GBF Calendar
Call 415-974-9876 for news about GBF and GBF-sponsored events. To skip the recording and leave a message, press 5.

2 Apr. (Tuesday), Steering Committee Meeting, at the home of John Krowka.

4 Apr., Thursday Sitting, 8 pm, at the home of Edward Sans.

6 Apr., Saturday Sitting (East Bay), 10 am.

11 Apr., Thursday Sitting, potluck begins at 6:30 p.m., sitting starts at 8 pm, at the home of Lee Robbins.

13 Apr. (Sat.), Hike to Chimney Rock and Potluck, Meet at 9:00 a.m. at Zen Hospice, 273 Page St., SF. (Details on page 1.)

14 Apr., Sunday Meeting, 10:30 a.m., 273 Page St., SF. Speaker: Zen Master Tundra Wind will give a dharma talk.

16 Apr. (Tue.), Planning Meeting for Engaged Buddhist Workshop, 7:30 p.m., at the home of Stephan Parid.

18 Apr., Thursday Sitting, 8 p.m., at the home of Mark Marlon.

20 Apr., Saturday Sitting (East Bay), 10 am, at the home of Geoff McNemy.

25 Apr., Thursday Sitting, 8 pm, at the home of Edward Sans.

28 Apr., Sunday Meeting, 10:30 a.m., 273 Page St., SF. Open Discussion. ♦

Tundra Wind to Speak April 14

Tundra Wind, a Zen Master who has taught for the past 12 years in Sonoma County, will be GBF's featured speaker on Sunday, April 14. Tundra is the former Abbot of the Chogyal Zen Center in New York City. He has developed an experimental form of Zen Buddhism that reflects, among other things, his talents as a musician and composer. We welcome him back to GBF. ♦

East Bay Sitting Group Forming

An East Bay sitting group for GBF members will be starting in April. Modeled after GBF's Sunday morning format, we'll be sitting for a half-hour period, followed by social time afterwards.

The group will meet on the first and third Saturdays of the month beginning at 10:00 a.m. at the home of Geoff McNemy in the Glenview district of Oakland. In April, the meeting dates are Saturday, April 6 and 20.

Please arrive a few minutes early so we can start together as a group. Bring your own zafu or sitting cushion.

In This Issue...

This month we are focusing on the meaning of sangha, as viewed through the hearts and minds of a few GBF members. We again invite other members of GBF to send us your thoughts on this topic. As space permits, we will print these contributions also.
The Local Dharma
April-May 1996

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

Special Events

5 Apr. (Fri.) Lama Kunga Rinpoche and Damola Sakya-Three Levels of Spiritual Perception by Deshung Rinpoche. Cost $5. 7 pm, Open Secret Bookstore. 923 C St., San Rafael. 415/457-4191.

12 Apr. (Fri.) Singing the Blues Away: Using Your Voice as a Tool For Changing Your Consciousness. Ram Smith will speak on how to change your consciousness through singing and using your voice as a tool for spiritual transformation. Participants should come prepared to experience the healing power of using seed sounds, mantras, affirmations, and chants. East West Bookshop 342 Castro St., Mountain View. 415/988-9800. Cost $8. 7:30 pm

15 Apr. (Mon.) Lama Tharchin Rinpoche-History of a Yogi in Tibet. Cost $15.7 pm, Open Secret Bookstore, 923 C St., San Rafael. 415/457-4191.

26 Apr. (Fri.) Blowing Zen: A Performance/Lecture of Shakuhachi with John Singer. Master shakuhachi flutist John Singer ranks among the finest Japanese bamboo flute players in the world, and his work has been highly praised by such great flutists as G. S. Sachdev and Paul Horn. John specializes in the rare Zen pieces of the ancient Komuso monks. East West Bookshop, 342 Castro St., Mountain View. 415/988-9800. Cost $8. 7:30 pm

26-28 Apr. (Fri.-Sun.) Recovery and Spirituality: The Art of Awakening the Heart, with Ngawang Chotak. As human beings we look for happiness. Many of us thought we had found it in alcohol, drugs, food, sex, gambling, relationships. We found suffering instead. Through meditation, the energy which fueled our addictions can become the fire of our recovery. Cost $100. 5 pm (Fri.)-1 pm (Sun.) VI

26-28 Apr. (Fri.-Sun.) San Francisco Whole Life Expo. The nation’s premier event for natural health, personal growth, spirituality, and global change. Advance tickets $5 on Friday, $10 on Saturday or Sunday; $20 for a three-day pass. SF Fashion Center. 415/721-2484.

