GBF Sponsors Day of Meditation and Mindfulness

GBF will sponsor a silent, one-day sitting on Saturday, May 20, 1995, at Sangha House, 1800 Arch Street, in Berkeley, from 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. The schedule will include sitting and walking meditation, and some brief dharma readings. Please bring a meditation cushion or bench and a bag lunch. Tea will be provided. Space is limited.

To register, please mail a check for $10 payable to GBF to: GBF Sitting, 2261 Market Street #422, San Francisco, CA 94114. Include your name, address, and telephone number.

If you have any questions about the sitting, call the GBF voicemail line at 415/974-9878. Leave your name and number, and someone will return your call.

Another Earnest Experiment in Sangha

With an eye toward strengthening the ties of our spiritual community, I would like to explore the idea of GBF members sharing a monthly potluck dinner. This would not be anything elaborate, just an informal potluck once a month at a member’s home.

I’ve tentatively selected May 27 as the first trial dinner. If there’s enough interest in this idea, we can plan for future events. For more information, call Clint Seiter.
# The Local Dharma

**May 1995**

[Note: Sometimes schedules change, so we recommend you call to confirm events.]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ongoing Events</th>
<th>Special Events</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sundays</strong> Introductory Open House. Meditation and study according to Tibetan Buddhist traditions, as taught by Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche. 9-noon. Free. Meditation instruction available. BSC</td>
<td>6 May Sitting with Ed Brown. 5 periods of zazen, outdoor walking meditation, yoga, talks and discussion. 9 am-5 pm. $20 non-members/$15 members. GGF</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Sundays</strong> Community Practice Day. Open house, sitting practice session, Shambhala practice session, and talk. Meditation instruction available. SFSC</td>
<td>20 May Men’s Day Robert Hail and Wes Nisker lead this day of traditional Vipassana practice with special attention to the spirit of our lives as men. 9:30 am-5 pm. $30 includes lunch, contact code MEN. SR</td>
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<td><strong>Sundays</strong> Weekly Vipassana Sitting with Eugene Cash. 45-minute silent meditation followed by discussion. 2150 Lyon St., SF. Call 79-4879, 7-9 pm.</td>
<td>21 May Monastic Daylong Ajahn Sumedho, the abbot of Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, leads this day of teachings, sitting, walking, and dharma talk. 9 am-5 pm, by donation. Bring lunch and something to share with the monks.</td>
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<td><strong>Mondays-Saturdays</strong> Meditation and Services, 5-7 am. Zazen/Evening Service, 6 pm. Zazen instruction at 5 pm on Mondays. HSZC</td>
<td>28 May-2 June Five-Day Sesshin led by Abbot Zoketsu Norman Fischer, this is a traditional Soto zen meditation retreat. Orientation begins at 3 pm on 28 May. $150 non-members/ $125 members, registration deadline 23 May. GGF</td>
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<td><strong>Tuesdays</strong> Sitting, 7-8pm. BSC</td>
<td>28 May Vipassana Daylong Ajahn Jumnien leads this day of meditation. 9 am-5 pm. $25. Call for contact code. SR</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Tuesdays</strong> Weekly Vipassana Sitting with Howard Cohn. 675 Dolores St. (at 20th St.), SF, 7:30-9:30 pm.</td>
<td>29 May-3 June Five-Day Sesshin led by Abbot Zoketsu Norman Fischer, this is a traditional Soto zen meditation retreat. Orientation begins at 3 pm on 28 May. $150 non-members/ $125 members, registration deadline 23 May. GGF</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Wednesdays</strong> Shambhala Sitting Practice, 7-8pm. BSC</td>
<td>29 May-3 June Five-Day Sesshin led by Abbot Zoketsu Norman Fischer, this is a traditional Soto zen meditation retreat. Orientation begins at 3 pm on 28 May. $150 non-members/ $125 members, registration deadline 23 May. GGF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Thursdays</strong> 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.</td>
<td><strong>Thursdays</strong> Sitting, 7-8pm. BSC</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Saturdays</strong> Zazen &amp; Dharma Talk, 9 am. HSZ</td>
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Do you want a Dharma center's events listed here? Send a note with information on special events, or better yet, arrange for their mailings to be sent regularly to Ron Ginsberg, 2215 R Market Street, Box 230, San Francisco, CA 94114.
Reader Comments on Aging and Death

Compiled by Ron Ginsberg

“Aging is a reminder of impermanence and an invitation in practice to seek that which is not born and does not die.”

