



Gay Buddhist Fellowship

DECEMBER 2010 / JANUARY 2011 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.

"These Are Our Siblings": Helping International LGBT Refugees

BY NEIL GRUNGRAS

Neil Grungras is the founder and executive director of ORAM, Organization for Refuge, Asylum and Migration. ORAM is a San Francisco-based nonprofit providing international and domestic advocacy, education and representation of LGBTQ refugees. In addition to directly assisting refugees who have escaped countries such as Iran, ORAM works closely with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the US Department of State, and several community groups to establish consciousness and international protection standards for these vulnerable refugees. Neil spoke at GBF on August 22, 2010.

It's really wonderful to be here. I really cherish the opportunity to talk to you about what we do and about what you might be able to do to help a brother you don't know yet or a sister you don't know yet.

A little bit about our organization: ORAM, which stands for Organization for Refuge, Asylum and Migration, took on this little task of assisting LGBT refugees. I formed ORAM three years ago, and we became active about two years ago. I formed ORAM in response to what I saw as the abandonment of LGBT refugees by the mainstream refugee assistance community worldwide. It seemed to me, after doing refugee law for 25 years, that I was never hearing about LGBT refugees. I was seeing some in my own law practice in San Francisco and in doing international refugee work later at NGOs, but the subject never came up openly. It was in the closet. And I started to think, "You know, it's really strange. I'm seeing case after case after case and yet there's no literature about this. We know what the statistics are worldwide; we know what the condition is of LGBTs worldwide. People are escaping, and they're going somewhere, and why isn't anyone talking about this? Why isn't our own community doing anything about it, about this phenomenon, about the people?" And I started to dig a bit deeper, and then put the picture together. There are 75 countries in the world which criminalize same-sex consenting relations, 75 countries. There are an additional twenty or so countries that don't criminalize same-sex relations but where you can get imprisoned or you can get killed or your family can do what is called "honor kill" you for being gay or lesbian or trans, and where the police will not protect you at all. I think that's most of the countries in the world. The picture that I started to put together was that the people who were escaping this persecution probably outnumbered every other kind of refugee in the world. Most refugees are identified by their nationality or by their faith or by their political opinion, but these refugees go

across every national border, across every faith, across every political opinion. It's five to ten percent of the human population that's persecuted in more than half of the countries in the world. That's the reality of being LGBT around the world.

What happens to these people? Most of them never escape; most of them never get to leave their homes. Most of them live in the closet, in hiding, and the ones who don't succeed in hiding are found out and imprisoned or killed. Many, many, many are sexually abused. (I'll talk about that in a little while.) But a very small per-

It seemed to me, after doing refugee law for 25 years, that I was never hearing about LGBT refugees. I was seeing some in my own law practice in San Francisco and in doing refugee work with international NGOs, but the subject never came up openly. It was in the closet.

centage have the fortitude to actually get up and help themselves and cross a national border and go try to get protection somewhere else or try to move somewhere else. The vast majority don't have the inner strength to do it. When they reach that country of transit, their struggle begins. And now we're talking about a very small percentage, those five to ten percent of the five to ten percent who have the wherewithal to cross a national border and try to get somewhere safe. And you would think that that is the end of the saga, right? That's where the movie would end. You'd see the credits. That's really just the beginning of their saga because most countries that they escape to share cultures, values, hatreds, whatever it is, with the countries that they've come from. The way cultures work, they spread across international borders, and most of our clients escape from a country where things are really bad and enter another country where things are maybe just as bad, sometimes a little bit better in some ways, sometimes a little bit worse in other ways. I'll give you an example in a while about Iran and Turkey, which is where ORAM has a project on the ground right now. It was our first project. I want to give you some real examples.

So let's put this in a bit of a broader perspective before we get too deep into the life of one refugee. There are ten million refugees in the world today, ten million people who have run away from one country and entered into another one. These are very approximate numbers, obviously. And those are refugees who have run away because they've been persecuted because of their race, religion, nationality, political opinion or because of their membership in a social group, which is oftentimes being LGBT. There are today about 150 million forced migrants in the world. That's people who have crossed international boundaries because of wars, because of mass persecution, because of terrorism, or more and more because of climate change. That number is expected to rise to over a billion in the next ten to twenty years, so that the world that we're looking at today is very, very different from the world we'll be looking at in ten to twenty years. It's going to be a world of mass migrations, of people crossing borders for water or to escape hunger. It's already happening, but we don't see it here as clearly as it's seen in the rest of the world. What's the part of LGBTs in this? Well, whenever you have situations of crisis or situations of not enough, those who are marginalized have even less than the others. Those who are marginalized don't have the connections to get the basic necessities that others are getting. We're already seeing that with regard to LGBTs, and you'll see even more as these mass population flows continue.

