

Gay Buddhist Fellowship

JUNE / JULY 2009 NEWSLETTER

Coming Home to Ourselves

BY 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. She spoke at GBF on October 10, 2008.

When I reflect back over the different movements that I have been part of, growing up in South Africa, having parents who were very active in the anti apartheid movement, and then being active myself in the Women's Liberation Movement and the student Marxist movement at university and then the queer movement—queer comprising trans, intersex, bi, and all of us—if I were to look at the conditions that brought about so many of the changes that have manifested in our lives, coming together, making the effort to come together is probably the grounds for much of that to happen. If we hadn't come together, it wouldn't have happened, none of those movements would have happened. And so even if the experience of coming together seems like a waste of time, that turning up over time feels like the precondition for any and all change, and so I really want to honor you—on such a beautiful Sunday when there's so much going on—for turning up. Thank you for that.

And really in a way this topic feels like it goes to the heart of all liberation movements, actually, and that is redefining the cultural definitions and social definitions of who we are and really asking, "Who am I? Who is this human being that I call me? And what does it mean that this me is situated in queer expression, that I am a universal expression of life, and that expression happens in a unique form and one of those unique forms is to be queer, and so what does that mean?" In all the different political activism I've done over my lifetime, one of the reasons I came to Buddhism and one of the reasons I stayed here in Buddhism is because it names so beautifully the heart of life. Why am I alive? What does it mean for me to be alive? And that naming is awakening. I believe that we are all alive to awaken, and awakening is really about letting go of the cultural and social definitions and the individual definitions we have taken on that have restricted and constricted our hearts and minds, that awakening is really a description of this profound coming home to ourselves, where we feel a deep ease of who we are and how we are, and that ease is totally free of all prescriptions and conscriptions and descriptions. It is that longing to find my true home,

The gay Buddhist
fellowship supports
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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.

the opposite of that place where I feel driven. You know that feeling of just being driven, that momentum. It is even a kind of anxiety, or the opposite of it is a kind of depression or hopelessness. Awakening is that sense of deep relatedness that is actually underneath those movements,

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and probably each one of us here has touched some place that feels more universal, whether we were a kid, whether we were in nature, whether in touch or sexual expression, some place where we feel we have moved away from living in the realm of concept, and we have dropped down into some other place that feels deeply related, without a sense of duality or opposition, or tension or anxiety, this place where we feel, “Oh my God, I feel at home in the universe.” But that home isn't about a building and it isn't even about a word; it's a lived experience of finding that place, and that's what the dharma teaches in all the lineages. That's what the Buddha teaches: that sense of being at home in myself, not in an abstract way, not that everyone looks the same, but home is me queer in my own queer expression, that type of home the dharma teaches. It feels like the longing that every human being has, and that longing gets distorted by the conditioned mind, both the conditioned mind that the Buddha says we're born with but also the conditioned mind that is expressed in cultures, in most cultures, actually, which is based on inadequacy and deficiency. So for example, all the advertising that we experience is a reflection that says we are inadequate in some way and we need to do something about it. The Buddha's description of that is ignorance. He said every mind until it is awakened lives in ignorance, and that ignorance is an expression of insufficiency and inadequacy; that's what ignorance is. And so any place inside of us that believes that, not always consciously but unconsciously, and then acts out of that inadequacy and insufficiency in particular ways, and those particular ways the Buddha describes as suffering. Whatever we do out of that energy brings suffering by definition because it's based on delu-

sion; it's based on a lie. So for example, just to take something we're all experiencing right now in terms of the war and fundamentalism, here are people who are suicide bombers—whether they're in the United States Army or whether they're part of different army, whether it's Al-

Qaeda or Shiites—the fundamentalism says that in order to serve God, we need to get rid of a certain population: by killing we're serving God. What's wrong with that particular perspective is that it's based on the idea that you here and now are not good enough, and so you have to do this thing to make yourself good.

That is really the basic description of addiction, given an ideological framework, and so much of our own addictive behavior, whatever expression it is but particularly sexual, is based on the misunderstanding that we are in some way inadequate and insufficient or not good enough in some kind of core way, and that in order to fill this inadequacy or insufficiency, there is a dynamic—and it's not like we are choosing it; I just want to acknowledge that it's a dynamic that's happening already, according to the dharma—and what's important about meditating and cultivating awareness is to see it because unless we see it, it can't be transformed. Each human being is born with this dynamic because each human being until awakened is born with a certain kind of ignorance, according to the Buddhist teaching. Particular cultures and ideological frameworks will support this and strengthen it, or there are particular ways of living if we undertake the dharma training that will challenge it.

