



Gay Buddhist Fellowship

AUGUST / SEPTEMBER 2013 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.

Freedom from a Buddhist Perspective

The Precepts: Our Religious Bill of Rights

BY CATHLEEN WILLIAMS

Cathleen Williams has been in and about the San Francisco Zen Center for 30 years or so, practicing both as a lay student and as a priest. Over the years she has found that the beginning questions of practice evolve into more refined questions that engage her whole life and that involve both her priest and her psychotherapy practice. She gave the following talk at GBF on July 3, 2005. It first appeared in the February/March 2006 newsletter.

Today is the day before the 4th of July, and I realized when I set up the date for this lecture that I was going to be lecturing right before the 4th, and I thought, "Since that's the case, why not talk about freedom?" So I've been spending some considerable time thinking about freedom and about its definition in the preamble to the Constitution as "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Then I thought a little bit about the Buddhist definition of freedom, which is non-suffering, and, of course, not pursuing happiness. Liberty is a very strange term—a strange term in our time, and maybe it's always been kind of strange. Culturally and politically, freedom's definition is very legalese. How it's defined varies from state to state, and sometimes from national administration to national administration. In our world, liberty is a very changeable condition, often associated with personal actions and the public consciousness. So often liberty seems to be attached to this phrase, "You can't tell me what to do." This is kind of a daunting phrase, and I think that it underlies a lot of unskillful action, personally and politically. Buddhist liberty is more about the freedom to choose what is in our best spiritual interests, and those are always intimately intertwined with everyone else's spiritual interests.

So here I want to interject a little note. After I'd gone so far, I went back and reread what I did, and I went to the dictionary and I looked up both freedom and liberty, and their definitions were very interesting. I hadn't done this since I was in junior high school. Both of these words have the connotation of freedom from constraint, meaning unbound freedom. And there follows a long list of words, in this British dictionary I used, in which the term "free" means actually acting outside the law: free love, freeloading, freebies, the unre-

strained enjoyment of one's natural rights. Now I don't know what they mean by one's natural rights, although I'm sure there's a legal definition of it, but this is a very interesting way to put it.

What do we call it when people act too freely? In my own experience, it makes me alert and somewhat anxious when I perceive that boundaries are being broken. When someone else feels free to impinge on others, which is often how freedom is taken, bad things often happen. Right now I'm think-

will happen. I think of these fears as the real mental terrorists. Fear of something is usually the worst suffering. Most of the time we are not noticing these things because we're in them, and when we're in them, or in fantasies of forthcoming events, we're mentally living them in advance and we're in the other side of this, which is in fear and defenses; these are all-absorbing when they come. It's hard to get enough distance at first to see how and why we suffer in our minds, and when we

Taking on the precepts conditions your body and mind. Actually, you have a whole lot of conditioning right from the get go of being a person, of having an ego, of knowing that this is me. You don't understand how deep that conditioning is until you run into it in meditation for the first time and then you find "I I I I" coming up hugely in what's called the waterfall of the mind.

ing about driving down the freeway watching someone cut in and cut out, cut in and cut out, and drive really fast, and not pay very much attention to what's going on. They just want to get to where they want to go as fast as they can. This is a very concrete example, and of course, there are interpersonal ones too. There's the person who gets mad and dumps their anger all over you. This is another kind of impingement. So freedom is kind of a double-edged word in lots of ways.

To be at liberty—what does that mean? Often we think of this, as I said, in the political sense, that we have certain constitutional rights, the right to gather, like we're doing now, freedom of religion, the right to bear arms, freedom of the press, and so forth in the Bill of Rights. We kind of take these for granted in a sense in this country, although maybe not so much lately. However, here's another question: Does external liberty equate to internal liberty?

Practicing Buddhists have to consider the nature of freedom because in our hearts and bodies, this is the state that we long for. We want very much to be free, not to hurt, and this is the Buddhist premise, that there is with practice freedom from suffering. Nevertheless, we are at times barred from considering our best spiritual interests. Often we are mentally roaming around on what we would like to happen, thinking of nice things that have happened or wondering if we will be at liberty to pursue the nice things we want to occur. I don't think this is something we need to be ashamed of especially. But we need to notice it. We also need to notice the negative times when we turn away from the things that are happening that greatly upset us. There's a place of fear that is often not acknowledged—fears that we won't get what we want, fears that something dreadful

do get a little distance, maybe the whole thing is kind of overwhelming, the first time you recognize how much you're suffering. It's very easy to panic and run away because the organism sort of automatically withdraws from pain. It's very easy to check this out: just light a match and hold it to your finger and see how you do internally.