So where is this happening? The largest pockets of persecution today of LGBTs are the Middle East and Africa. When we started ORAM two years ago, virtually all of the stories we'd heard would have been in the Middle East. This is actually one of the most disturbing things I'm here to tell you today. You know about conditions in Iran. Most of you know that the death penalty applies to homosexuality in seven countries. Six of those are in the Middle East. One of them is Nigeria, where the death penalty applies in the North, where *Sharia* governs. And that situation is bad enough

because in most of the Middle East, even the countries that don't criminalize homosexuality, you are very likely to get killed by your family or by neighbors if it's found out that you are LGBT. In the last two years, a completely new phenomenon has arisen, new in terms of media: mass persecution of LGBTs in Africa. Most of you have heard about what's happening in Uganda; you've heard about the case in Malawi; you've heard about cases in Rwanda and Burundi and Kenya. As the conflict between East and West, between the perceived colonizers and the native populations, sharpens, the battle lines form on the backs of whom? On the backs of homosexuals because in many of these places in the Middle East as in Africa, homosexuality is perceived to be a Western phenomenon being imposed on the clean, ethical native cultures by the evil Westerners, and the concept of living openly as a homosexual is unknown in any of these places, as Ahmadinejad told you a couple of years ago. And let me tell you, he knew what he was talking about. He knows that there are lots of gays in Iran. He knows that there are gay parties in Iran, but he also knows that living openly as a homosexual is forbidden and is punishable by the death penalty, and that's what he was saying, that there's no homosexuality, that we don't have that phenomenon in Iran. He didn't mean that people don't want to be with people of the same sex. He meant that you could be killed for being with people of the same sex, and that's the reality in most places. So what's happening in Africa is that as people are daring to come out of the closet, all of the rage of many, many years against colonialism, the hatred and the anger that built up, is being focused on the few gays that have the nerve or the daring to come out of the closet and demand the right to live as who they are. Those people are paying with their lives very often. So we're seeing a shift now from a condition in which the Middle East was the most virulent place for gays and lesbians and transgenders to one in which Africa is becoming that place.

In the Middle East, things haven't been quiet either. How many of you have heard about what's happening in Iraq to gays? It's been in the media just a bit here but not too much. About 700 gays have been killed in Iraq in the last few years. With the American occupation, it became safe for gays in Iraq to begin coming out of the closet in the safe areas of Baghdad and the Green Zone, and the phenomenon of homosexuality has come out of the closet. Of course, these very same people were gay and lesbian all their lives, but now they're able to be a tiny bit more open or to seek each

other's company, and what's happening is that paramilitary groups, police, and private civilians are targeting these people. They are usually tortured. There's a very popular method that's being used to execute gays. If they're not hanged, typically what happens is that super glue is injected into the anus and then the person is forced fed diuretics until the stomach explodes. And the streets are strewn with these people who have been caught. A few weeks ago one of the safe houses of a group of gays in Iraq was found by the police. Five of the men disappeared completely. One of the men was found in the hospital with his throat slashed, and the house was burned down. That's the level of hatred. Let's not misunderstand: this is not just homophobia; this is caustic blend of homophobia and xenophobia and hatred of the American occupation that's all being directed at the gays. Very few of these people manage to escape. And when they do, they get to a place like Syria or Lebanon or Jordan. This is what I was talking about before. These countries share cultures with Iraq to an extent, and being out of the closet is absolutely impossible in these countries. You can be beaten up and killed in Jordan or Syria just like you can be in Iraq, and some of our clients come from those countries, in fact.