It's useful to name this and say, “Okay, is it true? Do I agree with what you're saying?” And I'm really interested in having a dialogue with you to see if this is your experience. Is it true? Is there some part of my being that is habitual and automatic? And if I really look at that behavior, I see underneath it a confusion, a lack of clarity, and in that confusion associated with it is an inadequacy, an insufficiency, and out of that comes a clinging, a movement towards clinging and wanting, because that insufficiency is so painful.

And so the mind moves, and it's not personal. Each one of us has it. It's universal across straight, gay, American, South African. We see it all around the world, this dynamic that moves in every single mind to try to hold on to something, and that something is pleasure, as a way to fill that inadequacy and insufficiency, on a very basic level. And so we have this momentum inside of us moving towards what? Moving towards pleasure as a way to move away from this deeply unpleasant experience. That movement, the Buddha says, will always bring suffering. Out of that insufficiency, a movement towards pleasure will always bring suffering because it is not situated in our humanity, it is not situated in our love, and it is not situated in that inner connection of being rooted in the universality of life that is connected to what is beautiful about life.

Here is the place where it feels like the patriarchal lineage of Buddhism doesn't make clear, at least for me, the difference between sensuality and pleasure as an exquisite reflection of life and the beauty of myself as queer and when it actually brings suffering and is a part of this habitual expression that brings ultimately alienation. The Buddha doesn't make clear the distinction between where our sensual expression is coming from. Is it coming from this movement of delusion and confusion? If it is, it might bring us a kind of physical relief and even physical pleasure, but it actually isn't in the service of coming home, which is where the real longing is. Or is it

Sitting in front of this Buddha is this reminder to us in saying, "If you touch that place of coming home inside of yourself, even if you get lost again, you know where your compass is pointing, and once you've touched it you know there is actually nothing more important than orienting your life to touch it." And so what the statue is saying is, "Why eat at Dunkin' Donuts when you can eat at Just Desserts?" It's so much better.

Were any of you in South Africa during apartheid? Yeah? But here in America, there continues to be this incredible enslavement. But also just being queer and coming out—I don't know if you've been in a situation where you have found yourself acting out of shame for being queer, in a place where maybe you could have come out and you didn't come out. There is something close to that, where we have lost connection to what is beautiful about ourselves, and so we buy into a behavior that is about the smallness of ourselves. Buddhism is saying, "Don't buy into that behavior." So then we get to look at, "What is it?" How do I start to make that distinction between aligning my life and acting out of that longing for deep connection and intimacy with myself, with others and with life, and that other behavior that when it's more extreme is described as addictive? It comes out of believing that I am inadequate in some way and there is nothing better than meeting that inadequacy through the use of pleasure.

What are the differences between both kinds of behav-

That's what the Buddha teaches: that sense of being at home in myself, not in an abstract way, . . . but home is me queer in my own queer expression . . . It feels like the longing that every human being has, and that longing gets distorted by the conditioned mind, both the conditioned mind that the Buddha says we're born with but also the conditioned mind that is expressed in cultures which is based on inadequacy and deficiency. . So for example, all the advertising that we experience is a reflection that says we are inadequate in some way and we need to do something about it. The Buddha's description of that is ignorance. He said every mind until it is awakened lives in ignorance, and that ignorance is an expression of insufficiency and inadequacy; that's what ignorance is.

this habitual nature that actually enforces the sense of inadequacy? That is the question that I think a radical interpretation of the dharma is asking us, and not just around our sexuality and sensuality but really all of our life. Is this in service of my heart opening? Is this in service of me coming more deeply in connection to my humanity and yours, to what's beautiful about you being queer, and about me being queer?

ior? Let me ask you: what are the differences between honoring that deep calling and moving out of inadequacy?

GBF: I'm thinking of temporal and ephemeral. This temporary sense of well being might be allowed by most of the physical pleasure, and then you can sustain the idea that everything is good, but it's a little shallow and fleeting, and dependent on getting another one.

Arinna: Right, exactly. Thank you. That's so beautiful.

Here's the rub: that sense of intimacy has to acknowledge all of our experiences. When we talk about intimacy and coming home, it can't be exclusive because as soon as it's exclusive, it becomes repressive. We repress the experiences we don't like, and we go for the experiences we do like, that is, turning away from pain, because that's unpleasant, and moving towards what is pleasurable. One of the first characteristics of habitual behavior is that it turns away from our sorrow and our grief, and it moves only to what looks nice and is pleasant.