8 May-26 Jun. (Wed.) Reducing Stress, Working & Living Mindfully: A Course For Health Professionals, Caregivers, and People with Chronic or Life-Threatening Illness, presented by the Zen Hospice Project. This experimental course emphasizes mindful breathing and awareness of the body, gentle movement and stretching, guided meditations, exercises in awareness of everyday experiences, and presentation of research findings. Cost $295. To register, send $75 deposit to ZHP, 273 Page St., San Francisco, CA 94102 or call 415/863-2910.

17 May (Fri.) “Spiritual People Don’t Get Angry” and Other Myths. Do you have ideas about how the “correct spiritual person” thinks, acts, and feels? Where do you get them? Are they true? What price do you pay for believing them? Spend an interactive evening with Cheri Huber exploring these and other questions. Cheri is a teacher of Soto Zen and author of eight books, including The Depression Book, That Which You Are Seeking Is Causing You to Seek, and There Is Nothing Wrong With You. East West Bookshop, 342 Castro St., Mountain View 415/988-9800. Cost $8. 7:30 pm

26 May (Sun.) Working With Pain with Eugene Cash & Adrianne Mohr. Meditation, movement, and small and large group process using the practice of mindfulness. Contact Code: ECZ. 10 am-5 pm SR

(continued on next page)
Meeting to Plan Engaged Buddhist Workshop Set for April 16

As announced in the March newsletter, people are needed to attend a one-time only planning meeting to contribute ideas toward the development of an engaged Buddhism workshop.

This program is aimed at two groups of Buddhist practitioners: 1) those already involved in their community/world environment who wish to learn new ways to approach their work mindfully from a Buddhist perspective; and 2) those who have contemplated such work but have been reluctant to become more involved. For this second group, the workshop will provide an ideal “coming out as an activist” educational experience.

The overall workshop format will include noted Buddhist speakers who will apply their expertise to various social justice issues and activities, and exercises dealing with real-life scenarios and ethical dilemmas.

A planning meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, April 16, 7:30 p.m., at 224 Winding Way in San Francisco. For more information, please call Stephan Pardi.

Co-Editor, Designers, and Librarian Needed

GBF urgently needs volunteers for the following positions: newsletter co-editor (1 person), newsletter layout/design coordinators (2 persons), and GBF librarian (1 person). All offer important practice opportunities to GBF members.

The newsletter co-editor would share responsibilities with the current editor for collecting, writing, and editing newsletter copy. The layout/design coordinators would share responsibilities for desktop publishing the newsletter and for finding graphics and illustrations. Having at least two people in each position would allow them to alternate monthly responsibilities.

The librarian position is new. We are seeking someone with natural organizational skills who would enjoy helping GBF set up a Buddhist resource library of books, tapes, and article reprints. The librarian would also take over responsibility for maintaining archival records such as back issues of the newsletter.

To volunteer for any of the above positions, please call GBF’s information line at 415/974-9878.

Local Dharma

(continued from page 2)

Beyond the Bay

5-10 May (Sun.-Fri.) Embodying Images of Health with Jamie McHugh, RMT and George Solomon, MD. Jamie McHugh, somatic movement therapist, AIDS activist, and performance artist, teams up with George Solomon, physician and professor of psychiatry at UCLA and a pioneer in the field of psycho-neuroimmunology. Together with workshop participants, they will explore the uses of somatic awareness, expressive movement, and imagery in the healing process. Esalen Institute, Big Sur, CA. 408/667-3005.

Letters

Sangha Dana

Receiving this month’s newsletter (March 1996) sent a special feeling into my heart. Here were a group of gay men (i.e. the steering committee) actualizing the “Buddha Way.” I am truly touched by their dana, their continuous selfless giving for the benefit of our sangha. Their dana is a seed which has enlightened my own Buddha mind and inspired these very words.

