



GAY BUDDHIST Fellowship

FALL 2015 NEWSLETTER

Being Human

BY PAMELA WEISS

Pamela Weiss has been practicing Buddhism since 1987, including several years of Zen monastic training and teacher training with Jack Kornfield through Spirit Rock. Pamela leads a weekly sitting group at SF Insight and offers retreats and workshops internationally. She is also an executive coach and founder of Appropriate Response, a company dedicated to bringing the principles of Buddhism into the workplace.

I wanted to offer some reflections on this peculiar phenomenon of being human. Have you noticed how odd it is, really? You may know that the Chinese character for human being is a stick figure. It is described as we humans being literally stretched between heaven and earth—stretched perhaps between the vast infinite possibility of our potential and the earthy animal in us. So here we are.

Last week I had the interesting experience of witnessing both sides of that humanness. I spent an evening at the California Academy of Sciences. They have an open evening Thursday nights and it's kind of a big party. I highly recommend you check it out if you have not. In addition to the albino alligator, the South African penguins, and many varieties of snakes and fish, there was this incredible display of humans. I went up to the roof, and on the way down stopped on the second floor and just stood for a long time at the balcony, looking over the rail at the parade—of us.

At some point, I walked by what looked like just a piece of paper on the wall. It was inside of a case so clearly it was an important piece of paper, but at first pass, it looked like just a piece of paper with a bunch of holes in it. The second time I walked by, I went up and looked more closely, and it was a page on which there were impaled no-longer-living ladybugs. I learned later they're actually called ladybirds. This was a display to demonstrate diversity, because at first pass you only see spots on the page, but looking more closely you see all of these bugs, every one different. Each one was unique. A great sign to the side of the ladybird display said, if you want to see diversity, just look around. So there it was: this evening and this celebration of our uniqueness and of the vast potential and beauty of being human.

Then over the next week I read the perhaps not surprising discovery that the shootings in Ferguson were not in fact the result of a single human being's error, but due to a pervasive institutional bias. I read also that despite states with now legalized gay marriage, there was push back to not allow gay couples to share the same privileges as non-gay couples. I read about a young woman at school at UCLA who was

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.

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denied, at first, the ability to sit on the leadership of the school council because she might be biased because she was Jewish. And we read about the dearth of women in positions of leadership in business and politics. So there it is: racism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, misogyny.

What are we to make of ourselves, right? The good news is that Buddhism has some very useful things to offer. Like most real spiritual traditions and practices the question of being human and what it means to live a full human life is right at the center. What I am particularly fond of in the Buddhist tradition is that in addition to philosophy, it is also very practical. Buddhism gives us practices to engage in so that we can tilt the needle toward our potential, our big-mindedness, rather than our small-mindedness.

Sometimes in my coaching work I say that it's as if humans are looking at the sky through a straw. Is that the sky we see? Sure it is. But is it the whole sky? No, it's not. What tends to happen is that, especially as we get older, we get more and more attached to our circle of sky. We get kind of comfy in there, you know? The circle of sky that we know is what we know. It's familiar. It's known. The rest of the sky becomes some kind of threatening other. And yet if we pay attention I think all of us feel at some point the pinch of the edges of our own straw of knowing, don't we? We begin to feel that as comfortable as it is, it becomes a kind of prison. It has its limitations. And there's a deep longing in all of us to see, to feel, and to experience a bigger sky.

How do we do that? In Buddhism there's often a description of the practice as having two wings of a bird: the wing of wisdom, and the wing of compassion. Wisdom has to do with clear seeing. Compassion has to do with seeing in a way that's infused with kindness. If we have one without the other, it's a little rough going, right? If we have really clear seeing, but we're not kind, then as true as what we see may be, or as true as what we say is, pretty much nobody wants to hear it. Those sharp truths can just be too much to hear. And yet if we just wade over to the side of compassion, the wing of compassion, then we can be very, very kind but not very skillful. This, I think, is the dilemma that so many people face that we call burnout. Pema Chodron describes a phenomenon she calls "idiot compassion." It's the compassion of running ourselves ragged to try to help without the wisdom to know what it really takes to do that.

Today I want to talk about these same two principles with slightly different language. Sometimes when we use different language we can see things in a different way. Rather than wisdom and compassion, I'd like to talk about mindful awareness, and love. Let's start with mindful awareness. I read recently in the LA Times that "mindfulness" is now officially a buzz word. Yes, a buzz word. Those of us who have practiced for some time will smile at the irony of this. "Mindfulness" is in fact the English translation of the Pali word *sati*, which points to the amazing unique capacity of human beings. We're referred to as *Homo sapiens sapiens*. The double *sapiens* refers to our unique capacity to know that we know. We have this amazing self-reflective awareness.