How not to suffer—this is the question. How to address the suffering around you—this is the next question. How to incorporate the answers into your practice and your life, take them inside yourselves and show them in your action and speech—this is the third question.

These questions are a big part of Zen and Buddhism generally. Sometimes I hear that Zen is a purely meditational practice. This is not true. Practice begins with some desire to wake up. At first it might be around getting enlightenment. Well, I actually started like this. I wanted a big experience. I was so hot on the Big Experience that I was looking for that I ignored all the vital supports that promote steadiness, good will and insight into unskilled actions. I had to learn to arouse bodhicitta, which is not only the desire for freedom but the desire for everyone else's freedom too, and which is not only a spiritual desire but also a very important training in humility.

In any case, you must start where you are, because your mind is the field from which good and bad spring. The mind is never empty. It's your practice and your dedication that determine the outcome.

When I began to meditate, that was all I did. I didn't have any intent or sense of the morality that actually infuses meditation; I just sat down and tried to make my mind a blank. Well, you all know how successful that is. Has eve-

ryone tried to make their mind blank? Minds don't work like that. So three years later, I did lay ordination, and at that point I formally took precepts. Now at the time I did precepts, there wasn't any preparatory precept class. You went through a ceremony in which you formally took precepts, and from that point on you were supposed to be practicing them. So when I took precepts, it was kind of words on paper, which I knew about because I had been a Catholic and I certainly was familiar with the concept of sin, confession and having to make it right—there was a point at which you had to make it right, be reborn, and then go on. And that didn't fit for me anymore, so I converted, so to speak, to Buddhism. So a little later, after this lay ordination, I started trying to incorporate these precepts, very clumsily but with good will. I consented to this because I am a very stubborn person, and I have to be shown, but I had read what Buddha said, "Don't do it because I say it; do it because you find it works for you." This is the thing that led me to Buddhism before anything else. "Don't do it because I say it; do it because it works for you."

Well, I wanted to know it all for myself. And in fact, if I couldn't know it, I wouldn't do it. So I found out. And I think now the thing that I found out the most was that in order to have any inner freedom, I had to consciously take on restraint,

We want to wake up both our minds and our hearts. My image of the unawakened heart is something with layers of hardened callous on it, which is calloused because of what we go through in life. And practice is like the razor that shaves the callous off, and then you get to the place where you can actually feel with your skin again, and feel what it's like to do these unskillful things. So as you take on restraint and become aware, there's a certain softening that happens for you.

and the very act of taking precepts led me to know just how willful I was in the use of body, speech and mind. And that was really kind of a shock for me. So just on the most basic level, just don't do these things: don't lie, cheat, steal, kill, talk about others, defame the dharma, screw around and deliberately make people feel bad, be covetous. I took them as rules at first, and I had the experience of rules we all have: if you want to be good, you have to follow the rules. If you don't, you're bad, or you've done something bad. In this sort of muddle of self-judgments, I didn't understand that in the larger

sense, taking on the precepts conditions your body and mind. Actually, you have a whole lot of conditioning right from get go of being a person, of having an ego, of knowing that this is me. You don't understand how deep that conditioning is until you run into it in meditation for the first time and then you find "I I I I" coming up hugely in what's called the waterfall of the mind. It's all about me.

Consider the precept against stealing. The first thing is that it's not what you steal. It's the act itself that actually is the habit. Taking the small inconsequential thing has the same weight as taking the Mona Lisa. The precept is, "Do not take what is not given," which covers everything you don't own personally or that is not available by convention, like toilet paper at a public toilet. (This is conventionally available to you, so you can use it.) But if you think about the number of times you take without asking, casually from friends or at work, it's kind of a shock.

