Gay Buddhist Fellowship
Newsletter
May 1996

GBF Calendar
Call 415/974-9878 for news about GBF and GBF-sponsored events. To skip the recording and leave a message, press 5.

2 May, Thursday Sitting, 8 pm, at the home of Bill Kirkpatrick.

4 May, Saturday Sitting (East Bay), 10 am, at the home of Geoff McNamara.

7 May (Tuesday), Steering Committee Meeting, 7:30 pm, at the home of Allen Oliver.

9 May, Thursday Sitting, 8 pm, at the home of Lee Robbins.

11 May (Sat), Hike in Annadel State Park and Potluck. Meet at 9:00 am at Zen Hospice, 273 Page St., SF. (Details, page 1.)

12 May, Sunday Meeting, 10:30 am, 273 Page St., SF, TBA.

16 May, Thursday Sitting, 8 pm, at the home of Mark Marlon.

18 May, Saturday Sitting (East Bay), 10 am, at the home of Geoff McNamara.

23 May, Thursday Sitting, 8 pm, at the home of Edward Sams.

26 May, Sunday Meeting, 10:30 am, 273 Page St., SF, Open Discussion.

30 May, Thursday Sitting, 8 pm, at the home of Edward Sams.

Foundations of Buddhism Workshop to be Offered Again

A year ago GBF offered a seven-week series of meetings that addressed basic Buddhist information, concepts, and forms of Buddhist practice. This opportunity was particularly suitable for those new to Buddhism who wanted an overview of this spiritual practice. A conceptual framework is suspect in Buddhism, but it can establish some familiarity with language, concepts, and approaches that can aid in understanding readings, dharma talks, and Buddhist discussions.

Instead of a multi-week study group, we have streamlined the format into two sequential Saturday workshops. These two full-day sessions will be held on June 8 and 15. There will be a charge of $10 per session for a total of $20 for both parts of the Foundations Workshop.

The workshops will include readings, presentations, question-and-answer dialogue, and some sitting practice. There will not be as much time for free-ranging discussion as in the past, but we will endeavor to address the same range of topics with time for some related questions and shared answers.

The first session on June 8 will focus on the Buddha, Buddhist history, The Four Noble Truths, The Precepts, and key concepts. The second session on June 15 will focus on the major Buddhist traditions and key practice questions.

If you are interested in participating in this two-part workshop, send a check for $20 payable to GBF, along with your name, address, and phone number, to: GBF Workshop, 2261 Market Street #422, San Francisco, CA 94114.

The workshop is open to 25 participants and will be closed once that number have registered. Details on place and time will be sent to all participants, along with handouts to be read before the first session begins.

Morning Meditation

GBF will sponsor a silent, half-day of meditation practice on Saturday, June 1, 1996, at 791 29th Avenue (at Cabrillo) in San Francisco, from 8:45 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. (The entrance is next to the garage.)

The moderate schedule will include sitting and walking meditation, Sutra recitation, and a brief dharma reading. Please bring a meditation cushion or bench. Preregistration is required. To register, mail a check for $5.00 payable to GBF to: GBF Sitting/6/1/96, 2261 Market Street #422, San Francisco, CA 94114. Please include your name and phone number. For more information, call Daishin David Sunseri.

May Hike Planned to Annadel State Park

Due to the success of last month's hike, GBF is sponsoring a second hike on Saturday, May 11. This time we'll be traveling to Annadel State Park near Santa Rosa. On the trail, we'll pass through forests, meadows, and chaparral of Douglas-fir, oaks, redwoods, and chaparral. There will also be wildflowers to enjoy. We'll stop for lunch at picturesque Lake Ilsanjo.

This hike (5.5 miles) is longer than last month's, but again we'll take a leisurely pace. There will be a potluck

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The Local Dharma
May–June 1996

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

Special Events

6 May (Mon.) “The Life Story of Yeshe Tsogyal” with Lama Tharchin. Cost $15. 7 pm, Open Secret Bookstore, 923 C St., San Rafael. 415/457-4191.

