What GBF Means To Me

by Mark Picciano

[The following article is the second in an ongoing series. We encourage others to share their perspectives about GBF.
—GBF Newsletter Committee]

There are at least as many opinions about the purpose of GBF as there are participants. I'd like to share some thoughts about GBF, and the name of our group is a convenient structure. I hope these observations stimulate more reflection and discussion about this unique group.

GAY. Why do we need a group with the specific designation of sexual orientation? As a member of a minority group, I feel a special comfort and connection with gay men, and that affinity is strengthened when spirituality is the focus of the organization. Could I pursue my path with a group of people from both sexes, representing the full spectrum of sexual orientation? Sure, but the added dimension of shared sexuality increases the odds of finding people who can appreciate me, and with whom I can develop relationships.

BUDDHIST. I have been meditating for four years, and only recently have begun to apply the label "Buddhist" to myself, and I'm willing to admit I have not completely figured out what it means! Having experienced a very structured religious environment throughout childhood and adolescence, I am leery of organized spirituality. Buddhism appeals to me as a non-theistic path whose hierarchies are concerned with helping people to end suffering rather than promoting political careers.

The loose structure of GBF offers me the opportunity to explore the different Buddhist traditions and meet men who are following those paths. I have not chosen a specific tradition, and may never do so. Maybe that means I am not a true Buddhist, but the message of compassion and wisdom strikes me as profoundly true, and GBF is an access to the world of people following that path. The men I meet through GBF show me how the Buddha's teachings can be integrated into everyday life, and they support my efforts to do the same.

FELLOWSHIP. There is a special camaraderie in GBF, but only if you get involved. I overcame my natural fear of commitment, after attending GBF events for 2 years, and began to volunteer. And after taking that major step, a new level of fellowship/sangha is unfolding.

Thich Nhat Hanh led a day of mindfulness at Spirit Rock last year and he addressed the concern about appropriate community/sangha. He warned against looking for "the perfect sangha" and urged us to work where we are. I intend to stick with GBF, and help it grow to meet the changing needs of our Gay Buddhist Fellowship.

February 18 Workshop to Focus on Gay Buddhism

Once each year the Gay Buddhist Fellowship has sponsored a retreat on Buddhist practice. Our regular meetings each month focus briefly on Buddhism and related topics. What we have not done thus far is to spend a whole day looking at gay Buddhism and the Gay Buddhist Fellowship.

On February 18 we plan to do just that. We have arranged with Sangha House, located near UC-Berkeley, to use their space for a one-day workshop where we will explore issues dealing with our practice, our community, our experiences in everyday life, and developing a vision for the GBF.

Sangha House was, until recently, a Korean Zen Center but is now a group residence. There is a tremendous feeling of peace and tranquility in the large space on the first floor of Sangha House that lends itself to a creative discussion of who we are and where we are going. This program is being planned by a committee of GBF and will be described in greater detail in next month's newsletter. Enrollment will be limited since the space accommodates approximately 35-40 people. The cost for the workshop, including lunch, is $10.00.

To those of you who live outside the Bay Area and who have been unable to attend the Sunday morning meetings, we urge you to consider attending this special workshop and making a weekend of it in the Bay Area. For a successful workshop, we

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LOCAL DHARMA
January, 1995

ONGOING EVENTS

Sundays Dharmadhatu Introductory Open House. Dharmadhatu is dedicated to promoting an uplifting environment for students to practice meditation and to study Dharma, as taught by Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche. Intended for new students and visitors. Features various local speakers. Meditation instruction available. 9-noon. Free-of-charge. BDSC

Sundays Shambhala Community Practice Day. Includes open house, sitting practice session, and Shambhala practice session. Meditation instruction is available during all practice sessions. SFSDC
San Francisco Schedule:
Open House. 9:30-12 noon.
Shambhala Practice. 9-12 noon; 1:30-4:30 pm.
Sitting Practice. 9:30-12 noon.