GBF: The temporal and ephemeral is always outside of ourselves. It always has to be sought externally. You always have to go out and get it.

Arinna: Exactly, and getting it is all about duality. It's all about me here moving out to get something to meet that need. We all do it. We are all doing it. And not just in this room. We are all doing it. What's so beautiful is having a discussion to investigate to see for ourselves. Can I see that in my life, that place where I don't want to hear or see all of your humanity because I'm not interested in seeing all of mine? I just really want to get away from it. I've seen that. In fact, I remember that early on my life, I grew up with three sisters, and we were very competitive, and there was this one point when I was fighting with one of my sisters over this really gorgeous dress that she'd bought. I wanted to wear it to a party, and even though it was her dress, I was trying to manipulate her into giving it to me to wear. In that moment of wanting, I actually didn't care if I hurt her. I have noticed over the years particular moments. There was another one in a relationship in the 80's. We were driving to the city, having a fight. We realized we had to get out of the car, and she said something, and I had the same movement of getting my arm up to hit her because I wanted to hurt her. Those were expressions of a mind and heart that couldn't open to the pain of what was happening and moved out in an expression of either wanting to grasp, hold on to the dress, or hurt, push away. And what these teachings are

A couple of us were in a one-day sitting yesterday at the Hartford Street Zen Center, and we were talking about what it means to hold both the joys and the sorrows of our life and how humbling it is to acknowledge all of who we are and to say this is who I am. The quality of coming home is a mind that allows all of ourselves to be held in our presence and our loving kindness. That allowing is really the passageway home. In that allowing, we find ourselves opening to each human being, allowing them to be all of who they are. In that kind of relatedness comes a touch and sensuality and sexuality that actually continues to help us and support us to know more about all of who we are and to come home to ourselves. And that is the sensuality and sexuality that becomes an expression of our divine selves and also takes us to our divinity, as against the kind of sexuality that ignores. For example, I lived in a commune. This is unique because there wasn't a whole lot going on then for women, but anyway, it was in the 80's and it was called the Oregon Land Trust. It was land just for women, and we were exploring all kinds of forms. In that era, in the early 80's, it was like monogamy was patriarchal and totally uncool. So we were having sex with everyone, and it was so interesting just to see in that experimental milieu how sometimes sex in that environment was just like—I really wanted to get away from the person afterwards. It did not feel that good. The actual touching was okay, but right afterwards I found myself turning away from some women, and with other women, you knew you were not going to be in a relationship with this person because that wasn't what was happening, but you felt that you had touched something beautiful. So it's not about having this commitment. There are some people like Thich Nhat Hanh who say that sex is okay but it has to be in a long-term committed relationship. But I'm not even talking about that. I'm saying, "How are coming into it, and is it really serving us and that longing we have to come home to ourselves and our life?" Whatever the form that

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saying is that longing that we want to come home to is actually a longing that expresses itself in including everything. It means including all of ourselves and all of another human being, and that's one of the characteristics that tells us whether we're on the right path or not. Am I being inclusive? Am I really opening and allowing someone to see all of myself? And am I really seeing all of someone else?

sexual expression is taking, it's not about judging and shaming ourselves. We are operating primarily in a Judeo-Christian culture, and the kind of shame and guilt that we have unconsciously imbibed because we are living in that culture means that when we have sex often it doesn't feel beautiful in that more connected open-hearted way. We shame ourselves and judge ourselves, and in this tradition

there is never ever a reason for judgment, no matter what we do. There is never a good reason to shame and judge ourselves. This is not about shaming and judging our-