Let's follow stealing a little more. The stealing mind is interested in what it can get for itself. It's not free from desire or attachment to what may be stolen. It's not at liberty, let's say, to consider other people except as sources of theft. So there's no freedom here, but definitely a mental habit. Our mental habits define us, and like all habits they're really hard to break. It was about the time that I started to refine my habits that I

realized how ingrained they were. The more I recognized how my mind ran, the less free I felt. However, I did have this theory that getting enlightenment meant that I could have the freeing effect without the preliminary work. So you might also think. And let me immediately say, this is not the way it works. You can't sit on the cushion and hope for an experience that will then change everything. This happens, but it's rare. Norman Fisher, whom you may have heard of, met a guy in Seattle whose wife had just died. The man was in such agony from this that the tumult it stirred up brought him to an experi-

ence that we would describe as one of great clarity, but he had never practiced before and he had no idea what it was about or what to do. So when he came to Norman and told him about this, about this sorrow and grief about his wife's death and this clarity that had been brought to him, this amazing mental opening, the first thing that Norman said to him was, "Now that you have this, you have to put the underpinnings underneath it; you have to practice; you have to take on what is ethical and also correct in this practice; it can't just be "boom," and that's it.

For most of us, it's a brick by brick experience. For actions, there are consequences. This is a really hard lesson to learn. Maybe the most common reaction to actions is to cast blame on to others. Taking responsibility for our habits is a huge step in practice and really our first step to freedom. Yes, there's a way to not let yourself know you're stealing; there's a way to make it perfectly okay and justify everything to yourself. You can gloss over what you did. You're at liberty to do that, actually, and every time you do that, the habit rut gets a little deeper, so you produce more consequences.

So our thief—what does he lack? Well, he lacks generosity. He certainly doesn't practice it, but generosity is the positive action, the action that opens the heart. Of course, you can give money; you can do concrete things that are generous, but even more you can open your heart because the stealing habit has been overcome. And stealing and acquiring

take a vow not to do this for a certain period of time, which can be short—it can be an hour, or it can be a month. And then they mindfully avoid it.

When I was writing this, I was thinking, "This is really hard to do, because everybody is so used to talking about everybody else." You know, the effect of religious practice is that it changes you. It actually changes you. It's kind of like being alcoholic. It's realizing you want to stop this addiction of alcohol and go into AA. One of the first and most difficult things is that you lose all your drinking buddies. All the people that you went and drank with and considered your friends are now no longer in your group because you're not doing the same thing anymore. Right? Some of you are in AA, and you've probably gone through that and you know what it feels like, and it's kind of a lonely feeling. You're with this new group; you're with this sangha, but you don't know these folks so well yet, and you don't know that they support right speech in a very deep way, and so you feel a little funny about doing it; you feel a little funny about hearing the gossip about somebody and just not responding to it. You might feel a little funny about not passing on a really good thing when you hear it, and it's hard. It's hard to do and it takes practice; that's why they call this practice, right? Because we have to practice. And then there's this place where you usually have some withdrawal: you have the desire for alcohol, and you

Take confidence from the depths of your heart, especially on this crucial point, the principle of cause and effect. Do as much good as possible, thinking, "Today I will strive for good and do my best to avoid the negative."

spring from the anxiety that there's never quite enough. This is true of all the precepts. In all the things we do, there's some basic fear that underlies those kinds of actions.

Mostly here I have been speaking about the negative precepts, the ones that we vow not to do. Well, there are positive precepts also. We take them as an antidote. On one level the positive precepts are a vow never to commit the ten negative precepts. However, it's not just enough to happen not to do something when you think of it. You commit to avoid that action whatever happens. If you catch yourself doing something that is unskillful, you admit it and then you refrain.

I want to say this is very tough. Right now I'm thinking of the vow against harsh speech and that includes gossip, name calling, angry words. Tibetans have a practice, which I think is really useful here. They take a time vow. They

also have the desire to go back to your group and to talk freely the way you used to talk because it feels comfortable. But that's counterproductive for us, actually.

So this is the point where you think back to how it was before, or you fall back. And, in relation to speech—and many of the precepts are about speech; as a matter of fact, four of them are about speech; that's how important speech is—you have to see what the effect of the speech is. And if you've ever been in a situation where gossip has come and you've passed it on, and someone has heard about it—the person who was being discussed—and has been very hurt and upset and angry about it, then you know just how painful and harmful this can be. Or, you've been the subject of gossip, and it's come back to you, and it's been rather painful. That's the effect of speech. It's hard. It's really hard to do.

So you have to remember and accept the consequences of being drunk, if you've been drinking, or having this smart vicious mouth, and go the whole round again. But I think the nice thing about precepts is that you can always start again. You can always say to yourself, "Well, okay, I did this, and now I see what's happened, and I don't think I want to do this again." You might think that saying some-

and do my best to avoid the negative." At night before you fall asleep, don't just fall off, think about what you've done during the day. Dedicate the merit to all sentient beings. Resolve to stop negative actions. Real freedom comes with responsibilities. Opening the heart and taking on these responsibilities is the Buddhist path. May all beings be happy, and may we have real freedom throughout all the worlds.