Sundays Sunday Morning Kunti Nye. Each session of this drop-in class introduces several practices for exploring a specific experiential theme, using the gentle movement exercises of Kunti Nye. Experienced and beginning students welcome. 10 am-1 pm. $10 per session. NI

Sundays Sunday Evening Practice and Dharma Talk. Nyingma Institute welcomes visitors, students, and friends to join in a public meditation and talk every Sunday. Meditation and chanting at 5 pm; Dharma talk at 6 pm. Free. NI

Sundays Weekly Vipassana Sitting with Eugene Cash. 45-minute silent meditation followed by discussion. 7-9 pm.

Tuesdays Guided Meditation on the Lamrim. Lamrim, the Graduated Path to Enlightenment, is one of the most profound teachings of the Gelugpa Tradition. The Lamrim presents a concise view of the entire Buddhist path, and is a timeless source of inspiration. Appropriate for experienced and new students of Buddhist philosophy. 7 pm. TCL

Tuesdays Weekly Vipassana Sitting with Howard Cohn. SF. 7.30-9:30 pm.

Fridays Healing Circle Berkeley. Berkeley Fellowship of Unitarian Universalists, corner of Cedar & Bonita, Fireside Room, 2nd floor, Berkeley. 7:30 pm. By donation. HBC

Thursday Weekly Vipassana Sitting with James Baraz. Albany United Methodist Church, 980 Stannage (at Marin), 2 blocks up from San Pablo, Berkeley. 7:30-9:30 pm. Call 510/525-7546.

Zen Center Classes. The Zen Center organizes the study of Buddhism into a Five Root curriculum:
I: Life of the Buddha and Early Texts
II: Buddhist Psychology
III: Buddhist Wisdom
IV: Ethics and Compassion:
Jan 8 - Feb 12 (Sun. mornings)
V: Zen: Jan 8 - Feb 12 (Sun. am)
Jan 9-Feb 13 (Mon. evens)
Jan 10-Feb 14 (Tues. evens)

New students should begin with the introductory class, "The Life of the Buddha." Class fees are $30 members/$40 non-members. Study Session V begins 23 Dec. 1994. Call for details. GGF

SPECIAL EVENTS

4 Jan. Medicine Buddha Healing Meditation. 7 pm. TCL

7 Jan. Meditation and Inquiry. One-day vipassana sitting with Howard Cohn. 9am-5pm. $20. Contact Code HCF1. SR

11 Jan. Praises to 21 Taras with Lama Chopra. Tsog. 7 pm. TCL

14 Jan. One-Day Sesshins. 5am-6pm. $30 non-members; $25 members. GGF

15 Jan. Day of Metta Practice with Sylvia Boorstein. 10am-5pm. $20. Contact Code SB1. SR

20-23 Jan. Nature of Mind. Ven. Robina Courtin, a fully ordained nun in the Tibetan tradition, leads these sessions. Suggested donation: $10 per session; $25 for all sessions. Friday, 7-9pm; Sat., Sun., 10am-1pm. TCL

26 Jan. Vajrayogini Self Initiation. 7 pm. Call for information. TCL


Feb. 2-4. An Exploration into Emptiness with the Ven. Thubten Pende. Feb 2-3, 7-9pm; Feb 4, 10am-1pm. $10 per session; $25 entire program. TCL
Maintaining a Balance in One's Life

by Bob Hass

The last step of the Eightfold Path is right meditation. Meditation rests at the heart of Buddhism, but it is not simply what we do when we are sitting on a zafu.

In a wonderfully concise publication titled American Buddhism (Chicago: Dharma House, 1976), Gyomay M. Kubose describes meditation as a serenity that enables us to see clearly the truth about life and all things. It reminds me of Thich Nhat Hanh's talks on mindfulness. Mindfulness, he explains, enables us to understand the people and circumstances we encounter daily by calming our minds and viewing others with loving kindness.

Since Buddhism teaches us that quietude is essential to our lives, meditation and mindfulness become powerful practices that help keep us centered. They slow us down in a society where technological "advances" speed up our lives and bombard us with information. They help us to set priorities and regain perspective on our lives. And they remind us to stop and smell the flowers.

