



# Gay Buddhist Fellowship

SPRING 2015 NEWSLETTER

## Karma

BY DAVID LEWIS

**David Lewis has been following the dharma path for 40 years and has a degree in comparative religious studies. He attended his first retreat in the Shambhala tradition at the age of 17 and has been practicing insight meditation since moving to San Francisco over 25 years ago. David teaches an insight meditation course at the Mission Dharma sangha, led the Gay Buddhist Fellowship's 2013 fall residential retreat, and facilitates a weekly meditation group for seniors. He is a graduate of Spirit Rock Meditation Center's Dedicated Practitioners Program.**

**K**arma is perhaps both the most well-known and misunderstood concept from the ancient Indian belief systems (both Hindu and Buddhist). When someone wrongs another person we say “that’s bad karma” with the assumption that their due punishment is not far down the road. Or when we have misfortune in our own lives we examine our recent actions to determine the cause. In other words, we view karma as destiny, fate, or justice. But the Buddha taught that karma is much more complicated; that our past karma is in fact “imponderable.” While karma is indeed a combination of cause and effect, the causes are too complex and numerous to tease out, and the effects may be diffuse, far away, or invisible to our investigation.

The literal translation of the word karma is “action.” There are many types of action: physical, mental (including internal speech), verbal, and the most powerful, emotive. When we talk about karma we are usually referring to the compound Sanskrit term “karma vipaka” or action and result; cause and effect. In Buddhism this is not a philosophical concept but a psychological description of how our experience unfolds. The Buddha saw karma as a matter of free will, a radical view at the time. He taught that we are responsible for ourselves and our own well-being, and not the victims of destiny or fate. Our karma arises out of our intentions and actions, but it is also determined by forces outside of ourselves *and our responses to those forces*: acts of nature, family and teachers, and social and cultural circumstances.

We are the results of our upbringing, society, and a tens of thousands random events and choices. As one of my teachers once put it, “you are not your fault.”

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. GBE's mission includes cultivating a social environment that is inclusive and caring.

**As humans, unlike other beings, we are spiritually inclined and have the ability to awaken and liberate ourselves from suffering. The mere fact that we were born into this world as humans means that we started out with a lot of bright karma.**

While we are drawn to trying to explain our current circumstances by putting our finger on defining events of our past, it's generally much more complicated than any one event or circumstance. Therefore, the Buddha advised against wasting too much mental energy trying to figure out which events from our past made our present what it is. No matter how much we ponder our past karma, we may very well miss much, if not most, of the truth of how we got to where we are. Our past karma cannot be changed: we are stuck with it. As Lily Tomlin said, "Forgiveness means giving up all hope for a better past." The best we can do is to have remorse (but not guilt) for past unskillful actions and try to do better in the present. The Buddha said, "It is growth in the Noble One's discipline when one sees one's transgressions as such and makes amends in accordance with the dharma by undertaking restraint in the future."

In western traditions we tend to focus on pathology: what is wrong with our lives and with us. But the Buddha reminded us that it is a great blessing to be born as a human being. As humans, unlike other beings, we are spiritually inclined and have the ability to awaken and liberate ourselves from suffering. The mere fact that we were born into this world as humans means that we started out with a lot of bright karma. And because we have the ability to choose skillful actions over unskillful actions in the present moment, we always have the opportunity to start afresh and redeem ourselves. The Buddha was as interested in the causes of happiness as in the causes of suffering, and his teachings on karma constitute a very hopeful and optimistic outlook on life.

Karma is illustrated by the story of Angulimala, a serial killer in the Buddha's time who was feared by everyone in the land. The name "Angulimala" means "chain of fingers" because he wore a necklace made of hundreds of the fingers of his victims. Legend has it that Angulimala had killed 999 people when he encountered the Buddha, who he intended to

make his 1,000th victim. He ran after the Buddha, but even though the Buddha was walking at a normal pace, Angulimala was unable to catch up to him due to the Buddha's spiritual powers.

Finally in frustration Angulimala called out, "Stop!" The Buddha responded, "I have already stopped; why don't you stop?" When Angulimala asked what the Buddha meant by that, he replied, "I have stopped harming living beings, but you continue to harm living beings so your suffering is perpetuated." When Angulimala heard this and looked upon the face of the Buddha he gave up his evil ways and became a follower. He put on a monk's robes and shaved his head and after years of devotion and practice eventually became enlightened.