“I am 53 and haven’t given much thought to aging. I don’t feel old, exercise, have become vegetarian and given up smoking and drinking. My mind is stable and aware of change, and age doesn’t seem to fit anymore. It is not my focus—irrelevant. I focus on the dharma and change.”

“My apprehension and fear of aging show me how little I understand about impermanence and the illusion of control.”

“Aging sucks.”

“I don’t have time to think about a satisfactory answer to this question.”

“Aging is an opportunity to experience very personally the Buddha’s first two Noble Truths. It is also an invitation to commence on the path that leads to the end of the suffering that aging brings.”

“Aging is one of the major experiences in life that we all have to go through. It is a process that we can strive to be aware of moment to moment as it is happening to us, the net result being a growth of maturity and eventual wisdom.

Or if we go through life in a closed and ignorant state, all that we will experience will merely be a physical process and a fearful one at that. So the key to the aging process is to be as totally aware as possible, and a good way for this to happen is to be mindful of our breathing. For it is the breathing process that connects us to the body-mind state.”

“As I grow older and realize at 66 years of age that I have far fewer years ahead of me than I did at age 30 or 40, time grows more precious, but so do people—strangers as well as friends.

Life seems more precious in whatever form it may appear. I’m more conscious, too, of the beauty of the natural world—plants, trees, and flowers. As you become older, you (I, at least) no longer take life for granted. This helps me to live more in the present.

At times I have negative thoughts, like why does my body have to slow down, or why couldn’t I have been more successful in the world’s eyes, such as having more material goods. To subdue these negative thoughts, I find meditation to be very helpful, and I do more of that now.”

Thich Nhat Hanh to Visit Northern California

Three events have been planned for Thich Nhat Hanh’s visit to northern California this fall. There will be a five-day retreat at Camp Swig in the Santa Cruz mountains on September 18-22, a Day of Mindfulness at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre on September 23, and a dharma talk at the Berkeley Community Theater on September 26.

To register, please send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to Community of Mindful Living, P.O. Box 7355, Berkeley, CA 94707.

Pre-Registration now Required at Spirit Rock Daylong Retreats

Now that lunch is being served at many of the daylong retreats held at Spirit Rock Meditation Center, staff need to know how many people will be attending. This will prevent wasting food and not having enough food for participants.

Beginning July 1, most daylongs will cost $30, and will include lunch only for those who have pre-registered in advance with a check that is either postmarked the Monday before an event, or received in the Spirit Rock office the Wednesday before the event. Registrants will receive a postcard confirmation that is also your ticket for lunch.

Macintosh Owner, Layout Persons Needed

Do you own a laser printer and Macintosh computer that you could make available to the newsletter committee one day a month? Or are you experienced in using Page-Maker, and would enjoy helping with layout? If so, please contact Bob Hass.

Contributors

Thanks to the following people who helped with this issue of the CMB Newsletter: Alan Oliver, Bob Hass, Clint Seiter, David Sunseri, John Krowka, Mark Picciano, Maurice Dockrell, and Ron Ginsberg.
Letters

GBF Workshop:

Dear Brothers,

I am responding to the request in the newsletter for comments on the GBF workshop in Berkeley. I wish I could have been at the workshop and participated in the full discussion. From the summary in the newsletter, I would say that the most important thing to watch would be the preservation of roots. By this, I mean first of all our Buddhist roots, and secondly our gay roots.