So people live in hiding over there. Many of them are afraid to come out of the closet even to the authorities, and this is where our activity kicks in. They live in hiding, and sometimes they live in hiding for the rest of their lives. Sometimes their lives are not very long. Sometimes they're caught by the authorities in these countries and kicked back home. Most of them are so deeply ashamed of who they are. I think homophobia is ultimately the biggest enemy, if you have to prioritize your enemies. Maybe people are so ashamed of who they are that they will not come out even if their life depends on it. One of my first cases was a gay man from Afghanistan on the Turkish-Iranian border. He had applied for refugee status with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and it did not occur to him for a second that he could tell anybody in a position of authority that he was a homosexual because in the place that he comes from, you can easily be killed for being homosexual,

These are our siblings; that's what we're trying to drive home everywhere. It's not them and us; this could easily be us. We're trying to inculcate an understanding in the international LGBT community, first of all, that this is our responsibility because no one is going to take care of ours unless we take care of ours.

and you would never tell anybody that in Afghanistan. His father had tried to kill him, and that's why he had escaped from home. He had been living in Turkey for four years when he applied for refugee status based on political opinion, which was a lie. He had never been persecuted for his political opinion. The UN Human Rights Commission found out that he was lying, which is very easy to do in an interview, and he was denied. After he was denied, he was kept for three years, waiting for his case to be appealed, and finally when he found us, it was the first time he had talked to someone face-to-face who said, "I understood about being gay. We're gay too, and we can help you." We took his case through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, but he would have never done that had someone not reached out to him and said, "It's okay; we're

here for you," because there is no symbol whatsoever at the UN headquarters that it's okay to be gay. The people who adjudicate these cases are often very homophobic.

In Turkey, refugees aren't allowed to work. Refugees are required to live in small towns. This is all refugees. If you have family or if you have compatriots or if you have co-religionists, you can somehow make your way through those years of struggle to get out, but if you're LGBT, you are targeted by that very community, so the last people he was going to look for were other Afghanis because they would have killed him themselves. He was all by himself, and he had to survive, and he did what many of our clients do: he sold his body; that's all he had. In Turkey, a trick will get you a meal. It wasn't once a day. It was three times a day that he would have to turn tricks. When he felt safe enough with me, I asked him, "Are you having safe sex? Are you watching out for yourself?" And he answered, "What are you talking about? Not even once. You can't get condoms here, and even if you could, the johns wouldn't agree to use the condoms." So do the math. He'd been doing sex trade for three years, three times a day, unprotected. What are the chances that he's going to eventually be safe somewhere and healthy somewhere? So this young man has gone from childhood sexual abuse, to abuse by elders, to threats of being killed by his family, to sex trade, and maybe he'll get to safety and maybe he just won't, and that is the reality of most of our people around the world.

That's when I decided to leave my cushy job in an international organization and to form ORAM. And I found out that the very organizations that were supposed to be helping these people were really not helping them. I went to the US Refugee Corps director, whom I'd worked with for many years, a very nice woman who I don't think is homophobic, and I said to her, "Why don't we have many gay refugees around here? The US accepts 80,000 refugees a year. Why don't I hear about any programs to assist LGBT refugees? These are the most persecuted people." And she said, "We have nothing against them; it's just that they're not coming forward for help. If somebody actually comes into the office and says, 'I'm

gay and I'm being persecuted; can you help me?' we'll help them. But nobody has done that, or very few people have done that."

I went one step back because those cases get to the US through the UN system. So I started to talk to people in the UN system and asked, "What is going on here?" It's easy to ask this question when you're over 50 and have been working with people for a really long time. They take you a little more seriously. And the people in the UN told me the same thing. They said, "We actually have nothing against them. We are actually working on the first guidance ever dealing with LGBT refugees, and that's going to come out really soon. If someone comes out to us, we'll consider giving them refugee status. But nobody does that." So I went one step further back to the NGOs that help the refugees, and there are a thousand

NGOs around the world which are charged with assisting refugees. And I got the same story. You go into these waiting rooms, and you understand exactly why it's impossible for most people to come out. Our clients go and speak to people who are from the place they're being interviewed in, people who share the culture of the place, who often exhibit the very same prejudices that everybody else does. When they go in, they fill out forms that have no indication whatsoever

the UN system, fighting the UN system. Eventually almost each one of them gets to safety, but it's a very time-consuming, labor-intensive, frustrating process that requires a tremendous amount of attention and a tremendous amount of compassion. Sometimes you just want to shake your clients and say, "Come on, get it together; you're just going to have to say this to the officer or else you're not going to get refugee status." I can't tell you the number of people that I have told before their interview,

Here in the United States, the refugee system is built on family unification. . . . If you've got family, you've got a place to live, someone who loves you, someone to say, "You're okay; you're a worthwhile human being, and you are worthy of survival." But our clients don't have that type of preparation in life. Our clients heard from age zero that their fate is worse than that of a cockroach.

ever that it's safe to be LGBT. Many of our clients are harassed by other refugees in the waiting room while they're waiting to be interviewed if they are a bit effeminate or if there's any sign whatsoever. Of course, in the cities where they're living, they often are harassed in their home. Stones are thrown through the windows. In Turkey, in many cities, our clients are afraid to go out in the day because they can be beaten up. They wait until nighttime. They're thrown out of stores; they're thrown out of shopping centers, and on and on and on. And that's the way they struggle to survive day to day.