Even though he was a respected disciple of the Buddha, however, people in villages they passed through recognized and feared him, and on alms rounds some threw stones at him. Angulimala endured their wrath as penance for his past deeds. The Buddha explained that while he could not escape his past dark karma, his enlightenment assured his peace of mind in this life and a favorable rebirth in his next life.

The Buddha's core teaching of the Four Noble Truths can be seen as a description of karma. We have suffering and stress in life because of actions, including thoughts, which are the causes of suffering and stress. We can alleviate suffering and stress by identifying their causes in the present moment and letting go of those unskillful habits. I'm using the word "unskillful" rather than "bad" because the Buddha avoided making value judgments in the way we do today. He saw a whole range of behavior between what we label as "good" and "bad." In fact, the Buddha did not talk about good or bad karma, but rather "bright" or "dark" karma. These describe feeling tones rather than value judgments. Bright karma generally leads to good effects while dark karma generally leads to bad effects. In action this mechanism is complicated by

**"Life is fleeting! Don't waste a single moment of your precious life! Wake up now! And now! And now!"**

**—Zen master Dogen**

# Autobiography in Five Short Chapters

**BY PORTIA NELSON**

## Act I

I walk, down the street,  
there is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I fall in... I am helpless... It isn't my fault... It takes forever to find  
a way out.

## Act II

I walk, down the street,  
there is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I pretend that I don't see it. I fall in again. I can't believe I am  
in the same place, but it isn't my fault.  
It still takes a long time to get out.

## Act III

I walk, down the street,  
there is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I see it is there. I still fall. It's a habit. My eyes are open. I know  
where I am. It is my fault. I get out immediately.

## Act IV

I walk, down the street,  
there is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I walk around it.

## Act V

I walk down another street.

the fact that our actions are usually a combination of bright and dark karma. No one, even Angulimala, is wholly good or bad, and our actions and intentions are often a mixture of bright and dark conscious and unconscious motivations.

The Buddha also saw karma as free will, however, so while we have to learn to live with our past karma, we *can*

have an effect on our present and future happiness. We can intentionally guide our actions in skillful or unskillful ways; we just cannot guarantee the results - the “what” or “when.” Intention is nonetheless the critical starting point in karma. All of our actions, whether verbal or physical, arise out of an intention, even if it is subconscious. The Buddha used agriculture as a metaphor for how we create karma. We sow a

seed in the hope that it will bear fruit. While we cannot pre-determine the soil conditions, the weather and other acts of nature, or how much time it takes, the “fruit” is still the result of our intentional actions.

The good news is that we have the ability to guide ourselves out of our circumstances and past history. This is what Awakening is all about, and it happens only in the present moment. The Buddhist sage Padma Sambhava said, “If you want to understand your past, look at your present experience. If you want to see your future, look at your present actions.” The present moment is all-important in Buddhism, as we learn in meditation practice. Our karma is born out of our intentions and actions in the present moment, whether carefully considered intentions or compulsive drives and unconscious psychological reflexes. In the very first chapter of the Dhammapada (short teachings of the Buddha) the Buddha says:

**All experience is preceded by mind, led  
by mind, made by mind.**

**Speak or act with a corrupted mind and suffering follows**

**As the wagon wheel follows the hoof of  
the ox.**

**All experience is preceded by mind, led by  
mind, made by mind.**

**Speak or act with a peaceful mind and  
happiness follows**

**Like a never-departing shadow.**

Happiness does not depend on who you are or what you have; its seed is planted in what you think. The Buddha taught that “whatever you think or ponder, that will become the inclination of your mind.” The inclination of our mind becomes our intentions, our intentions become our actions, and eventually our actions make up our personalities. This is the process of “bhava” or “becoming.”

**Sow an intention and reap an act.**

**Sow an act and reap a habit.**

**Sow a habit and reap a character.**

**Sow a character and reap a destiny.**

Bhava (becoming) is the core program behind karma. We are the accumulation of hundreds of thousands thoughts and actions from our past. Since we have free will, our future happiness therefore depends on our thoughts and intentions in the present moment. If we learn to change our habits of mind, we can alter our patterns of behavior. We are born

anew in every moment: “re-becoming” is really a better translation for the karmic term “rebirth.”

In order to change these mental habits, we first have to recognize them. It is through meditation practice that we can clearly see our habitual patterns as causes for suffering: meditation is an investigation into our mental programs. If we can train our minds through practice to recognize our habitual patterns, we can learn how to interrupt the feedback loop of stress, agitation, depression, and anxiety.