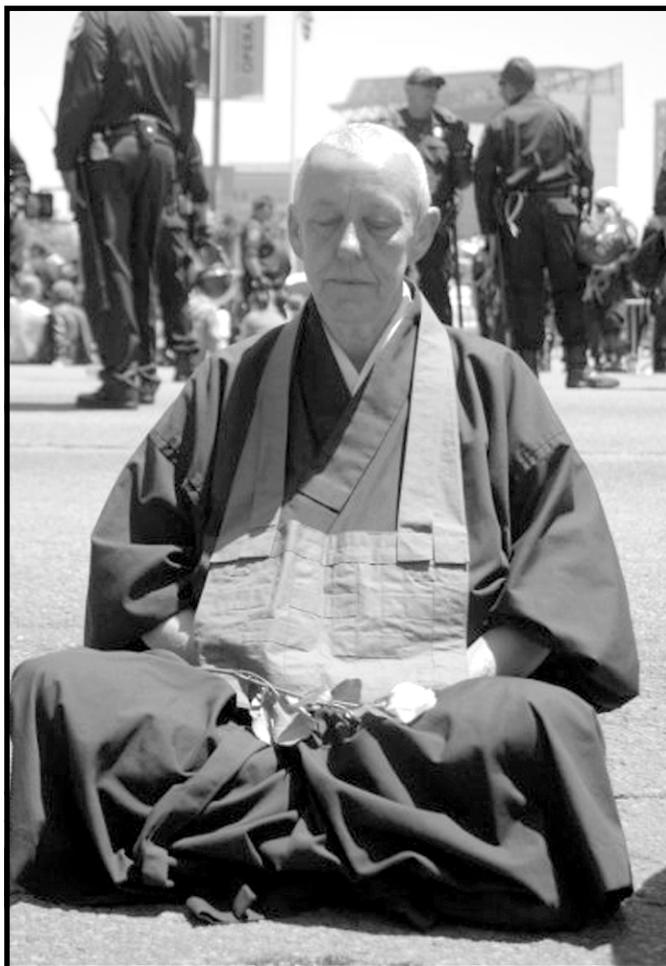
blessing of life and that means all of it, we are moved to bless each other's life through touch in whatever way that we are moved to in our life. That kind of blessing comes from this

The quality of coming home is a mind that allows all of ourselves to be held in our presence and our loving kindness. That allowing is really the passageway home. In that allowing, we find ourselves opening to each human being, allowing them to be all of who they are. In that kind of relatedness comes a touch and sensuality and sexuality that actually continues to help us and support us to know more about all of who we are and to come home to ourselves.

selves. This is saying, "What is your true longing and my true longing, and is my sexual behavior supporting that? And if it isn't, what are the characteristics of that, and can I become more conscious of them, so that I am in service of my heart's longing?" So there isn't a prescription so much as an investigation to see what is really serving me, just to become honest with ourselves. We are all in it; we are all doing, going, and getting; we're all doing that type of relationship. By naming it, I can see this actually doesn't feel as good as when I turn to a different relationship, a different type of cultivation. That different type of cultivation actually requires a tremendous amount of effort. Like anything that we want to honor that is a beautiful expression, whether it is as an artist, or in our work, or sports, or in dancing or in anything, it requires an incredible cultivation.

Having practiced since 1979, I wish I could say, "Well, you know, I've done these intense three month long retreats, I've just spent two years in monasteries, and it's really easy and here's the key." I wish I could say that, but I haven't found that to be true. It hasn't been easy, actually. I have to say that the practice of being present and turning towards myself so that I am increasingly honest and open with all of who I am has been an arduous practice. And what I also have found is that the places that are deeply touched are so transformative that actually I find myself not being able to act dangerously any more. Something gets changed so that the heart and mind more naturally flow towards love and respect. For example, one of my favorite stories is of Kali Rinpoche going to an aquarium in Boston, and he can't read English. There was a big sign that said, "Please don't tap on the glass," and he would go to each tank and tap on it, and so the fishes and the different creatures would be attracted to the tapping and come towards the glass, and there would be this moment, and then he'd move on to the next glass and tap. Finally his students said, "Rinpoche, what are you doing?" And he said I'm tapping them to get their attention so that I can bless them. That's what I think Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma and the Dalai Lama and other beings express for us, that capacity. Because we feel so touched with the

incredible effort to be present and to be present and to turn and open to all of who I am and then automatically all of who you are. That presence is the gift that each one of has that we can awaken. ■



Junsei Jana Drakka, who will speak at GBF on July 15, participates in civil disobedience on May 26, just after the California Supreme Court upheld Proposition 8.

GBF

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Gay Men's Buddhist Prison Network

The Gay Men's Buddhist Prison Network (GMBPN) is a network of practicing Buddhists organized to provide support for gay inmates interested in beginning or deepening a Buddhist practice while incarcerated. We provide this support through regular correspondence and encouragement, books and literature, and referrals to other resources.

We also act as a network to support each other as we write to those in prison. We recognize that such correspondence presents its own set of challenges. There are precautions to be taken, though not many, that will benefit both parties and also foster a helpful and healthy pen-pal relationship. We provide guidelines, sample letters to share, and reprints of material that can be forwarded to inmate penpals.