So at ORAM, we developed a strategy to change all this, to educate the international community, and to educate LGBTs around the world about what's happening to our siblings. These are our siblings; that's what we're trying to drive home everywhere. It's not them and us; this could easily be us. We're trying to inculcate an understanding in the international LGBT community, first of all, that this is our responsibility because no one is going to take care of ours unless we take care of ours. But beyond that, we also want to educate governments, to educate international institutions, and to assist individual refugees so that at least some of them can get to safety. In Turkey, we have about forty clients right now. Almost all of them are from Iran. As you probably know, Iran has executed 4,000 LGBTs since the Islamic Revolution in '78 and '79. Nobody knows the exact numbers because they're not published, and most people would rather be executed as a thief than as a homosexual for the sake of the family, so you often don't really know the reason why people are being executed. Most of our clients don't want to leave Iran. Very few do. What happens is that they typically hold on. They stay at home, and they try to stay in hiding as long as possible, until a neighbor finds out, or until the police find out, or a party they're at is raided, and at that point they have 24 hours to pack and get out. Most of our clients don't have money, so what most of them do is get on a bus and cross into Turkey, which is the only country that Iranians can go to without a visa, and they wait there to get somewhere else that's safe. This phenomenon is repeated in many parts of the world. Then they get to Turkey, and they find out they'll be living in a tiny little town which is hyper-conservative, which is very homophobic. Our clients tell us that they encounter a lot more homophobia in Turkey as a practical matter than they did in Iran, because Iranians won't beat you up on the streets, but Turks will. So it's a new kind of reality, and it's a new kind of fear. We work with clients sometimes for a year and a half, sometimes for two years, getting through

"You have to say that you're a homosexual, and I know that it's the worst thing in the world for you, but you're going to have to say that because your life depends on it." Most of them do; some of them don't.

I don't want to depress you too much. At the end of the saga, those who are resettled, those who get through the UN process, are lucky enough to be among the one percent who get international resettlement slots. Does everybody know what resettlement is? It's when a country accepts you as a refugee from outside, so you're sitting in country X, and country Y accepts you as a refugee voluntarily. The US accepts most of the refugees in the world, 80,000 a year right now. Those who arrive in the home country think, "Okay, phew! It's almost over." The screen goes down; the credits come up. Wrong! Now reality starts. Your client arrives in Canada, Australia, the US, Sweden—whichever country took them, that's where they can go. And once they arrive, this is the reality: they don't know the language; they often don't have a profession; they're all by themselves; their own faith community or language community rejects them, and they would never approach them in any case. We've had several Palestinian clients who were settled in Scandinavia and who were given housing among other Palestinians and were beaten up by those other refugees. Again, they're afraid to tell the social worker, even in Sweden. Can you imagine being afraid to tell a social worker in Sweden? It's about internalized homophobia. And they struggle to somehow make it. Most of them do make it, but the reality is really tough. Here in the United States, the refugee system is built on family unification; that's how the vast majority of the 80,000 refugees a year that are integrated into the US make it. What happens is their own family or their own community sponsors them; they're brought into their own church (usually) and then are given the support to make it. These people take them to the Social Security office, to the doctor, and to English class. Federal assistance here is eight months long. After eight months, you're cut off from all federal assistance, including medical assistance. So there's not a lot of time to make it. It's pretty tough even if you have family here. If you've got family, you've got a place to live, someone who loves you, someone to say, "You're okay; you're a worthwhile human being, and you are worthy of survival." But our clients don't have that type of preparation in life. Our clients heard from age zero that their fate is worse