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 experiential 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.

10-13 May (Fri.–Mon.) “Healing the Father Wound” with Gordon Clay. A boy’s first impressions about men come from his early experience with his father. Their relationship shapes his opinions of what a “man’s role” should be. Through movement and breath work, experiential exercises, appropriate emotional release, and ritual, participants will break down old barriers of competition, fear, and mistrust, and begin the healing process. Harbin Hot Springs. Cost $450. Information & Registration: Dad, c/o Healing the Father Wound, P.O. Box 800, HHS, San Anselmo, CA, 94979-0800, or call 415/453-2839.

11 May (Sat.) “Practice and Single Life” with James Baraz, Steven Newmark, and Shoshana Alexander. This retreat will address the topic of attraction, passion, and sexuality, and whether they can be made conscious. It will include experiential exercises and group discussion. Contact Code: JB9. 10 am. SR


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 Soto teacher Cheri Huber exploring these and other questions. 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 & Adrienne Mohr. Meditation, movement, and small and large group process using the practice of mindfulness. 10 am-5 pm. Contact Code: EC2. SR

16-21 June (Sun.-Fri.) “Meditation of Fear and Fearlessness” with Senior Dharma Teacher Tenshin Re Ignacio. This retreat will consider what many of us find to be most frightening—just being and expressing ourselves. This is the core of Zen practice. Through meditation and discussion, there will be an opportunity to recognize, understand, and become free of fear and anxiety. Our studies will include the five forms of fear and three forms of anxiety. $350 for commuters; $500-550 for accommodations. GG

23 June (Sun.) “Meditation/Walk for the Earth.” Come celebrate the summer solstice and confirm your gratitude to the earth for supporting our life and practice. We will silently walk the Green Gulch headlands (3-4 miles), stopping at points to chant and dedicate our practice to earth, air, water, and fire. Meet at the Green Gulch farm office. 2-6 pm GG

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Beyond the Bay

16 May (Thu.) "Jiva Goswami's Tattva-Sandarba: Sacred India's Philosophy of Ecstasy" with Swami B.V. Tripurari. Swami's newest book is a medieval Sanskrit manuscript, eloquently explaining devotional Vedanta, and the philosophy and nature of nonducal consciousness. No charge. 7 pm. Gateways Bookstore, 1018 Pacific Avenue, Santa Cruz. 408/429 9600.

Conference on Buddhism in America

"Buddhism in America," a landmark conference on the future of Buddhist meditation in this country, will be held January 17-19, 1997, at the Park Plaza Hotel in Boston. Teachers from all major traditions will participate, including Professor Robert Thurman, Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, Lama Surya Das, Wes Nisker, John Stevens, Tetsugen Glassman Roshi, Rick Fields, Helen Tworkov, Dr. Miranda Shaw, Ven. Henepola Gunaratana, Toni Packer, Mu Soeng, and many others.

For a conference brochure, contact: Buddhism in America Conference, 369 Pleasant Street, Northampton, MA 01060; 413/586-4269; fax: 413/586-1188; e-mail: allonezen@aol.com.

Gay Men's Retreat June 19-23 in Sonoma County

"Sustaining Heart and Spirit," a retreat for gay men, is being held June 19-23, 1996, and again September 18-22, 1996, at Anvil Ranch in western Sonoma County. The purpose of the retreat is to facilitate the experience of true strength, wisdom, and love that gay men can access through spiritually-focused community.

The program will include a balance of silence, personal sharing, discussion, outdoor time, creative expression, and guided meditation. It is also a place for gay brothers who have not yet found a way to nourish their spiritual nature.

Cost for the four days is $265 (indoor accommodations) or $205 (camping).

For more information, contact David Carr, Retreat Coordinator.