We are of various schools and traditions in Buddhism and are by no means teachers or spiritual leaders. We are simply friends of the dharma (the teaching) who correspond with those interested in Buddhism while in prison. We believe that those on the inside and the outside of the walls can benefit from each other's practice as we correspond (co-respond).

Why do we do this? We recognize the special challenges and hardships that exist for anyone in prison who wishes to pursue a spiritual practice. We understand that spiritual development can be quite beneficial for those in prison, yet the prison environment and its restrictions often are not designed to be supportive of this growth.

We also realize that gay men in prison face additional challenges and safety risks, making their spiritual practice all the more important, yet more difficult.

While we are a group of "pen pals," our emphasis is on one's Buddhist practice. We do not develop romantic relationships with pen pals, exchange photos, or provide money or other favors to help inmates get around the restrictions under which they live.

Our wish is that all beings will know happiness,
and the causes and conditions of happiness;

That all beings will be safe from harm, be healthy, be peaceful, and be loved.

The Gay Buddhist Fellowship can send a free copy of the book *Queer Dharma*, Volume 2, to prisoners interested in further Buddhist study. In this book gay men write openly and honestly about how they have integrated their sexuality and spirituality via Buddhist practice. Please send a letter to the GBF requesting a copy of the book. Allow 1-2 months for the book to arrive.

The following organizations send out newsletters to prisoners on request:

San Francisco Zen Center (SFZC)

Prison Outreach Program

300 Page St. San Francisco, CA 94102

SFZC offers free Buddhist literature and finds pen-pals for inmates interested in regular correspondence about Buddhist practice.

Prison Dharma Network (PDN)

PO Box 4623

Boulder, CO 80306

The Prison Dharma Network's newsletter is available to prisoners free of charge. PDN is a nonsectarian, contemplative support organization for prisoners and prison dharma volunteers.

Human Kindness Foundation

PO Box 61619

Durham, NC 27715

The Human Kindness Foundation's free newsletter, *A Little Good News*, is sent three times each year.

Buddhist Peace Fellowship (BPF) Prison Project

PO Box 3470

Berkeley, CA 94701

The BPF will send the quarterly journal *Turning Wheel* for \$10 per year and free dharma books to prisoners. They have a dharma pen-pals program.

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

June 7 Richard Moon

Richard Moon, founder of extraordinarylistening.com, a website focused on improving human relations and effectiveness, presently works on global problem solving as a senior associate with The Nautilus Institute. He has engaged in international peace building in Cypress and Bosnia with a consortium including The Institute for Multi-Track Diplomacy, in Washington, D.C., Conflict Management Group, in Boston, and the Fulbright Commission. He has authored several books, including *The Power of Extraordinary Listening* and *Aikido in Three Easy Lessons*, which is also available as a DVD. In his spare time he produces a variety of musical recordings.

June 14 Shahara Godfrey

Shahara Godfrey has followed the teachings of the Buddha for over fourteen years with her primary practices in compassion and social activism. She has completed the Community Dharma Leaders training and the Path of Engagement programs at Spirit Rock. Shahara also is a teacher at the East Bay Meditation Center.

June 21 Ji-Sing Norman Eng

Ji-Sing Norman Eng is the former facilitator of Q-Sangha at the Metropolitan Community Church of San Francisco. His main spiritual teacher is Thich Nhat Hanh ("Thay"), and he was ordained by Thay into the "Order of Interbeing" (Unified Buddhist Church) in 2003 with the Dharma name of "True Wonderful Happiness."

June 28 To Be Announced

July 5 David Lewis and Baruch Golden

David Lewis and Baruch Golden, both long term Buddhist practitioners and GBF members, lead a panel discussion and reflection on "Sexuality and the Dharma."

July 12 To Be Announced

July 19 Junsei Jana Drakka

Rev. Jana entered formal Buddhist practice sixteen years ago at the San Francisco Zen Center and received Dharma Transmission this year. Jana leads the Street Zendo at 234 Hyde Street, where meditation practices of all kinds are welcome, and is a practice leader of the Gay Buddhist Sangha. Rev. Drakka is a community activist, particularly for the rights of the poor and disenfranchised, and believes that mindfulness practice is 24/7. Every Gay pride Weekend you'll find Jana offering an opening blessing from the Trans Stage. For more about Jana visit www.janadrakka.com.

July 26 Open Discussion

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

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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