The history of Buddhism shows that whenever it meets a new culture it changes it but is also changed by it. In the U.S. there is the danger of hyper-individualism and the development of rootless fads. If this happens to Buddhism, we can no longer be certain that we have maintained contact with the ancient tradition, which has been shown to be effective in reducing suffering. Such contact, through authenticated teaching lineages, is essential.

But it is also necessary, of course, to recognize what the newsletter calls the “gay window.” There needs to be discussion on the vexed topic of gay spirituality. (I am one of those who believes that there is a gay spirituality.) For instance, GBF members might participate in Fairy gatherings and ask themselves how they feel as Buddhists when they do that. I have written a little on the positive and negative values of the Fairy vision to Buddhism, and would be glad to share my thoughts with you.

At the moment, the notion of GBF being a “bridge,” as the Seattle group says, between gays and established Buddhist groups, seems to me to be the safest and most productive way to go. At some time in the future there may arise a teacher of the status of Issan Dorsey who would not only found a center, but would also start a new, authentically Buddhist and authentically gay lineage. Until then, I would be more comfortable staying on the bridge. In regard to this, the listing of The Local Dharma in the newsletter is very valuable.

Of the other suggestions in the summary report, I would pick out GBF participation in the Gay Pride Parade as an important activity, not only for publicity, but also to encourage the feeling on the part of both members and non-members that GBF is truly a part of the San Francisco gay community.

I get back to San Francisco as often as I can, and I hope I will be able to see some of you on my visits.

In Dharma,

Roger Corless

[Roger Corless is a professor of Buddhist Studies at Duke University. A specialist in Pure Land Buddhism and a pioneer in the field of Buddhist-Christian Studies, he has taken refuge in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, but continues to attend Catholic Mass. He has no idea what this means, but is sure it is important.


Hamilton Project Needs Donations

The Hamilton Family Center is a shelter for homeless families that provides food and housing for approximately 75 people, half of whom are children. Once every month a group of GBF members prepares a dinner for the residents. This involves planning a menu, buying groceries, cooking the dinner, serving it, and cleaning up afterwards. We have been doing this for eight months now, and the project has been a huge success.

However, in order to continue doing this—and yes, it always comes down to this—we need donations. GBF provides a monthly contribution to the dinners that, while greatly appreciated, covers only a fraction of the costs. The rest comes out of the pockets of the volunteers and various generous donors.

If you would like a chance to help feed the homeless in a project where 100 percent of all donations go directly to the purchase of food, please consider making a contribution. For further information on how you can do this, contact Clint Seiter.

Buddhist AIDS Project

The Buddhist AIDS Project (BAP) is a small group that freely provides referrals to Buddhist resources and events for anyone living with HIV. This includes family, friends, caregivers, and all others who wish to access our services. The free information message line is 415/322-7473. ∩
Cultivating Compassion Workshop

Zen Hospice Project is offering a "Cultivating Compassion Workshop" the weekend of August 4-6, 1995. The workshop explores a mindful approach to caring for those with chronic or life-threatening illness. The workshop offers renewal and a fresh perspective to professionals or individuals caring for friends or family. For more information, please call 415/863-2910. ☕

Fool's Day Hike

On April 1, a group of GBFers trekked out to Point Reyes to check out the wildflowers at Chimney Rock. The sun was out and bright, the sky was clear, the scenery was incredible, the flowers were in full riot, and the wind was blasting at gale-force strength. One of the hikers with a wide-brim straw hat threatened to do a "flying nun" over the Farallons until we stuffed rocks in his pockets to anchor him down. The point of land we were on jutted out for a mile and a half, and we were treated to panoramic views of the Pacific on one side, and Drake's Bay on the other.

After some searching, we found a hillside protected from the wind where we could eat our lunches in comparative calm (and indulge our paranoia about tick bites). Afterwards, we drove inland and took a short hike down Bear Valley Trail. Because of all the recent rains, everything was lush and the creeks were rushing in full force. It was a fun day, and more hikes may be planned in 1995. ☃

Whoops?