Perusing the financial statement became my koan of how I might help the mission of our gay sangha. The math is simple: 500 newsletters a month at $.32 a piece for postage = $160. As my own fundraiser for the benefit of the GBF, I have enclosed 12 stamps to cover the cost of mailing the newsletter to me for a year.

For those of you seeking a means of supporting the efforts of our sangha, this small act of dana could manifest into the means by which the seeds sown by the steering committee blossom. My sincere gratitude for your practice.

Jack Taian Madden
Stormville, New York

A Practice Center

I’ve read about GBF’s plans to secure our own practice space, to develop a center. I think it’s a great idea. But I’m a little confused, because we already have one right in the heart of the Queer universe. It’s the Hartford Street Zen Center!

It’s so hilarious and grounding to read about the afflictions of so-called spiritual groups, and realize the dis-ease affecting our own. We have this great center (HSZC) which would love having GBF’s energy, but we at GBF have these dark sunglasses on that obscure the opportunity in front of us.

I challenge those who want a center to rise above historical problems and make the Hartford Street Zen Center our center.

Tommy Phillips
Santa Rosa
Grief and the Path to Awakening: Appreciating What a Gay Sangha Offers

by Mark Marion

Hope can neither be affirmed or denied. Hope is like a path in the countryside. Originally there was no path. Yet, as people walk all the time in the same spot, a way appears. —Lu Xion

In Tibet there is the story of Krisha Gotami, a young woman who had the good fortune to live at the time of the Buddha. When her first child was about a year old, it fell ill and died. Grief stricken and clutching its little body, Krisha Gotami roamed the streets begging anyone she met for a medicine that would restore her child to life.

Some ignored her, others laughed at her, and some thought her mad. But finally she met a wise man who told her that the only person in the world who could perform the miracle she was looking for was the Buddha. So she went to the Buddha, lay the body of her child at his feet, and told him her story.

The Buddha listened with infinite compassion, and then said gently, “There is only one way to heal your affliction. Go down to the city and bring me back a mustard seed from any house in which there has never been a death.”

Krisha Gotami felt elated and set off at once for the city. She stopped at the first house she saw and said, “I’ve been told by the Buddha to fetch a mustard seed from a house that has never known death.” “Many people have died in this house,” she was told. She went on to the next house. “There have been countless deaths in our family,” they said. And so to a third and a fourth house, until she had been all around the city and realized that the Buddha’s condition could not be fulfilled.

So she took the body of her child to the burial ground and said good-bye to him for the last time, and then returned to the Buddha. “Did you bring the mustard seed?” he asked. “No,” she said, “I’m beginning to understand the lesson you are trying to teach me. Grief made me blind and I thought that only I had suffered at the hands of death,” “Why have you come back?” asked the Buddha. “To ask you to teach me the truth,” she replied, “of what death is, what might lie behind and beyond death, and what in me, if anything, will not die. The Buddha began to teach her, saying, “If you want to know the truth of life and death, you must reflect continually on this: there is only one law in the universe that never changes—that all things change and that all things are impermanent...Because pain has now made you ready to learn and your heart is opening to the truth, I will show it to you.”

The first time I came across the story of Krisha Gotami, I felt the whole of my mind and body becoming still, as only happens when I am hearing something that all my experience tells me is true. I had listened to parts of this story many times before from friends, family, and people I worked with, but I had never truly heard it. But in exploring the meaning of sangha—of a gay sangha—my mind keeps returning to this story again and again.

There is a legacy that we all share as gay men, of separation and of loss, that I believe gives us an affinity for Buddhist practice. A gay sangha is a natural result of this affinity, and offers the opportunity to join with other gay men on a spiritual path. Together we can discover that our life experiences of separation and loss, this shared legacy, is no longer an impediment to fulfillment. It is, instead, a doorway to awakening to fulfillment. Of all the many meanings of the word “sangha,” my favorite is simply, “working together to discover our true nature” (thanks to GBF member David Sunseri).

Finding Buddhist practice and a gay sangha has been a lifesaver for me that I would not have pursued if not for the separation and loss in my own life. There was a time, about six years ago, when the bottom fell out of my life. Very quickly, dearly held assumptions about who I was and what life was about (in which I had invested my security and sanity) began to crumble.