than that of a cockroach. They've been told over and over again that they don't deserve to survive, that they are a source of shame to their families and their cultures, and they don't need to live. They carry that with them. They've also been denied education. They were afraid to go to school because they were afraid to be beaten up in school. They were cut off from financial systems; they were cut off from their families; and then they arrive here and they have nothing. Our Muslim Iranian queer arrives in San Antonio, Texas, and goes into the offices of the Catholic Charities—I'm not making this up—and has got to deal with "Who am I? Who are these people? How am I possibly going to make it? Who am I going to tell who I am?" We have found that after coming to the US our clients very often become homeless pretty soon because federal funding is \$2,000 for eight months, and they don't know the language and can't get a job. So we started a project recently to bring clients to the San Francisco area, and we found a resettlement agency, one organization in the whole country that agreed to resettle our clients, and they will start arriving at the end of this year or the beginning of next year. I've been speaking to a lot of groups, not asking for money although we love financial support, but because we the community need to be that family that these people don't have. When they start arriving (and there aren't going to be many), there need to be people here who have the compassion to reach out and to say, "I'll be the person to take you to the doctor," or "We have a room in our house; I'll rent you a room so you can have a safe place, so you can have a place you can belong to so you don't have to walk the streets." We need to start building support within our community. That means each of you. I couldn't ask anything more of you than that when you leave here today, you talk to some people you know about what's happening. We need to act like family. We need to start being family because we don't have any other family and to take care of our own.

We the community need to be that family that these people don't have. When they start arriving, there need to be people here who have the compassion to reach out and to say, "I'll be the person to take you to the doctor," or "We have a room in our house; I'll rent you a room so you can have a safe place, so you can have a place you can belong to so you don't have to walk the streets."

Perhaps Jack and Aurelio can talk about their experience with their refugees, who are in Turkey, and explain to you what their life is like.

Jack Busby: I just wanted to say a little bit about two things. I'm the reason that Neil is here today. I heard him on our local gay radio show on KALW late last year and found the story so compelling. And talk about suffering! Which is a significant part of the Buddhist understanding of the world, and one of our charges is to reduce suffering. This is such a direct application of that. So I got in touch with your organization, and that's kind of the Buddhist angle on this thing. And ORAM has set up a program where you can adopt a refugee, and so we did adopt two, one from Iran and one from Kazakhstan, both of whom had already escaped to Turkey. So we've followed them, and we've

had some correspondence with them. It's just two guys, and one guy so far is out. But if I were that guy, that would be important. My reaction is, "There but for the grace of God—or Buddha—would I be in the same situation." It just seems incumbent to try to do something. So we adopted these two guys, and we're just thrilled that last week one of them was relocated to Australia—in Melbourne. Last week, we had a Skype conversation with this kid. He's a 27-year-old graphic designer who spent two years in Turkey. And now he's starting this new, completely different cultural life in Melbourne. The other, I guess, is still having some problems getting out. That's essentially it. I'm all in support of our gay issues here in America—gay marriage and gays in the military and all that, which is important, and since supposedly we are cultural leaders, those issues are important, but for these guys over there, it's a literal matter of life and death, and so I thought this was Buddhism in action.

Aurelio Font: And there is much that you can do beyond the adopting. As Neil pointed out, these people are going to need contacts; these people are going to need resources to point them in the direction of gainful employment; they're going to need a roof over their head; they're going to need somebody to orient them in the various cities to which they are eventually assigned, and given the powers that we have with the global connection to other people through social networking, we really do have a hand in creating an environment that will be welcoming of these refugees.

Jack Busby: Actually, Aurelio is a big Facebook guy, and he got this guy, Hamid, in touch with a Facebook friend in Melbourne, and so that's where he's staying.

Aurelio Font: He's got a roof over his head, a free place to stay, two really sweet guys who are taking him under their wings—we call them gay uncles. Hamid refers to us—and it's quite moving—in some of the correspondence that we've had, he refers to us as his dads, and in the course of correspondence, I said, "Think of us as

uncles," and he said, "No, parents give life, and you have given me a new life. You are my father." That's very, very, very powerful. We haven't done that much; we've just given a few hundred dollars for each, and did the best that we could to make the connections with responsible people who would follow them and do their part to ensure that they are well taken care of and acclimated to the various societies that they are going to be in. And it can be done, and it can be done easily. I think that the important question for all of us to ask is, "What can we as individuals do? And what can we do collectively?" If one person doesn't have the beaucoup bucks to throw in the direction of ORAM, then several of you can get together. Share the cost. Share a child. Share a son. Share a daughter. You can do that. It's not that difficult." ■

GBF

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How You Can Help ORAM

ORAM is a non-profit organization dedicated to helping asylum seekers and refugees worldwide who have been forced to flee their home countries due to persecution based on their sexual orientation, gender or gender identity. It is based in the United States but has projects in the UK, Turkey and the Middle East. ORAM relies mainly on voluntary donations from trusts, foundations and individuals.