Several readers have inquired whether their March 1995 newsletters were missing a whole page of text. Not to worry—you did not miss the article of your life. Actually, one page was intentionally left blank due to the amount of copy we received that month.

However, from a Buddhist perspective, consider for a moment the rich possibilities presented by a blank page. What does "missing something" really mean? On another level, could a blank page represent the emptiness of the universe, or the sound of one hand clapping? Must one first create the space for mindfulness to happen? These are just a few of the thoughts our blank page may have generated, albeit unintentionally. ☕
Buddhist Alliance for Social Engagement Launched

The first full-time program of engaged Buddhism in the U.S. will begin as a pilot project in the San Francisco Bay Area.

The Buddhist Peace Fellowship is initiating a unique project that offers volunteers a six-month to one-year placement in Buddhist or spiritually-based service and social justice organizations. Called the Buddhist Alliance for Social Engagement (BASE), the project echoes similar movements in Asia and Latin America which bring together diverse groups of practitioners and activists who wish to live a simple lifestyle combining meditation, study, and service—all within a larger context of Buddhist training, support, and guidance.

Each volunteer will work 30 hours per week with one of the following organizations: Zen Hospice, Maitri Hospice, Women’s Cancer Resource Center, Daily Bread (food distribution), Bay Area anti-nuclear groups, and the Urban Community Garden Project. The project will operate on dana in much the same way that monastics are supported by the lay community in Asia. Most volunteers must be self-supporting, although a limited number of stipends and residential accommodations are available. All are encouraged to apply regardless of financial situation.

The cornerstone of BASE is a group training and retreat program that includes: 1) weekly meditation/study/discussion on issues of socially engaged Buddhism; 2) monthly retreat days; 3) a five- to ten-day meditation period; and 4) opportunities for dialogue and study with Buddhist activists and mentors such as Maylie Scott, Donald Rothberg, Joanna Macy, and Ken Tanaka.

The training program combines a comprehensive understanding of the roots of socially engaged Buddhism and its current manifestations; general dharma teachings and practice; and applications of Buddhist practice to volunteers’ daily experience of social action.

Each participant will be paired with a “spiritual friend” at the placement site for day-to-day guidance. In addition, a local Buddhist activist works with each of the volunteers as a mentor, providing ongoing spiritual guidance and support.

The jewel of sangha is essential to BASE. Through connections with other volunteers as well as practice at Buddhist centers, participants explore how to live and work cooperatively. Some housing is available at local Buddhist centers and homes. Eventually BASE hopes to open community houses—Buddhist-based centers of social change where participants can live together in voluntary simplicity.

Application forms, job descriptions, financial aid forms, and other information are available upon request from the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, Box 4650, Berkeley, CA 94704. Telephone: 510/525-8596. Fax: 510/525-7973. E-mail: bpf@igc.apc.org.

About the Buddhist Peace Fellowship

The Buddhist Peace Fellowship (BPF) is 16 years old and 3,000 members strong. Its style of open-minded socially engaged Buddhism, its expanding programs in Asia and the United States, and its excellent quarterly journal, Turning Wheel, serve as a beacon for spiritual activists committed to transforming the world and themselves.

Through the BPF, Buddhists of many traditions are invited to explore personal and group responses to political, social, and ecological suffering in the world. BPF members and chapters seek to awaken peace where there is conflict, bring insight into institutionalized ignorance, and offer help in the Buddhist spirit of harmony and loving-kindness.
Why Take the Chants?

[The following article appeared in the Buddhist online computer network, Tyger Team.]

A n online reader asks what the purpose of chanting (and liturgy in general) is within Buddhist practice. The answer to this question depends on which tradition of Buddhism one is talking about. It may even depend on the specific person to whom the question is addressed, for even within a tradition, answers can vary quite a bit.