I was working part-time as the HIV/AIDS counselor/advocate at an East Bay agency. My job was to provide crisis counseling for people with HIV and their family, friends, and lovers. I was also coordinating an HIV antibody test site and supervising support groups. In addition to all of this, I was maintaining a private practice.

This schedule was demanding, but I thought I was doing OK. I became used to dealing with illness and death in my work, and depended upon my private sense of spirituality to keep things in perspective. I thought that was enough.

But then a sequence of events happened that began to erode what I thought was solid ground. First, I became ill with hepatitis, but since it was not casually contagious, I continued working. My joke about it was that, since I was now jaundiced to a vivid orange from my toes to my eyeballs, I could finally wear all those fashionable earth-tone colors that had previously clashed with my wispish white pallor.

Lame humor only provided me with temporary relief, however, because in the weeks that followed, key members of my biological as well as my “gay family” began dying. Between cancer, heart disease, and AIDS, several people who had been emotional anchors for me were suddenly gone. Although I had lost people before who were close to me, the relentlessness and timing of these deaths cut to the core.

The line between the reality I experienced at work and at home began to blur. Although I recognized I was still

1The story of Krisha Gotami was paraphrased from The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying by Sogyal Rinpoche (Santa Cruz, CA: Rigpa Fellowship, 1992).
suffered separation and loss just like me has helped me to rediscover a sense of meaning and hope that I couldn’t have found alone.

For me, a gay sangha unites two of the most important components of lasting meaning and genuine hope. One is the sharing of the experiences, gifts, and challenges that come with being gay. The other is practicing together and supporting each other in awakening, and discovering our true nature. In GBF, both of these components are present.

A gay sangha provides us with a home where we can rediscover and deepen our acceptance of ourselves and our ability to trust others. It is also a place where we can use the grief and alienation that have been part of our lives to deepen our practice, and to stimulate questions that can lead us back to our own true nature, questions such as: “What can bring a lasting self acceptance and belonging?” “What if anything, is real?” “What in me, if anything, will not die?”

As a beginning practitioner I’m not yet at the point where I can view the suffering that happens in my own, or someone else’s life, as a wonderful opportunity for spiritual growth. As I heard another GBF member concisely put it, “Samsara sucks.” Especially in the form of AIDS, it is infuriating and horrifying. With more than a decade of unprecedented grief and loss, many of us are very weary. Facing ongoing loss seems to leave few options, for sanity’s sake, except either denial or despair.

Buddha offered to Krisha Gotami an alternative, and in the Dharma we are also offered this alternative. What allowed Krisha Gotami to see the alternative was opening to the truth of suffering. For myself, I take the alternative begrudgingly. Even after getting whacked relentlessly over the head by the sledgehammer of suffering, illness, and death, my ego shows itself to be remarkably resilient, and still wanting control.

But this is starting to change for me. A spaciousness is almost imperceptibly opening up around my ego’s grasping. It’s like the answer a friend gave me when I asked him how life was going for him. He replied, “Considering the enormity of my expectations and the depths of my ingratitude, I have to admit, I’m doing O.K.” Sometimes I can smile at the ego’s expectations and ingratitude.

Through heart-felt dharma talks and discussions at GBF meetings, I am slowly opening to whatever is happening, including aloneness or grief, as well as surrender and joy. I find courage, inspiration, and support within the practice and fellowship of a gay sangha.

Before finding GBF, I often felt like a solo explorer on the spiritual path. Facing the truth of suffering and death alone sometimes was like staring into a dark, bottomless abyss. But in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, I discover what amounts to a new set of eyes with which to gaze into that abyss—a new vision that is radiant, boundless, deathless.

Everything in experience—including the most unpleasant—can be turned back toward our practice. We can allow it to propel us toward the discovery of our true nature.

Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Sangha But Were Afraid to Ask

by Roger Corless

When a spiritual teacher gains a reputation, disciples collect. Those who collected around the Buddha were known as the gana (flock) or sangha (community). Those closest to him were the monks, and the word sangha is most often used, in traditionally Buddhist countries, to refer exclusively to them. But, there are wider uses.

