responds, "Originally, I had no thought to seek anything, and now this treasury has come to me of itself."

At the traditional, doctrinal, level of interpretation, this episode represents the Shravaka, or Hinayanist, converting to the grander perspective of the Mahayana. At the personal level, it is the discovery of our own self-worth. We are not only immensely worthy, immensely worthwhile, beyond all that we had imagined, we have always been that way, but we have not recognized our worthiness.

We have arrived, as T. S. Eliot says in the last stanzas of the *Four Quartets*, "where we started" yet we "know the place for the first time." The journey to where we have always been was hard. It was not enough to be told, or to read about, our worthiness. Our sense of unworthiness was too deeply embedded to be affected by statements of mere fact. We needed to develop a sense of self-worth by engaging in minor, boring, despised tasks. Having become expert in removing excrement, a champion shit-shifter, we could aspire to something greater. But we could never imagine the immense riches that were really within us until we had worked long enough at progressively more exalted, but still servile, jobs. Finally, we were ready to see the truth about ourselves, and about others, and the "treasury" (literally, a storehouse of jewels) came to us "of itself."

The compound translated "of itself" is the term which is used in Taoism to mean "spontaneously." By not-doing, all is done. The pure Buddha Mind self-manifests, and we know it to be our true self. It is now possible to enjoy the "samadhis (high mental states) of playfulness" mentioned in the introduction to the parable. We still practice, still sit

Achaan Cha, a famous Thai teacher, said that meditation was not to have nothing in one's mind but to have nothing on one's mind.

away dung." Subsequently, the father and son "trusted one another," but the son "still stayed in the same place as before."

In the early stages of our practice, we labor at subduing the passions and acquiring the virtues. When we have some success at this, we are not embarrassed to be called a son or daughter of in meditation, conduct ourselves ethically, and study the Dharma, but we do so for fun, not out of a grim sense of duty with some faint hope of a reward such as the destruction of the passions. We can relax, and allow the Buddha Mind to act through us.

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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.

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 contact Program Committee with suggestions for speakers and comments:

www.gaybuddhist.org/programs

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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 31/2 blocks. **PARKING:** on street (meters free on Sundays) or in adjacent New Mission Bartlett Garage. The Center is handicapped accessible.

Sunday Speakers

December 7 Dharma Duo: Mark Hoffheimer and Baruch Golden

Mark Hoffheimer was raised Jewish and has had a Buddhist practice since 2005. His spiritual path incorporates the best of two communities: GBF and the Billy Club. Much of his focus, both professionally and spiritually, has been on fostering community and shared appreciation.

Baruch has been a GBF sangha member since 2003. He is currently participating in the Path of Engagement, a two year program offered through Spirit Rock Meditation Center, focusing on social engagement and activism in Buddhist practice.

December 14 Tom Bruein

Long an admirer of the Dharma, Tom Bruein began studying Buddhism in earnest after the elevation of Pope Benedict XVI in 2005. Certified as a clinical hypnotherapist, he was especially drawn to the Dharma's approach to understanding and calming the ego. Recognizing the risk of substituting one form of attachment (the material world) for another (spiritual/philosophical accomplishment), here he helps us explore the trap of "Spiritual Materialism." A community volunteer with runaway youth and the homeless, he has also served as the board president for the Stop AIDS Project of San Francisco.

December 21 Diana Elrod

Diana Elrod, an active member of Soka Gakkai International (SGI), is a PhD candidate in Buddhist Studies at the California College of Integral Studies. She will speak about the Nichiren tradition.

December 28 Open Discussion

January 4 Doug Von Kloss

Doug is the Artistic Director of THE NOAH PROJECT, a men's ritual performance group in the San Francisco Bay Area. Through a magical blend of chant, movement, poetry and ritu-

al, Doug weaves a spell that encompasses the estatic, the sacred and the wise fool. He draws from many of the world's religious traditions—Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, Zoroastrian, Christian, Jewish and Sufi—to create a glorious mosaic that is, above all else, a celebration of the human spirit. Doug will lead the sangha in New Year's Inter-faith and cross-cultural rituals. For more information about Doug, see www.dougvonkoss.com.

January II Karen Van Dine

Karen Van Dine connected with the San Francisco Gay community in 1985 as a member of Radiant Light Ministries, where she served as a prayer counselor. Through the AIDS Epidemic of the 80's and 90's, Karen worked with the San Francisco Healing Circle and R.L.M., leading meditations, memorials and assisting many in conscious dying. After her time as a student at Tassajara Zen Monastery and retreats with Thich Nhat Hanh, she founded the Living Peace Meditation Community in 1993. The L.P.M.C. began in connection with the San Francisco Center for Living and later moved into its own location when the center closed. She has been the primary facilitator for the L.P.M.C. for the last 15 years. Through her many years of meditation, she has deepened her personal practice, insight, and compassion. She has a profound heart connection with the Gay community. The topic of her dharma talk will be "Shadow Dancing: In and Out of Hiding with our True Nature."

January 18 Jack Morin

Jack Morin, Ph.D., has been studying the mysteries of Eros for three decades as a psychotherapist and sex researcher in the San Francisco Bay Area. He is the author of *The Erotic Mind: Unlocking the Inner Sources of Sexual Passion and Fulfillment*, which offers a bold new psychology of desire and arousal based on his clinical experience as well as an in-depth analysis of over 7,000 anonymous descriptions of peak real-life encounters and fantasies. He is also the author of the international classic *Anal Pleasure and Health: A Guide for Men and Women*. He writes and lectures for lay and professional audiences about the paradoxes, challenges, and potentials of sexuality and intimate relationships. Jack will be presenting a talk featured in a radio broadcast titled "Erotic Integrity."

January 25 Open Discussion

COMING IN FEBRUARY AND MARCH: Larry Yang, Rev. Shoyo Tanaguchi, Jurgen Moellers, Donald Rothberg, Dharma Duos, Open Discussions and more.

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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 pedication of Merit