Wes Nisker, co-editor of Inquiring Mind magazine, recently addressed the issue of technology from a Buddhist perspective in his column, "The Dharma and The Drama" (Fall 1994, p. 42). (Nisker is also the author of a new book published by Ten Speed Press titled, If You Don't Like the News, Go Out and Make Some of Your Own.) He wrote, in part:

"One story making a lot of news lately is the new information superhighway. And although many people are talking about it, nobody seems to be asking the essential questions: Do we really need another highway? And, do we really need more information? One piece of information I read claims we will soon be able to receive 30,000 times more information just over our telephone. But who in the world could absorb 30,000 times more information?

"I defy anyone to absorb even 100 times more. There just isn't enough room in the "in."...Do we really want to do our shopping by TV? Do we need to have access to every fact ever known? Too much "info-tainment" crowds common sense out of the mind, and wisdom out of the soul. Too much imagery makes us jumpy and nervous and basically dissatisfied.

"Instead of an information superhighway, maybe we should build more rest stops on the information highway we're already on. Let people pull over and check out a reality that is not virtual. See trees in their natural habitat."

As someone who works in the field of education, I am well aware of the positive contributions that an information superhighway such as the Internet is having on teaching and learning. But it is also true that as Americans, we are becoming a nation addicted to technology. I would venture to go even further, and claim that technology is robbing us of our soulfulness, our spontaneity, our ability to communicate and to experience beauty—in short, our humanity.

Look at everything we have to distract us. There are computers and computer bulletin boards, a seemingly endless stream of computer software, CD-ROMs and video games, VCRs, laser disks, CD players, tape decks, stereo systems, cable TV, cellular phones, boom boxes, voice mail, faxes, e-mail, and answering machines. Gasp. Have I forgotten anything?

While some of these devices are convenient, and others entertaining, it is easy for them to occupy a large

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Workshop

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need both veteran and new practitioners.

To reserve a place on February 18, please send in a check for $10.00 payable to GBF to: GBF, 2261 Market Street #422, San Francisco, CA 94114. Be sure to write on the check that it is for the February 18 workshop. If you have any questions, call the GBF information line at 415/974-9878 and leave a message. This will be a wonderful opportunity to get to know each other better. ☺
Practice or Ordinary Life: Is There a Difference?

by Alan Oliver

What is your practice? It is a question that is asked frequently in Buddhist circles. Implied in that question are others about which discipline you follow, whether you have a teacher, and whether you practice at a center or monastery or alone. These questions can come with judgments tagging along behind them, such as it is better to have one discipline and stick with it; you are better off with a teacher; a traditional Asian-based discipline is better or more authentic; and if you are really serious you should live in a monastery at least for awhile.

These questions and others spill over into our "GBF practice" and prompt questions in many of our minds about how serious or necessary is GBF, and whether working within GBF is, itself, a form of Buddhist practice. If it is, what insights can come from examining that question? I am currently reading a remarkable book which, among its many provocative comments, says something very pertinent about this issue.

The book is *Breakfast at the Victory: The Mysticism of Ordinary Experience* by James P. Carse. He is the director of religious studies at New York University. In each of the short chapters, he starts with an ordinary experience from his life. Some of these are moving, and all are vivid. He then guides the reader over some very profound terrain. In effect, he asks the reader to jump off a conceptual cliff, and I did! At the end of each chapter, I find myself immersed in a mystical moment that leaves me with a sense of wonder. Following is a quote from the book that looks at the question of seeking a special path or living mindfully day to day.

"The danger, then, is that we can become so preoccupied with the path that we do not go anywhere on it while all around us life goes on its way. Eckhart concludes his warning by remarking that, 'Whoever seeks God without any special Way, finds HIM as he really is...and He is life itself.' But how can we seek God without having a special way to do it?"

"This brings us to a paradox compact as stone: Without a spiritual discipline we go nowhere, but a discipline intentionally followed may lead us only to the practice of the discipline."