Broadly, sangha can have an institutional and an accomplishment reference. The institutional sangha is fourfold: monks (bhikkhu), nuns (bhikkhuni), laymen observing precepts (upasaka), and laywomen observing precepts (upasika). The monks observe the 227 precepts of the Vinaya, and there are additional precepts for nuns. Laypeople may formally undertake to observe five, eight, or ten precepts, for a period of not less than one day. Due to various political upheavals, the succession of nuns has been lost except in China, and in the rest of the Buddhist world so-called nuns are women under long-term obligations to observe the lay precepts.

When the sangha is viewed from the standpoint of accomplishment, it is first divided into two, then into four, then into eight. The twofold division is the broad distinction between ordinary people (prthag-jana) and noble ones (arya-pudgala). Nobles are persons whose accomplishment is such that they are “non-lapsing,” that is, they will never again be reborn in an unfortunate state (as an animal, a Preta—“hungry ghost”, or a Narakan—“hell dweller”).

There are four kinds of nobles: those who have entered the stream (shrotapanna, i.e., have become non-lapsing and will never again be reborn in a lower or unfortunate realm), those who will be reborn only once more (sakridagamin), those who will not be born again as humans but who will attain liberation after being born in a deity realm (anagamin), and those who have achieved liberation (arahat). Sometimes these four are listed as eight, when each class is subdivided according to whether one is moving along the path (marga) or has attained its fruit (phala).

Although it is popularly believed that only monks, and perhaps nuns, can attain liberation, the official teaching has always been that anyone with sufficiently meritorious karmic roots can become liberated. There are usually more monastics than laypeople in the Noble Sangha, since they can devote more time to laypeople to meditation and Dharma study. From earliest times, however, there are records of laypeople attaining liberation and being honored by monastics as great teachers.

GBF members, most of whom are not monks and must fit practice into what time they can spare from work, will probably find it easier to identify with the sangha of accomplishment than the institutional sangha. We can think of this in terms of family. The Buddha left his biological family behind and his closest disciples were those who “left home” (pravrajya) to follow him. At ordination, according to a custom that has endured to the present day, they took a Buddhist name and became known as Sons of Buddha.

Many gay men have, voluntarily or involuntarily, moved away from their families of origin and found a family of choice in the “gay tribe.” We can perhaps recapture, or discover for the first time, a feeling of spiritual community by regarding our fellow Dharma practitioners as family members, respecting those of greater accomplishment, whatever their age or social status, as our elders, and beginners as our younger brothers.

Roger Corless is Professor of Religion at Duke University, and a specialist in Pure Land Buddhism and Buddhist-Christian Studies. He is a member of GBF and a contributor to the GBF Newsletter.

Classifieds Corner

CAREER NETWORK: HAIRCUTTING

One year into the career of haircutting/styling, I wish to learn from other hair stylists and shops in Northern California that practice in a nurturing and mindful manner. I am also interested in spas or places that offer body work. If you know of any such individuals or businesses, your referral would be valuable. Daniel Goldstein.

SUMMER HOUSING

Professor seeks accommodations while in San Francisco the month of July. Will share rent or consider short-term sublet. Easy access to California Institute of Integral Studies (in its new location near St. Mary's Cathedral). a plus. Roger Corless.

Contributors

Thanks to the following people who helped with this issue of the GBF Newsletter: Alan Oliver, Bob Hass, Clint Seiter, David Holmes, John Krowka, Jon Bernie, Lee Robbins, Mark Marion, Peter Goetz, Robin Levitt, Roger Corless, Ron Ginsberg, and Stephan Pardi.
The Sangha Spirit

by Bob Hass

The Buddha is said to have told a layman named Digha Jana that there were four things conducive to a man's happiness in the world. One of these was to have good friends who could help him along the right path. Those of us within GBF who have had an opportunity to be together—whether for meditation, talks and discussions, classes, engaged Buddhist projects, or social events—may already have experienced something of what the Buddha was talking about.

But neither the presence of a practice center nor the participation of its members in center activities automatically creates sangha. Like a flower that requires rich soil, rain, and sunlight in order to bloom, sangha thrives in an open, trusting, nonjudgmental environment where—as caring fellow spiritual seekers—we support and encourage one another's efforts to apply the wisdom of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path to our daily lives.