Real freedom comes with responsibilities. Opening the heart and taking on these responsibilities is the Buddhist path. May all beings be happy, and may we have real freedom throughout all the worlds.

thing nasty isn't as bad as being drunk, but actually I think it's sort of on the same level. What would you do with great insight if you were still having a lot of judgments? It can happen; you can have great insight and still have judgments.

We want to wake up both our minds and our hearts. My image of the unawakened heart is something with layers of hardened callous on it, which is kind of calloused because of what we go through in life. And practice is like the razor that shaves the callous off, and then you get to the place where you can actually feel with your skin again, and feel what it's like to do these unskillful things. So as you take on restraint and become aware, there's a certain softening that happens for you. You look at yourself and how you conduct your life, and then you really begin to understand about karma, that your actions determine an outcome. You understand this because you are paying attention in a different way, and that affects how you act and how other people react to you.

The precepts are often taught moralistically, but I don't think that's so helpful. I think it's more that it's really important to understand that the quality of the action determines the outcome, and that's what you're changing. And so when you do that, inner space opens up, and it's the space that was formerly taken up by unrestrained, very conditioned ego.

So on this day of July 3rd, we have come together to consider the dharma on a three-day weekend on which most people are out doing other things. And how to study and practice in a way that promotes freedom. Today I talked about our precepts as our religious bill of rights. We are all free. We're at perfect liberty to act as we wish. We all, all of us, everyone of us, have the innate capability to choose for ourselves the path that will without fail lead to liberty, real liberty, liberty extending beyond this conventional life.

Take confidence from the depths of your heart, especially on this crucial point, the principle of cause and effect. Do as much good as possible, thinking, "Today I will strive for good

So this is the content of my lecture about freedom. A little aside: Sometimes when I consider the political situation now and how much our fear has conditioned what's going on in the American consciousness, it's a place where I think it's particularly important to look at what freedom is, and what we believe. There's a lot of fear, and we're as much immersed in it as anybody else who is a US citizen now. I think we can all be free from this fear. One thing I've done is I've just stopped watching TV news because the words that they use are so—there's a repetitious crisis, and it's entered the consciousness. And then I think, "What do I fear actually right at this moment?" and nothing really comes up. In other words, I don't have a fear of getting on planes; I don't have a fear that terrorists are going to come and do something, because those things have not yet happened. But there are certainly large areas in which we think, "Oh, my God, what if it did happen?" Well, what if it did? What if it did? Of course, there would be anguish and fallout—there always is in human life—but there's also change, and I know that from time to time—as a matter of fact, all the time—things change. So the American consciousness that's happening is something that's happening now, but somewhere along the line, there will be a change. Buddhism says things go like this: They will either get better, get worse, or stay the same, and as this happens, these changes, what is our mental attitude towards it? One thing I've noticed is that I'm getting gray in my hair, a lot, and this year when I turned 64, I thought, "I really *am* getting older." And it was a shock. I've been doing this practice for a long time; things have changed a lot for me in the course of the last 25 years, and yet even so, I have this shock. So I think I'm encouraging myself and I'm encouraging all of us when we fall into this culture of fear to take a step back and say, "Is it in the here and now right in front of my face? If it's not, maybe I don't have to be as scared as they tell me I have to be." ■

GBF

Steering Committee

Ray Dyer
Michael Murphy
Marvin Snow
Carl Wolf

Treasurer

Peter Washburn

SUNDAY SITTINGS

Program Committee

Bob McMullin
Shantanu Phukan
Jim Stewart

Facilitator Coordinator

Ray Dyer

Facilitators

Tom Bruein
Oswaldo Garcia
Joe Goode
Roy King
Michael Murphy
Jeff Lindemood

Host Coordinator

Cass Brayton

Hosts

Richard Azzolini
Cass Brayton
Jim Christrup
Jay Corbett
Mark Hoffheimer
Tage Lilja
Dave Limcaco
Jerry Martin
Kei Matsuda
Jim Stewart