"It may be that the key to this paradox lies in Eckhart's stark claim that what we are to seek is 'life itself.' If the disciplined life is something other than ordinary life, is it possible there is a discipline already hidden in the ordinary? Have we always been on our way toward being who we are before we were—without knowing it? Are we mystics before we try to be mystics, even before we know anything of mysticism?"

"It is not unusual in Buddhism to find yourself faced with a paradox such as this. The crux of the paradox lies in the second paragraph quoted above. We can't uncover our enlightenment without a spiritual path or discipline. Each of us has to be the judge of the mix we want and need. It certainly changes for many over time, and as a result of life experiences. But it was good to find someone who is teaching profound things, yet approaching it from ordinary life experiences."

Which brings me back to GBF. The discipline involved in building a gay Buddhist sangha is not so obvious and not as focused as the carefully structured disciplines from Asian Buddhism, but I have experienced very important moments during the "ordinary" meetings of our sangha. This book gives me the incentive to look deeper and apply basic Buddhist insights to the ordinary moments wherever I am and, at the same time, to continue to learn from established disciplines. *Breakfast At The Victory* has made me more aware of "ordinary moment" zazen and its presence in our gay Buddhist community. Best wishes for many "ordinary moments" in 1995.

GBF Treasurer Al Chase reports that as of December 15, the recent fundraising letter resulted in contributions of nearly $2,000. After expenditures for postage, copying, and related expenses, the GBF coffers now contain over $1,800. This money will be used for activities such as the February workshop, future retreats, and contributions to Zen Hospice, Buddhist AIDS Project, and the monthly dinner at the Hamilton Family Shelter.

Look for future articles in the newsletter about these programs. Thanks to all contributors, and remember, your efforts in building the sangha are as important as your monetary contributions.

Fundraising Appeal Yields Generous Response

What's Up Out There?

Once in a while we hear about a newly-formed gay and/or lesbian Buddhist group out there somewhere. Most recently, we have learned of a new group in San Diego. We also know there are groups in Los Angeles, Seattle, Washington, D.C., and New York City.

The Gay Buddhist Fellowship of San Francisco would like to hear from other groups about what form your practice takes, and how you are creating a gay/lesbian Buddhist community. Individuals are also welcome to respond. There is much we can learn from each other's efforts. So, when you have time, please drop us a line.
Mindfulness is Not a Part-Time Job

Dharma Talk by Issan Dorsey-roshi

Someone said to me the other day, “Aren’t you always working on something?” Yes, we’re always working on something, but hopefully it’s not up here in our heads, filled with words to obscure it. I was talking with a friend recently about the phrase, “coming to reside in your breath-mind,” and working with the phrase, and how useful it is to me. I thought it was interesting that I’d never really heard it before, and was just now beginning to work with it. I realized that I actually just heard it deeply.

This has been with me since I first started practicing. It’s a whole way of working with your mind—and I’ve been thinking a lot about that lately. I hope you won’t have to wait for 20 years before you begin to hear how to work with this thing called mind in zazen (meditation).

Now, people who come to practice immediately sit much easier than they did when I first began to sit at Sōkoji Temple years ago. I remember everybody sitting with their legs bent up. They’d sit for five minutes, then they’d lie down and moan. But now people come and it’s like we already did that part for them. It’s as if we have a shared body that has already gone through that preliminary stuff, and people are already able to experience some aspect of zazen practice and how we practice together.

We have to be willing to explore and experiment. First we have to have a sense of humor and a willingness to explore and experiment with our lives and our uncomfortableness. We know that sometimes we can sit for a few minutes, or even a few days, but at some point it gets pretty uncomfortable; and it’s uncomfortable for us not to invite our thoughts to tea, and to reside in our breath-mind.

“Don’t invite your thoughts to tea” is an expression of Suzuki-roshi’s which I’ve always found useful. You know, these are just words, and we have to remember that every human concept is just delusion. Still, we use words and provisionally talk about our experience. Lately, I have been exploring this way of thinking with a friend who has AIDS dementia; the virus is living in his brain. I’m thinking and working on it and talking with him about it because the virus that is attacking many of us now ends up being in the brain. So is there some way for us to experience that? I don’t know yet. My question is: how to be with people who have dementia and how to experience the dementia that we all have now anyway? It’s called delusion. Mind is always creating confusion, joy and pain, like and don’t like, and depression. But there is also a “background mind.” This is what my friend and I have been discussing together.