Always having been the kind of disciple that teachers tend to wish some other teacher had, I have asked this question of several teachers in several traditions over the course of the past three decades. Most of the answers given to me have been versions of one of the following: 1) chanting aids the memory; 2) it cultivates positive emotions; and 3) it reduces self-importance. Let me comment on each of these, in turn.

Chanting aids the memory.

It is much easier to remember a passage that has a rhythmic structure and various euphonic elements. (Ever tried to get a commercial jingle out of your head?) Repeated chanting therefore aids sati, which means not only “mindfulness” but also “memory.”

This answer has been given to me by several Theravada teachers. It seems to follow the spirit of a passage in the Vinaya that forbids monks to chant.

When told by monks that chanting enables them to memorize his teachings, the Buddha allows them to chant, but only as an aid to memory. He warns against styles of chanting that distract attention from the message and make one focus on such incidental details as the beauty of the voice or the melody line. Needless to say, this mnemonic function of chanting tends to be lost, or substantially reduced, if one is chanting words in a language that one does not know.

Chanting cultivates feelings of devotion, piety, and gratitude.

Perhaps it even promotes what Lance Cousins calls sentimentality, which is not always seen as such a dreadful thing. Chinese and Japanese styles of chanting, undoubtedly influenced by Confucian attitudes towards ritual, may also invoke strong feelings of mystery and wonder, of a world beyond our ken to which ritual provides a tiny window.

Certain Shingon or even Zen chanting, when done with great skill, can make your neck hairs bristle in a paradoxical combination of rapture and apprehension. It is pretty hard to deny the realm of spirits while listening to it. In producing feelings of awe and mystery, it probably helps to chant words that are more or less pure sound, to which no significance has been attached. Of course meaning often gets attached anyway, even to these pure sounds, and especially in esoteric traditions, which tend to resist the temptation just to let nonsense remain joyously unexplained.

Many mantras and dharanis began life as utter nonsense. This phenomenon is in some ways not much different from speaking in tongues, except that it is no longer improvised.

I think of chanting some Buddhist formulas, or doing the ritual of koan practice, as being similar to memorizing and repeating the improvised syllables sung by Ella Fitzgerald when she is scat singing. It is the routinization of spontaneity, a kind of simulated freedom of the spirit. Chanting and other rituals require one to leave one’s normal worldly persona behind, and to take on a different character by playing a particular role.

Again, Buddhists influenced by Confucian beliefs concerning ritual have said that one of the values of doing a ritual is that one has no choice in the way that one does it; the ritual is not under the influence of one’s own will and desires. One must submit to it, and to the extent that one successfully submits, one bypasses the sense of “I” and “mine.” Ritual imposes a liberating uniformity on one’s actions, rather similar to the rules of European monastic training.

Anyone who has done some Zen training is aware of how thoroughly every minute of the day is regulated. The way one walks, sits, lies down, speaks, eats, washes, defecates, and sleeps is so completely routinized that there is practically no single event of the day in which one can say, “I am doing things this way because this is how I want to do it.”

Used effectively by someone who understands it, ritual can be a very powerful tool in redesigning one’s character. But like all power tools, if used awkwardly or negligently, it can do quite a bit of damage. And, like anything that is effective, ritual can also have unexpected and undesirable side effects. As with everything else in life, it pays to keep alert to the specific effects a program of rituals is having, and to have the courage to speak up when the effects are negative. No teacher worth following will make a person continue doing rituals that are having harmful effects. No teacher worth following will refuse to ask direct questions about what a ritual is for.

If you would expect a straightforward answer from a physician before taking a drug or getting an operation, then you should expect an equally straightforward answer from a teacher before doing a practice. If you don’t get a good answer, think twice about doing the practice. And think at least once about seeking another teacher.

Richard P. Hayes is a member of the faculty of Religious Studies and an associate in the Department of Philosophy at McGill University in Montreal.