Hamilton Family Center: Opportunity for Engaged Buddhism

As has been described in past issues of this newsletter, on the third Saturday of every month a team of GBFers gets together and prepares a dinner for the residents of the Hamilton Family Center, a San Francisco shelter for homeless families. Currently we are looking for new volunteers who would be interested in participating in this event. This involves spending a Saturday afternoon and part of the evening in the center's kitchen with other GBF members cooking a meal for up to 50 residents, half of whom are young children.

Most of the volunteers find the experience tremendously rewarding. The preparation of a nourishing, delicious dinner can be a deeply loving act between the cooks and those who enjoy it. The project personalizes the experience of homelessness. It allows us to meet with the residents of the shelter and to get a better sense of their humanity. Also, working with fellow GBFers is a great opportunity to build sangha—not to mention the fact that it's fun.

Most of us see the suffering around us and wish there were some way we could ease it. This is one way. If you are interested in participating, please call

May Hike (continued from page 1)

picnic, so please bring something to share with others. Carpools will leave the Zen Hospice at 9:00 a.m. (273 Page Street, SF) and will return to the city about 5:00 p.m. Maps will be available that morning. Bring a sweater or jacket, water, a blanket, and sunblock. Rain cancels.

Afterwards, hikers are invited back to Bob Hass' home in Sonoma to relax, and to prepare and enjoy a meal together. If you plan on participating in the evening meal, please let Bob know in advance. However, you do not need to worry about bringing ingredients for the evening meal; your appetites and culinary skills will suffice. For more information, call Bob Hass.

GBFers Trek to Chimney Rock

Last month's annual pilgrimage to Chimney Rock in the Point Reyes National Seashore was a case in point of the universe conspiring to create a near-perfect day. The weather was warm and, unlike the gale force winds of last year's hike, there was nothing but gentle breezes to keep the day cool.

Best of all, the wildflowers were in full bloom, carpeting the fields with different colors, shapes, and sizes. Thanks to Larry Alege, the group's unofficial amateur botanist, we were able to identify blue-eye grass (small blue flowers with yellow centers); mule ears (bright yellow, miniature-like sunflowers); Indian paint brush (brilliant orange-red blooms on spikes); Douglas irises (ornate deep purple to pale lavender blossoms); California buttercups (five-petalled yellow flowers); marsh marigolds (dark pink flowers); and, of course, hundreds of California poppies.

All of us spent the greater part of the day camped out on the point, eating the shared food we had brought, talking, relaxing, sunning, snoozing, and soaking in the views of the Pacific from the nearby cliff tops. Afterwards, we took a side trip to the Point Reyes Lighthouse, descending and later ascending all 330 stairs to the rock spur on which the lighthouse is perched. A few of us spotted migrating whales and families of sea lions playing in the ocean below. My thanks to everyone who showed up and helped make it such a special day.

—Clint Seiter

Thanks...

Thanks to David Sunseri, who is leaving the steering committee after a lengthy period of service. His contributions are too numerous to mention. He now plans to concentrate his efforts on supporting practice opportunities within GBF. We also thank him for coordinating our recent fundraising letter mailing.
The Buddha and Homosexuality

by Allan R. Bomhard

I would like to make a few comments about the article titled “Gayness in the Life of the Buddha” by Saddho Joel Michael, which appeared in the February 1996 issue of the Gay Buddhist Fellowship Newsletter. In my opinion, Michael is approaching the subject within the framework of current American social conventions and attitudes on sexuality. Objectivity demands, however, that the subject be looked at within the framework of the Buddha's times and with a clear understanding of the Buddha's own agenda.

First, let me point out that modern views of sexuality only began to take shape in the middle of the nineteenth century: the term “homosexual” appears to have first been used in 1868. Indeed, it was not until the early part of this century, owing mainly to the work of pioneers in psychology and sex research, that the so-called “heterosexual norm” became standard. Prior to that, the concept of a heterosexual-homosexual dichotomy did not exist.