NEWSLETTER

Editor

Michael Langdon

Design / Layout

Michael Gabel

Mailing List

Joe Castrovinci

Newsletter Mailing

Jack Busby

Mail

Richard Azzolini

LARKIN STREET YOUTH CENTER

Volunteer Coordinator

Clint Seiter

PRISON OUTREACH

Coordinator

Baruch Golden

WEBSITE

Joe Kukulka

YAHOO GROUP MODERATOR

Tom Bruein

SOUND / RECORDINGS

George Hubbard

RETREAT COORDINATOR

Michael Murphy

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

Mail correspondence:

GBF

PMB 456

2215-R MARKET STREET

SAN FRANCISCO CA 94114

For general questions about GBF write to:

inquiry@gaybuddhist.org

To contact Program Committee with suggestions for speakers and comments:

programcommittee@gaybuddhist.org

Address changes or to subscribe or unsubscribe to the newsletter:

mailinglist@gaybuddhist.org

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

August 4 Open Discussion

August 11 Dorothy Hunt

Dorothy Hunt currently serves as Spiritual Director of Moon Mountain Sangha, teaching at the request and in the spiritual lineage of Adyashanti. Dorothy is the founder of the San Francisco Center for Meditation and Psychotherapy and has practiced psychotherapy since 1967. She is the author of *Only This!*, editor of *Love: A Fruit Always in Season*, and a contributing author to *The Sacred Mirror: Nondual Wisdom and Psychotherapy* (vol. 1), *Listening from the Heart of Silence: Nondual Wisdom and Psychotherapy* (vol. 2), and the on-line journal *Undivided*. She is also a featured spiritual teacher in the book *Ordinary Women, Extraordinary Wisdom* (Ed. Rita Marie Robinson). Dorothy offers satsang, retreats, intensives and dokusan in the San Francisco Bay area and elsewhere by invitation. For more information you may visit her website at www.dorothyhunt.org.

August 18 Prasadachitta Dharmachari.

As an ordained member of the Triratna Buddhist Community, Prasadachitta teaches meditation, yoga and Buddhism at the San Francisco Buddhist Center. His practice and teaching grows out of a valuing of friendship and community. He is interested in the link between ideal qualities, such as love and clarity, as inspiring guides, and those same qualities as they manifest "imperfectly" in everyday relationships.

August 25 Carol Newhouse

Carol Osmer Newhouse has studied Insight Meditation for more than twenty years and has been teaching for ten. Her root teacher is Ruth Denison, who was empowered by the

great meditation master U Ba Khin of Burma. She has also studied with Dr. Rina Sircar at CIIS and Dr. Thynn Thynn in Daily Life Practice. She is the founding teacher of the Lesbian Buddhist Sangha in Berkeley.

September 1 Open Discussion

September 8 Dharma Duo

Paul Shepard and Philip Rosetti

September 15 Mark Leno

Mark Leno was elected to the California Senate in 2008. He currently represents the 11th Senate District of California, which includes San Francisco, Broadmoor, Colma, Daly City and portions of South San Francisco. Senator Leno chairs the Senate Budget and Fiscal Review Committee. From 2002-2008, Senator Leno served in the California State Assembly, representing the 13th District, which encompasses the eastern portion of San Francisco. Prior to his election to the Assembly, he served for four and a half years on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors.

Senator Leno also spent two years in Rabbinical Studies at The Hebrew Union College in New York. Senator Leno is the owner of Budget Signs, Inc., a small business he founded in 1978 and operated with his life partner, Douglas Jackson. Together, the two entrepreneurs steadily grew their sign business until Jackson passed away from complications relating to HIV/AIDS in 1990. This deep loss would not deter Leno. Instead, he redoubled his efforts in community service.

September 22 Open Discussion GBF Retreat

September 29 Jonathan Reynolds

Jonathan Reynolds has trained extensively in the fields of Buddhist meditation, classical yoga, and both Eastern and Western philosophies. His manner of teaching meditation is greatly influenced by time spent in the presence of Jack Kornfield, whose wisdom has infused Jonathan's voice with compassion, playfulness, and story. Jonathan earned his Masters Degree in Holistic Counseling Psychology from John F. Kennedy University, and his ongoing interests are focused upon integrating the practices of meditation, therapy, embodiment, and conscious relationship. Jonathan is co-founding editor of *The Journal of Holistic Psychology*. For further information on his work, please visit: www.ayogisway.com

GBF NEWSLETTER
PMB 456 2215-R MARKET STREET
SAN FRANCISCO CA 94114
ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

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, believing in the equality of all that lives.

—GBF Dedication of Merit