Campaign with ORAM: You can help ORAM make positive and lasting changes to the way LGBTI asylum seekers and refugees are treated. Spread the word about what is happening. Invite ORAM to speak at your functions. Tell your friends about ORAM. Sign up for its e-newsletter. Link to its website from yours!

Donate: Help ORAM continue its vital work. Make a donation. Commit to longer term giving if you can—check out ORAM's Adopt-a-Refugee program.

Fundraise: Help ORAM raise money for the vital work that it does. Hold an event in your city, town or neighborhood. Organize a collection for ORAM at your place of worship, community group or workplace. Invite ORAM to speak at your event.

Volunteer: Become an ORAM volunteer or intern.

Email volunteer@oraminternational.org

For more information, please visit www.oraminternational.org
or email info@oraminternational.org.

How to Reach Us

www.gaybuddhist.org

For general questions about GBF write to:

inquiry@gaybuddhist.org

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gaybuddhist.org/programs

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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

December 5th Pauletta Chanco

Pauletta M. Chanco is a long-time student and practitioner of meditation in the Theravada Buddhist tradition. She was recently nominated to the Community Dharma Leadership Program at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre and hopes to begin this in 2012. She has taught beginning and ongoing meditation classes at Alameda Yoga Station since 2007. She is a mother of three children aged 13, 15 and 29. Pauletta is also a professional fine artist whose abstract paintings are inspired by her meditation and spiritual practice.

December 12th Tom Moon

Tom Moon has been a practitioner of Vipassana meditation for fifteen years, and his spiritual home is Spirit Rock Meditation Center. He is a psychotherapist in San Francisco, and works primarily with gay men. His chief professional commitment is in exploring the interface between Buddhist practice and psychotherapy practice.

December 19th 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 lifelong involvement in environmental, women's, and other justice movements, as well as an interest in Buddhism and earth-based spirituality, is at the heart of her writing. She teaches at the California Institute of Integral Studies in the department of Philosophy and Religion. Her on-going class (since 1997) is entitled "the Healing Ecstasy of Sound" and explores music as a spiritual practice from a wide range of cross cultural, traditional and contemporary perspectives.

December 26th Open Discussion

January 2nd Tom Faupl

Thomas Faupl is a licensed psychotherapist in private practice in San Francisco. He was a Diamond Heart student for several years before returning to Buddhism as his primary spiritual path. For the past nine years, Thomas has been a student of Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche, one of the first lamas to bring the Bon Dzogchen teachings of Tibet to the West. Thomas has a particular interest in the interface between the complementary practices of Buddhist meditation and psychotherapy.

January 9th Heather Sundberg

Heather Sundberg began teaching meditation in 1999 primarily to youth and families. She has completed the four-year Spirit Rock/Insight Meditation Society Teacher Training and continues to be mentored by Jack Kornfield. She is also a graduate of the Spirit Rock Community Dharma Leaders program (CDL2). She held the position of Spirit Rock Family Program Teacher & Manager from 2001-2010. Currently she teaches classes, daylongs and retreats throughout California, especially at Spirit Rock, and through the Mountain Stream Meditation Center community. She brings to her teaching a passion for the depth of retreat practice, combined with a playful creativity for integrating the teachings into daily life.

January 16th John Mifsud

John Mifsud has studied insight meditation for over nine years and recently completed the East Bay Meditation Center's Commit to Dharma Program led by Larry Yang. He is currently in the Community Dharma Leaders Training Program at Spirit Rock. He is a lead facilitator of the EBMC Deep Refuge Affinity Group for Men of Color and their Euro-Descent allies. He also studied with Rodney Smith at Seattle Insight Meditation for eight years. John was also the Coordinator of the Seattle Multicultural Sangha and spent ten years on the Leadership Team of Seattle Dharma Buddies, a meditation group for GBT men.

January 23rd Anne Diedrich

Anne Diedrich has been practicing vipassana meditation for ten years. She has completed the Dedicated Practitioners Program at Spirit Rock Meditation Center. For seventeen years she has worked with a diverse clientele and a wide range of problems. From 1993-2005, her clinical home was Family Service Agency of Marin, where she worked with adults and children experiencing distress, mental suffering, and symptoms of depression, anxiety, abuse, substance abuse, and serious emotional disturbances. She has also trained in Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) under Dr. Zindel Segal. MBCT is an innovative, clinically proven treatment that encourages patients to play an active role in preventing the return of depression by integrating elements of mindfulness-based meditative practice with cognitive therapy.

January 30th 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