Meditation practice has a great many benefits in addition to this investigation. It calms the mind, settles the body, and anchors us in the present moment. In the present moment we can watch our habitual mental patterns arise, and make choices about our actions rather than simply reacting. Every single moment is an opportunity to wake up and choose actions that will establish beneficial (bright) karma and turn our lives around. It is never too late to start all over again.

It is helpful to have some guidance in meditation practice through a teacher, a therapist, or through reading and study. As we uncover our habitual patterns many things arise that we might not want to acknowledge. In everyday life we turn away from what makes us uncomfortable, but in meditation practice we train ourselves to stay with it until we see that it is not so scary. With wise guidance and persistent practice, we come to see that these patterns are simply conditioned habits, and not “me or mine.” Like all conditioned phenomena, they are ephemeral and can be changed. Indeed, as we make different choices and respond to the world in a different way, they often change all by themselves.

In addition to meditation practice, we can influence our karma by being mindful of our behavior. This is called “sila” in the Buddha’s language; “morality” in English. Morality in Buddhism is not so much a list of rights and wrongs, dos and don’ts, as it is an investigation into which behaviors (karma, actions) are skillful and which are not skillful. Skillful action tends to lead to happiness; unskillful action tends to lead to unhappiness. So Buddhist morality is not just about how we treat others; it is also about how we create or prevent our own happiness. It goes without saying that not harming others is skillful behavior that results in happiness. “Do no harm,” or the Golden Rule, is a central concept in Buddhism as in other belief systems.

So, we have the power to change our attitudes and behaviors through the practices of meditation and morality. We can not only be kinder and more compassionate to others, but in doing so foster more happiness for ourselves. Each moment is an opportunity to create bright karma and therefore a better world. So what are we waiting for? The Zen master Dogen advised, “Life is fleeting! Don’t waste a single moment of your precious life! Wake up now! And now! And now!” ■

# Inside Out

Words and works from our spiritual friends in confinement.

## Be Free and Soar Affirmation

BY VIC HERNANDEZ

You will meet this life challenge.  
With the strength of your Willpower,  
Integrity, and Truth  
Look to Your Wisdom, Confidence and  
Inner Guidance.  
Trust in Your Self.  
And the Guidance of the Creator—Your  
Higher Self.  
Be patient, hang-in-there, and persevere.  
You will not be forsaken,  
No matter how bleak things appear.  
Honour Your Physical, Mental, Spiritual  
Well-Being.  
Know and Cherish Your Worth.  
Build Honesty, Understanding, Trust,  
Expression  
Among others and yourself.  
Give it and Accept it.  
Life is a symbiotic effort and process.  
May You have Invigorating and Substantial  
blessings.  
May Your adventures be  
Mind-expanding, Spiritually-uplifting and  
Body-empowering.  
Don't grasp or cling to Life,  
Nor take up aversion or flee from it.  
Go there, don't run there.  
And embrace it.  
You will succeed!  
Regardless of the outcome.

## Forgotten

BY CLIFF SMITH

I'm forgotten in the darkness  
By a world I'll never know again.

I feel I've been abandoned,  
And what's left for me now?

If emotional pain left scars,  
I'd have one for every day.  
There's not an hour that goes by  
That takes the pain away.

I struggle with it all alone,  
No way to get rid of my feelings.

I'm not a violent person,  
But all you see is a stranger.

You'll never truly know me.  
Even if you really cared,  
My pain I do not share.  
I have enough pain to live with,  
A pain I will never show.

So this is just one stranger  
You and the world will never know.

# GBF

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# 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.

## How to Reach Us

[www.gaybuddhist.org](http://www.gaybuddhist.org)

Mail correspondence:

**GBF**

**PMB 456**

**2215-R MARKET STREET**

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For general questions about GBF write to:

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### GBF Yahoo Discussion Group

There is now a GBF discussion group for the general membership (and others) on Yahoo. Join the discussion at:

[www.groups.yahoo.com/group/gaybuddhistfellowship](http://www.groups.yahoo.com/group/gaybuddhistfellowship)

The Gay Buddhist Fellowship is a charitable organization pursuant to Internal Revenue Code 501(c)(3) and California Revenue and Taxation Code #23701d.