Yet how many of you learned about that in school? I didn't. I had to haul off to a Zen monastery to get my dose of it. This in fact is one of the benefits of "mindfulness" being a buzz word: the spreading and opening of the way in which mindfulness is now everywhere. It's in schools. It's in hospitals. It's in prisons. It's in work places. This is good.

And yet there can be a downside as well. I like now to use the term "mindful awareness" rather than "mindfulness" because it points to the phenomenon of awareness, which is so important for understanding what we're doing when we practice mindfulness. So what is awareness? I will borrow a story from the late, great David Foster Wallace, from his graduation speech at Kenyon College. He describes these two young fish swimming along in the ocean. They pass an older fish swimming in the opposite direction. As the older fish swims by he nods at the lads and says, "Morning boys, how's the water?" The two young fish nod back and continue to swim along. A little while later one of the young fish looks at the other and says, "What the hell is water?"

Awareness is the water we swim in. Awareness is the gift we are given when we arrive in these strange bodies here on our planet. You can't make awareness happen. Let's try a

little 30 second experiment. Try to not be aware: stop, just stop, being aware. Just knock it off. You can't do it, right? You can't make awareness happen, and you can't make awareness not happen. You can't improve it at all. And you know what? You can't harm it. That's the good news. You can't ever harm it in any way. Awareness is a gift. It's the gift that was already given and it's yours.

In that context, we practice mindfulness. Mindfulness is a subset of awareness; it is a training of our attention. But why would we need to train our attention? Because untrained attention is, as the Buddha described it, monkey mind. It is the mind constantly swinging from future to past, to future to past, planning and worrying and obsessing and so on. It's the mind that keeps you up at night. Sometimes it's described not as monkey mind but as a herd of wild elephants. Ever had that mind?

Mindfulness is training our attention to help us come into the present, into the moment—to actually be here for what's happening so that we can appreciate this peculiar phenomenon of being human. Whether it's pleasant or unpleasant, whether we like it or not, it's hard to really appreciate it when we're not exactly here for it. So in mindfulness we're training ourselves to land, to arrive, to get here.

Now this might be argued, but I would say in terms of resolving or deepening or understanding or coming to terms with this odd phenomenon of being human, mindfulness is not enough. This may be blasphemy because I'm a Buddhist teacher, but mindfulness needs to be balanced as wisdom with compassion, with love. The quality of attention we bring is as important as the attention we bring. How we pay attention is important. We can pay attention in a very judging way, a cutting way—or not.

I think we're kind of mixed up about love. What I mean by love is that love is exactly how awareness expresses itself. That's the punchline. Love is the active functioning of the clear seeing of our wisdom. Ajahn Sumedho said, "Love is wisdom's natural radiance." It's the expression of something. In America we've managed to reduce love to just romantic love, and worse than that, to hearts and flowers and Hallmark cards—to some version of being nice. That is not love. I don't mean love even as a feeling or emotion, but as a force.

Love as I said is awareness expressing itself. The Greeks, you may know, had many words for love, just as the Eskimos have many words for snow. When we pay close attention to something, we can begin to appreciate the diversity of what we see. We stop lumping everything under one word, and we begin to see a bunch of different dimensions. The Greeks had *eros*, romantic love, but they also had love of friendship, and love of family. They had the kind of love that's not about falling in love, but the love that matures and deepens over time. They also had *agape*, which is spiritual or universal love, the love of the world of humanity.

I think if we look under all of those different definitions of love, past the arising and passing, the fluid feelings that come and go, what we see underneath is this pull, this force. Love is a kind of magnetism. It draws us to things. But here's the secret: love is never in the object. This is one of the ways we get so mixed up. It's not out there, we know that. We may still think though that love is inside us. What I would propose instead is that love is the force, the pull. It's the magnetism in between. It's what joins us together, the fabric of inter-connectivity. In Buddhist language, it is the truth of our interconnectedness.

In Buddhism, of course, we also have different words for love. We have the traditional teaching of the Brahma Viharas, of the boundless qualities of the heart. We say "heart" to understand that heart and mind are actually one thing in Buddhist teaching - they aren't so delineated as they are in English. There is *Metta*, or loving kindness, which is the

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basic openness and warmth of the heart, and the quality of compassion. There is *Karuna*, which is when the open heart meets suffering and difficulty - the natural spontaneous arising of compassion. And *Mudita*, joy or selfless joy - this is when an open heart meets something wonderful and delightful. And *Upekkha*, the wise quality of the heart, the quality of balance and stability, of staying power. And so we have different kinds of love, and again, if we look underneath we begin to discover this powerful force, which is what I'm really proposing love is.