That is to say that homosexuals seem not to have been recognized as a distinct group, separate from heterosexuals, at least not in the modern sense. What was recognized were particular sexual acts, both heterosexual and homosexual, which were judged to be socially and/or legally acceptable or socially and/or legally unacceptable, as the case might be. Not surprisingly, throughout the ages in Western society, both in Europe and its colonial offshoots, there were often sharp differences between what was legally prohibited and what was practiced and tolerated. In the East, one finds much the same situation.

Moreover, different Eastern cultures held different views on the social acceptability of various sexual practices. This contrasts to the European societies, which tended to have more common views throughout history, no doubt influenced by shared religious beliefs. Consequently, current Western views on sexuality do not reflect the views of the Buddha, nor do they reflect even the views of different periods within Western society.

The heterosexual-homosexual dichotomy is an artificial division that does not fully reflect the complexities of human sexual experience. It is a social construct, not a biological imperative. This division imposes rigid boundaries on socially acceptable forms of sexual expression. The result is often severe psychological traumatization as members of contemporary American society attempt to conform to the totally unrealistic, unnatural, and unwholesome expectations demanded by the extreme view that exclusive heterosexuality is the only valid sexual option.

This view is so pervasive and so firmly held that it is rarely questioned. It is extremely difficult for anyone born, raised, and living in this society—be they Buddhist or non-Buddhist, male or female, gay or straight—to see it for what it really is, namely, that it is one among many possible approaches to human sexuality.

Given this, we must be very careful not to interpret the statements on sexual matters made by those living in other societies and in other periods of history in terms of contemporary American concepts of human sexuality. Furthermore, it is important that we not confuse any cultural norms or traditions, American or non-American, Western or Eastern, with the Buddha's teachings.

Now let us explore the earliest Buddhist scriptures, specifically the Vinaya Pitaka, in a little more depth to illustrate how off the mark it would be to say that the Buddha condemned homosexuality. To be sure, there are several references in the Vinaya to members of the Sangha performing homosexual sexual acts, and these acts are condemned. Nobody would dispute this. However, page after page of the Vinaya is devoted to detailing heterosexual sexual acts, and these are equally condemned. Are we therefore to conclude that the Buddha was anti-heterosexual or that he condemned heterosexuality?

Surely, based upon the overwhelming preponderance of references to heterosexual sexual acts versus the relatively small number of references to homosexual sexual acts, we would be more justified in saying that straight people got a bad press in the earliest Buddhist scriptures, commentaries, and other extra-canonical writings. Gay people are not condemned any more than are straight people. Nowhere in any of the earliest Buddhist scriptures, commentaries, and other extra-canonical writings does the Buddha condemn homosexuals as a group separate from heterosexuals. Indeed, such a concept did not even exist at the time of the Buddha.

What the Buddha is saying, quite simply, is that all forms of sexual activity are distractions that bind one to samsara, and thus prevent one from achieving full liberation. Therefore, all forms of sexual activity are proscribed for members of the Sangha (i.e. monks and nuns). To read anything more into it than that is to misunderstand and misrepresent the Buddha's intentions.

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Letters

A Practice Center

Securing a practice space for GBF activities is a long process. There are many steps to be taken before this will happen. One possible choice of direction could be the Hartford Street Zen Center (HSZC) as was pointed out in the letter from Tommy Phillips in the April newsletter. We are open to considering that option. The current steering committee, as of May, has no members who participated in that history.

The HSZC was a gay center primarily because there were gay practitioners at the San Francisco Zen Center (SFZC) who wanted a practice center close to the gay and lesbian community in the Castro neighborhood. Issan Dorsey, a gay Zen monk under Richard Baker's direction, played a key role in developing that center in the 1980s. Since Issan's death, it has become primarily a home for Maitri Hospice, which has a broad range of volunteers from beyond the gay and lesbian community. In the 1990s, the leadership of HSZC has not been gay oriented. A sitting schedule has been maintained in cooperation with the San Francisco Zen Center.