From my experience in GBF, I've come to believe that sangha also contains a less tangible quality that, for want of a better term, I shall call spirit. I was reminded of this recently, not while sitting with my gay brothers in San Francisco, but while in the chapel of a gay church in Birmingham, Alabama.

What brought me to Alabama was my friend, Alex. Two hours after my plane landed, we were sitting together in the chapel of Birmingham's Metropolitan Community Church. Alex had forewarned me that the weekend I chose to visit coincided with the Birmingham church's fifteenth anniversary and the signing of a purchase agreement for their own church building. Church members had planned a full weekend of events to celebrate, and the Reverend Troy Perry, MCC's founder, was to be on hand as well.

Alex wanted to attend several events, and asked if I'd be willing to join him. Knowing how important MCC was to Alex, both spiritually and socially, I agreed. I thought to myself, how bad could one weekend in church be, especially since most of its members were lesbian and gay?

What I was not prepared for, however, was that the experience would prove the exact opposite of my fears—namely, positive and uplifting. We ended up spending the better part of three days "in church," attending two services and two concerts. During that time, many people came up to me and said hello. Quite a few welcomed me warmly and wanted to know about me.

What impressed me most, however, was how much the church members truly seemed to enjoy being together. Both men and women freely expressed their affection for one another with hugs and kisses. Each day people hung around the church long after an event had ended, talking in small groups. After that, many of them met at a local eatery where they "took over" the back room of the place. To an outsider, it seemed as if they couldn't get enough of one another's fellowship and support.

My experience with this particular MCC congregation moved me deeply. At work within this gay and lesbian community of spiritual seekers was a powerful, unifying element of love and caring that I could feel, even as a visitor. While sitting in their church on the third day, I suddenly thought of GBF and then made the connection: "They've got the sangha spirit, too!"

I returned home knowing that Buddhism remains my chosen spiritual path, and that I, too, need a spiritual community that's got spirit. Admittedly that may appear to be a form of attachment, but then, who's perfect?

Bob Hass is editor of the GBF Newsletter and a Vipassana practitioner.

Thanks...

Thanks to Ron Ginsberg, who will be missed in his role as newsletter proofreader, a job he has performed admirably for nearly a year; David Holmes, who took over preparing the Local Dharma calendar last fall, and continues to compile listings mindfully for each month's newsletter; to John Krowka, who pinch-hit as our interim treasurer for the past several months; to Alan Oliver, who was a host for the Thursday evening sittings during 1995; and to Clint Seiter who regularly bakes delicious tea breads for us to enjoy on Sunday mornings.

Feedback Sought on Idea of Business Classified Ads

A few GBF members have inquired about the possibility of including business ads in the "Classifieds Corner" section of the GBF Newsletter. At its last meeting, the steering committee considered this request and the issues related to it. The committee felt it needed more feedback from GBF members before making a decision.

A number of questions arose during steering committee deliberations, and other GBF members may wish to respond to them. Would business ads from GBF members be inappropriate in a newsletter that tends to focus on spiritual practice issues and news? Should members pay to have their business ads included in the newsletter? If paid ads were included, should the total number of such ads be limited to a certain amount of space in the newsletter (e.g., one page)? Since the "Classifieds Corner" was initiated to allow members to network in the spirit of creating sangha, would business ads be OK as long as they promoted services considered "right livelihood?"

The steering committee would appreciate receiving advice from members of our sangha on this issue. You may contact steering committee members directly, or leave a message on the GBF information line (415/974-9878) and someone will call you back.
Spring Cleaning?

Don't discard those items you no longer need. Put them in boxes or store them in a closet or garage, and save them for GBF's sidewalk sale fundraiser, happening sometime this summer. Also, if you can help organize this event, please call the GBF information line, 415/974-9878.

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Potluck to Precede Thursday Sitting

GBFers who plan on attending the April 11 Thursday night sitting at the home of Lee Robbins are invited, if they wish, to come early that evening for a potluck dinner from 6:30 to 8:00 p.m. If you need additional information, please call Lee.

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GBF, 2261 Market St. #422, San Francisco, CA 94114.
For 24-hour information on GBF activities, call 415/974-9878. Submissions for newsletter publication can be sent on a Macintosh disk to: GBF Newsletter, Bob Hass.