When I was a young Zen student in my first weeks of practice, I had an encounter with a teacher that implanted the seeds for some of what I'm sharing with you now. The

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teacher's name was Kobun Chino Roshi. He was a Japanese priest who came over in the 60s to support Suzuki Roshi, the founder of San Francisco Zen Center, and he gave a talk there one evening. I always laugh at myself because I remember saying to my friends, "Oh, I'm going to hear a talk from this guy, Cappuccino Roshi." It was unintentional irreverence on my part. What I remember is that he came into the mediation hall at the Zen Center in the city, and I don't actually remember anything he said. But I remember him. It was the first time that I was deeply imprinted by someone with so much of what I would now call presence. And the way that he moved through the room and sat...

After his talk, there was a little tea. A bunch of people gathered in the back end of the dining hall at the Zen Center and Kobun came in, and he sat himself down and adjusted his robes, and there was this beautiful tea set on the table in front of him. He very slowly poured himself a cup of tea, and he took a sip, and he put the cup down and looked out at the audience and said, "Any questions?" My hand shot up. I was too young in my practice to know that was kind of an uncool thing to do. You're not really supposed to ask questions, and you're especially not supposed to ask them with enthusiasm, but I didn't know that yet. I said to him, "What is the Dharma?" Everyone laughed because that's like asking, "What is reality?" or, "What is the truth?" So everybody laughed. He laughed too, and said "I don't know." And then I said "No really. I'm new here and I don't know. I keep hearing this word and I don't know what it means."

He paused for a moment, and he sat, and then did this beautiful thing where he would sort of push his mouth together as he was thinking. He sat there thinking for a little while, and it got very quiet in the room. Then he leaned over—I'll never forget this—he leaned over, and he picked up the teapot and he said, "The Dharma is what holds this teapot together." I had no idea what he was talking about, but something touched me. Something in me understood that he was pointing to something very real and true.

Almost 30 years later, that story is still in me, and I'm sharing it with you. Because that force he was pointing to, that something that holds us together and connects us all, that web of connectivity that we share as human beings, is what I'm now calling love.

Sometimes the web of connectivity may feel a little fragile, certainly with some of the ongoing disasters we hear about daily for our planet. It feels a little fragile, but I think that love is an incredibly strong force. We think that the need to survive is at our core, and yet all of us have heard stories about the strength of a mother lifting a car off her trapped child. A friend told me about a guy who fell onto the subway tracks in New York, because he

was epileptic. He was between the tracks, and he was thrashing. As a train came, a man standing on the platform jumped down and laid his body over this man, so that he wouldn't be flapping and flailing, and that allowed the train to pass over the two of them. He flattened himself. Now if survival was our greatest source of inner strength, our strongest pull, that would never happen. I read this beautiful quote from the late, great Maya Angelou. She said, "Love recognizes no barriers. It jumps hurdles, leaps fences, and arrives at its destination full of hope."

If there's anything we need in our world today, in this odd phenomenon of being human, it is hope. All of us odd humans, I think, need to find a way to come into our own presence, to land in the moment, to get here, and to tap into the vast capacity of awareness. We need to express our unique song, our unique way of expressing our love—the love that is the expression of our awareness. If ever there was a time it was true, our planet, our tender aching world, needs us. It needs all of us to express our love, to sing our song.

Thank you for letting me share some words—my song — this morning.

QUESTION

I enjoyed your story about being a new practitioner and asking the Zen master about the meaning of Dharma. How would you now answer that question?

ANSWER

What is the Dharma? Dharma is the relationship between what Zen language would call form and emptiness. In my language I would say love and awareness. It's the interplay, the dance, the perpetual unfolding of that relationship as our life. That would be my answer.

QUESTION

I loved your story about the old fish. I realized the joy of knowing that you are in the water—it's great to be here.

ANSWER

Yes, yes, we can take refuge in awareness, and awareness can be aware of anything. It can be aware of the worst crap unfolding on the planet, and it can be aware of the most sublime states of consciousness. But the awareness, as I said, is a gift. It's here, it's ours. It's beautiful. It can't be harmed in any way. And when we start to see that, there is tremendous joy. It's not the go out and party, yippee-yi-yo-ki-yay kind of joy. It's a deep, rich kind of joy that can bring a sense of delight and wonder, even in the midst of difficulty. And absolutely we will all have our share of difficulty—we already have, our planet continues to have. Without that awareness, without knowing of that awareness, and without knowing of that power of love, boy it's hard isn't it? I have a teacher who said there are a few things that we know. We know that we're here for a short time, and we know that we're here together. And that is awareness and love.

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QUESTION

You mentioned hope, and often in the Buddhist context I see hope referred to as an obstacle or a kind of delusion. Could you share what you think is a skillful way of holding hope?