Besides now being primarily a straight-run hospice program (we understand the hospice will be moving soon to new quarters), there are many other issues that must be considered. Five major issues have been discussed in a general way at the steering committee at various times:

1. Hartford Street is a Zen center that is part of the San Francisco Zen Center. GBF is a non-denominational organization that currently rents space, as needed, from a variety of Buddhist centers. To make the HSZC our center would involve separating it from the SFZC, its parent center. There is no evidence that the SFZC is interested in that occurring, and we do not wish to mount an effort to "take it over."

2. We have been informed by a past member of the HSZC that there are upwards to $60,000 estimated expenses for repairs to the foundation and to the building that must be made. GBF is not willing, at this time, to enter into a situation where we start with an obligation of that magnitude in order to make the building functional.

3. The large spaces available at the HSZC are no larger than those we now use at the Zen Hospice on Page Street. Hartford Street would not meet our need for a larger space for certain activities and speakers or for possible future growth in our sangha. Frequently there is no extra space at our Sunday sittings. It would seem unwise to invest in a space without that potential for serving more people. Another issue concerns the nature of the sitting space at the HSZC, which is located in the cellar of the house and is dark and "cave-like."

4. The Castro is a desirable location, but it is a very difficult one in which to find parking. We are reluctant to make things more difficult for the many GBF participants who drive in from the Peninsula, Marin, East Bay, and from all parts of the city.

5. Finally, the HSZC has never initiated any contacts or made any proposals to the Gay Buddhist Fellowship. We would be open to hearing a proposal and considering it in light of the four discussion points mentioned above. We surmise that the leadership at the SFZC and Hartford Street see the building as a Zen practice center first, and only secondarily as a center serving gay men and lesbians. Since GBF is made up of gay men, this would also present a problem.

GBF has moved well past the "history issue" mentioned in Tommy Phillips' letter, and has a sense at this time that the HSZC is a valued part of our history, but not part of our future. We are forming a Development Practice Group that will start planning for how we move ahead with the issues of space and the future development of GBF. If any members of GBF are interested in helping us think through these issues while preserving our current level of sangha, please phone the GBF information line at 415/974-9878 and leave a message. You can also do this by speaking directly with any steering committee member.

Alan Oliver
Steering Committee Member

Buddha

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In closing, it should be pointed out that for lay practitioners, neither heterosexual sexual acts nor homosexual sexual acts—including premarital sex—are proscribed by the Buddha. It goes without saying, however, that anyone wishing to attain full release from samsara—and not just members of the Sangha—must overcome sexual lust. The sexual activity of lay practitioners is governed by the Third Precept, which requires abstinence from rape, adultery, and seduction.

References:


Allan R. Bomhard is a linguist living in Charleston, South Carolina. He has published five books and over 30 articles on various linguistic topics.
We Are Family

Each week for over 11 years, members of DC’s Mintwood Zendo have been meditating together and sharing fellowship.

by Andrew Hudson

"Every Wednesday night at 6:30 p.m., nine people sit motionless on a line of black cushions on the fourth floor of an apartment building in Adams Morgan..." So began the write-up in the Washington Blade when Mintwood Zendo celebrated its tenth anniversary in March 1994.

The article continued, "To an outsider it might appear that nothing is going on inside the dimly lit room. To the nine gay Zen Buddhists, however, these meetings are possibly the most concentrated activity of the week."

In the two years since this article appeared, our gay and lesbian sangha (not entirely composed of Zen Buddhists) has grown larger. We now often have as many as 10 or 11 people who sit zazen together, out of a pool of some 20 regular attendees. One crowded evening late in 1994, we had set up a double row on the south side of the living room to accommodate the 15 people who had shown up. Folks were wondering where we would put everyone if yet others arrived. "Would we overflow into the kitchen?" asked someone. Another person quipped, "I'd be willing to sit zazen in the bathtub, just to be here!"

Stability, regularity, and repetition have made us into a true sangha, along the lines of Suzuki-roshi's comparison, that becoming an enlightened being is like creating a loaf of bread. "If you do something, you should be very observant, and careful, and alert...Actual practice is repeating over and over again until you find out how to become bread," he said.