# Calendar

## Sunday Speakers

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### March 1      **Open Discussion**

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### March 8      **David Lewis**

David Lewis has been following the dharma path for over 40 years and has a degree in comparative religious studies. He attended his first retreat in the Tibetan Shambhala tradition at the age of 17, and has been practicing vipassana meditation since moving to San Francisco 25 years ago. He is a long time member of the Gay Buddhist Fellowship and also leads a weekly sitting group for seniors every Friday morning. David is a graduate of Spirit Rock Meditation Center's Dedicated Practitioners Program and has been on the teaching team for Spirit Rock retreats.

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### March 15      **Pamela Weiss**

Pamela Weiss has practiced in the Zen and Theravada traditions of Buddhism for over 25 years, including several years of Zen monastic training. She completed teacher training with Jack Kornfield through Spirit Rock, leads a Wednesday evening sitting group at SF Insight, and teaches classes, workshops and retreats internationally. Pamela is also an executive coach and the Founder of Appropriate Response, a company dedicated to bringing the principles and practices of Buddhism into the workplace.

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### March 22      **To Be Announced**

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### March 29      **Eve Decker**

Eve Decker began practicing Vipassana meditation in 1991. She has been teaching dharma since 2006. She has released two CDs of original, dharma based music. She leads groups on 'Metta-for-Self' and a monthly 'Sit-and-Sing-Sangha' in her hometown of Berkeley CA. She is a graduate of the Path of Engagement and Community Dharma Leader training programs at Spirit Rock Center in California. For more on Eve see her website at [www.evedecker.com](http://www.evedecker.com).

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### April 5      **David Lewis**

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### April 12      **Bill Scheinman**

Bill Scheinman has been teaching meditation since 2001. He teaches 8-week courses in mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) in the San Francisco Bay Area, as well as workplace mindfulness courses at Bay Area businesses. He is a graduate of teacher trainings in MBSR from the Center for Mindfulness at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, and is a graduate of the Dedicated Practitioner's Program at Spirit Rock Meditation Center, a graduate of the Buddhist Alliance for Social Engagement, and is the former President of the Board of the San Francisco Insight Meditation Community under guiding teacher Eugene Cash. He is currently participating in the Community Dharma Leader Program at Spirit Rock.

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### April 19      **Kevin Griffin**

Kevin Griffin is the author of *One Breath at a Time: Buddhism and the Twelve Steps* (Rodale Press 2004) and *A Burning Desire: Dharma God and the Path of Recovery*. A longtime Buddhist practitioner and 12 Step participant, he is a leader in the mindful recovery movement and one of the founders of the Buddhist Recovery Network.

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### April 26      **Open Discussion**

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### May 3      **David Lewis**

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### May 10      **Gary Ost**

Gary Ost is a retired Episcopal priest living in San Francisco. He began his study of the dharma in 2008, starting with the Shambhala school of Tibetan Buddhism. Since then he has practiced daily shamatha-vipashana meditation. He recently declared his aspiration to help Christians understand Buddhism better and Buddhists to understand Christianity better. Gary has taken informal bodhisattva vows, and is studying the Lojong teachings of the 11th Century Tibetan monk Atisha. Out of those teachings he is currently exploring the transformative psychological effect of Tonglen, a personalized mantra practice accompanied by taking in and sending out the breath. He would like to share some of the benefits of this practice today.

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### May 17      **Jana Drakka**

"Gengetsu Junsei" received Dharma Transmission in the Soto Zen Buddhist Lineage from Zenkei Blanche Hartman. Jana's nonprofit organization, Jana Drakka Community Services, provides a wide range of services including support groups, workshops, classes and talks. Jana's community work is based in Harm Reduction Principles—a way to meet everyone with complete acceptance—and allows for a client-centered modality. There are three meditation groups a week in San Francisco which are free and open to everyone. For details and contact info visit [www.janadrakka.com](http://www.janadrakka.com).

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### May 24      **Open Discussion**

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### May 31      **Carol Newhouse**

Carol Osmer Newhouse has studied Insight Meditation for more than 30 years and has been teaching for 20. She was given Dharma transmission by The Venerable Ruth Denison, student of the great meditation master U Ba Khin of Burma. She has studied with Dr. Rina Sircar of CIIS and Dr. Thynn Thynn in Daily Life Practice. She is the founding teacher of the Lesbian Buddhist Sangha in Berkeley, and a Licensed Clinical Social Worker.

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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, believing in the equality of all that lives.

—GBF Dedication of Merit