Sometimes when I’m talking about uncomfortableness, I talk about the five fears. One of the five fears is the fear of unusual states of mind. How do we come to have appreciation and respect for this fear and not just some resistance, so that we can enter our fear, allowing these new areas of uncomfortableness? When we can enter each of these new spaces, we can begin to look at truthfulness.

Why do we have to sit? Really there’s no reason to sit. If we’re completely sincere, then there’s no reason to sit. I’m not completely sincere so I have to keep sitting to check. Even if we’re involved with unskillful actions, the one quality we should strive for is truthfulness. Truthfulness takes a total commitment to see all aspects of ourselves and our unskillfulness. If we can embrace the totality of ourselves, we can embrace the totality of others and of the world. Our tendency is to think about things before we do them. Even when we see a flower we say, “Oh, what a beautiful flower.” “Beautiful flower” is extra. Just look at the flower with no trace.

Suzuki-roshi wrote, “When we practice zazen, our mind is calm and quite simple. But usually our mind is very busy and complicated, and it is difficult to be concentrating on what we are doing.” This is because when we act, we think, and this thinking leaves some trace. Our activity is shadowed by some preconceived idea. The traces and notions make our mind very complicated. When we do something with a simple, clear mind, we have no shadows and our activity is strong and straightforward.

So, even with zazen practice, it gets so complicated. We’re dissecting every aspect of what’s going on, reviewing and comparing. How do we keep it simple and straightforward? How do we come to know this basic truth of practice and Buddhism? The teaching and the rules can and should change according to the situation and the people we’re practicing with, but the secret of practice cannot be changed. It’s always truth.

We teach ourselves and encourage ourselves by creating this space (the meditation hall) so we can begin looking at our mind. “Don’t invite your thoughts to tea.” “Where is our breath-mind?” “How do you create background mind?” I used to say: allow this kind of mind to arise. But now I’m saying: create background mind.

This practice is simple: watch your breath and don’t invite your thoughts to tea. But not inviting your thoughts to tea doesn’t mean to get rid of thinking. That is discrimination. So, there’s no reason to get rid of thoughts, but rather to have some blank, non-interfering relationship with them. Don’t make your mind blank, but rather, have some blank relationship with the thoughts. Begin to see the space behind and around the thoughts, and shift the seat of your identity out of your thoughts and come to reside in your breath-mind. We develop our intention to reside in our breath-mind by first bringing our attention to “breath as mind,” and then by shifting the seat of our identity from our thoughts to our breath.

This all ties in with how we use this space, this laboratory. We should have a willingness to explore with our lives, and this is our laboratory right here—how we use the meditation hall and how we use what happens outside of it. Mindfulness is not a part-time job.

Issan Dorsey-roshi, an openly gay man, was a Soto Zen monk and teacher in the lineage of Shunryu Suzuki-roshi. He was the first Abbot of Issanji Temple in the Castro district, founded Maitri Hospice, and died of AIDS in 1990.
Balance
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portion of our work and leisure time. If we are not careful, it is easy for
them to take over. Too much time playing with technological gadgets
tends to rev us up, clutter our minds, and dull our emotions. When this hap-
pens, we work against all we do to calm our minds through Buddhist
practice.

I'll never forget a solstice party I attended a few years ago. When I ar-
rived, it seemed like it was going to turn into a warm, intimate gathering.
Then the host turned on his computer, which was located in the living room.

For the remainder of the evening most of the guests crowded around the
terminal while he played with a new software program he had purchased.

As Thich Nhat Hanh writes in The Miracle of Mindfulness, the goal of medita-
tion is not merely relaxation. That is only the point of departure. A tranquil
heart and clear mind are additional goals along the path. By maintaining a sense
of balance in our lives, it is possible to live in a highly technological world and
still hold onto our true nature. ♡