Just so, our evenings together have gotten stronger from repetition: we have discovered how to create them, over and over again. We sit zazen together, walk kinhin together, read aloud together from a sutra or a printed talk, listen once a month to a recorded dharma discourse. We prepare a meal together, put out the table, chairs, plates, cutlery, glasses, napkins, water, eat and talk together, clear up and wash dishes together. All of these shared activities—inform ed by the zazen that precedes them—have made us into a family of caring and loving friends.

The written talks we read are by Charlotte Joko Beck; the recorded discourses we listen to are by Abbot John Daido Loori of Zen Mountain Monastery, which is now host to two gay and lesbian retreats, and welcoming to the point of sometimes performing same-sex Buddhist marriages.

'Going for Buddha'
by Andrew Hudson (1992)

Our sangha took part in a marriage ceremony here in April 1994, when two of our members—Arlene Bock and Molly Jones—exchanged vows in a combined Buddhist-Quaker wedding at the Friends Meeting House. Two monks of the Theravada tradition chanted the Loving Kindness Sutra in Pali, and I was asked to read aloud the Practice of Loving kindness prayer and to sound our zazen bell to mark the beginning of the Quaker silence. The Buddhist concept of "Sangha" and the Quaker tradition of holding the marriage "under the care of the Meeting" fit together perfectly: it was a most moving event.

Our group began in March 1984, not long after Soen-roshi's death in Japan, and shortly after Ka Shin Zendo, to which I belonged, moved to a new, smaller zendo in Takoma Park. My friend Rebecca, who sat at the Tibetan Dharma Center, had been suggesting for six months that we start sitting together, especially now that Ka Shin Zendo had moved away from Dupont Circle out to the suburbs.

I would say, "We need a zazen group for lesbians and gays!" and she would reply, "We need a zendo located downtown!" In my drawing and painting (I am an artist and came to Zen through art), I had a new model, the dancer Patrick Scully from Minneapolis, and when this subject came up at one of our drawing sessions, he exclaimed, "I would be interested in that."

So I took Patrick and Rebecca to Ka Shin Zendo, to show them the protocol, and on our first visit there asked to buy the old Buddha statue that was to be replaced with a new one, brought from Japan by Eido-roshi. We sat in my apartment and at Rebecca's, two blocks away, with this Buddha I had learned zazen in
Something else, quite alien to the Japanese manner of sitting and bowing, became part of our protocol: from the start, we began and ended each evening of zazen with everyone giving everyone else a hug. I have come to think this an effective way of grounding ourselves, akin to receiving the keisaku. It gets us into our physical selves after the mental distractions of the day. It also generates togetherness, a recognition of one another, and gratitude.

So we continue, some 20 of us, in our own gay practice and our own gay lives. We are still developing. Last December we held our first all-day sitting on a Sunday, during which periods of zazen were interspersed with kinhin, a morning service, work practice, a communal lunch, rest practice, and a taped talk. Some of us are going to Zen Mountain Monastery for the gay and lesbian retreat this spring. We continue to “find out how to become bread”—our own unique gay loaf!

Andrew Hudson is a DC-based artist, a member of the Mintwood Zendo, and also a member of GBF.

[Editor’s Note: We encourage others around the country and in other parts of the world to create their own gay and/or lesbian sanghas. This sort of effort adds a dimension to practice that is very important. There are common elements to all these practice groups, yet each also has its own distinctive qualities. We would also enjoy hearing from those groups that already exist, so we might share your practice experiences with our readers. Let a thousand flowers bloom!]

*Compassionate Blue Buddha*
by Andrew Hudson (1993)

**Contributors**

Thanks to the following people who helped with this issue of the GBF Newsletter: Alan Oliver, Allan Bomhard, Andrew Hudson, Bob Hass, Clint Seiter, Daishin David Sunseri, David Holmes, Ken Harper, Mark Marion, Paul Dalwigk, and Robin Levitt.