ANSWER

If you read the news it's so easy to be in a state of despair, so I don't mean hope as a kind of fantasy or illusion, or clinging to a pipe dream of how it's all going to work out. A colleague talks about how we're in a constant state of imagining there's this island where it all works out, and this causes so much suffering because we end up not being here. We're doing all of what we're doing so we can get to the island, and actually there is no island. So that's a kind of false hope. What I mean by hope is to really take the edge off potential despair; to hold the possibility that we can grow and learn as a species. As much as we read about all of the difficult things, there are also wonderful things. We don't want to cling to hope as some future event, we want to bring hope into our life as a willingness to open our eyes to see what's possible. More like that. ■

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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 12pm. Everyone is then welcome to stay and socialize over refreshments till approximately 12:30pm, 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.

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.

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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

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

September 6 Open Discussion

September 13 Heather Sundberg

Heather Sundberg began teaching meditation in 1999. Beginning her own meditation practice in her late teens, for more than twenty years, Heather has studied with senior teachers in the Insight Meditation and Tibetan traditions, and has sat one-three months of retreat a year for the last fifteen-plus years. She has completed the four-year Spirit Rock/ Insight Meditation Society Teacher Training. She is a teacher for Mountain Stream Meditation Center in the Sierra Foothills, and also teaches classes, day-long and retreats nationally, especially at Spirit Rock Meditation Center. For more information, visit www.heathersundberg.com.

September 20 Stuart Sovatsky

Stuart Sovatsky is degreed from CIIS and Princeton. He has lived the “inner marriage” kundalini bhakti tantra for forty years, and chanted Sanskrit benedictions privately for Yanez Drnovsec (chair of Unaligned Nations of the World) and for Sri Sri Ravi Shankar in India. He is author of *Advanced Spiritual Intimacy*, which has been endorsed by Robert Thurman and Ken Wilber. In 1977, he received the only federal grant to bring meditation into a juvenile facility.

September 27 David Richo

Dave Richo, Ph.D, MFT, is a psychologist, teacher, and writer in Santa Barbara and San Francisco who emphasizes Jungian, transpersonal, and spiritual perspectives in his work. He is the author of *How to Be an Adult in Relationships*. For more information, visit www.davericho.com.

October 4 David Lewis

David Lewis has been following the dharma path for forty years and has a degree in comparative religious studies. He attended his first retreat in the Shambhala tradition at the age of seventeen and has been practicing Insight Meditation since moving to San Francisco over twenty-five years ago. David teaches an Insight Meditation course at the Mission Dharma Sangha, has led the Gay Buddhist Fellowship’s fall residential retreat for several years, and facilitates a weekly meditation group for seniors. He is a graduate of Spirit Rock Meditation Center’s Dedicated Practitioners Program.

October 11 Daigan Gaither

Daigan Gaither began Buddhist practice in 1995 in the Vipassana tradition and then began to study Zen in 2003 with Ryushin Paul Haller Roshi. He received Lay Ordination in 2006, when he was given the name Daigan, or “Great Vow.” He received Priest Ordination in July 2011. His work, practice, and free time include many hours devoted to community service in a variety of ways, including his work as one of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence and as a volunteer at Zen Hospice Project. He has spoken nationwide on a variety of issues and has sat on a number of boards and committees that serve community and social justice.

October 18 Laura Burges

Ryuko Laura Burges, a lay entrusted Buddhist teacher in the Soto Zen tradition, lectures and leads retreats at different practice centers in Northern California. A teacher of children for 30 years, she trains other teachers to bring mindfulness practice into the elementary classroom. Laura co-founded the Sangha in Recovery program at Zen Center, and has a particular interest in the intersection of Buddhism and Recovery. She is the abiding teacher at the Lenox House meditation group in Oakland.

October 25 Open Discussion

November 1 Baruch Golden

Baruch Golden is a longtime GBF Member who has been practicing Vipassana meditation since 1998. He completed Spirit Rock’s Community Dharma Leaders program in 2012 and the Buddhist Chaplaincy Training Program with the Sati Center in Redwood City in 2013. He teaches dharma to many sitting groups in the Bay Area. Baruch is a registered nurse and has been doing hospice work for the past 14 years.

November 8 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. 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.

November 15 Frank Ostaseski

Frank Ostaseski is a Buddhist teacher, international lecturer, and a leading voice in contemplative end-of-life care. In 1987, he co-founded the Zen Hospice Project, the first Buddhist hospice in America. In 2004, he created the Metta Institute to provide innovative educational programs and professional trainings that foster compassionate, mindfulness-based care. His groundbreaking work has been widely featured in the media, and in numerous print publications.

November 22 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.

November 29 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, believing in the equality of all that lives.

—GBF Dedication of Merit