Sunday Speaker

The speaker for our Sunday morning meeting on June 23, 1996, will be Daishin David Sunseri, a Zen monk, a disciple of Issan Dorseyroshi, and a member of GBF. He has practiced in the gay Buddhist community for the past 12 years, and has worked with the sick and the dying for over a decade. He will give a dharma talk on intimacy.

Newsletter Schedule

The next issue of the GBF Newsletter will be a combined July-August issue, so please send in all articles and information by Friday, June 14. Those with computers are requested to submit articles on disk in Mac format using Word or WordPerfect, along with a hard copy.

Half-Day of Meditation Set for July 21

On Sunday, July 21, 1996, GBF will sponsor a silent morning of meditation practice at Kairos House, 2128 15th Street (near Market) in San Francisco from 8:45 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. The moderate schedule will include sitting and walking meditation and a brief Dharma reading. Be sure to bring your own meditation cushion or bench. Pre-registration is required. To register, please mail a check for $10.00 payable to GBF to: GBF Sitting-7/21/96, 2261 Market Street #422, San Francisco, CA 94114. Include your name and phone number. If you have any questions about the sitting, call the GBF information line at 415/974-9878 and someone will get back to you. We hope to see you there. ♥

Space Still Available in Buddhism Course

The Foundations of Buddhism course will be offered on two consecutive Saturdays, June 8 and 15. The cost of the two-session course is $20.

This is an opportunity to review the basic background and concepts of Buddhism and thus establish a stronger knowledge base for your practice. It is especially recommended for those who are new to Buddhism and want an overview of this spiritual path.

If you wish to attend, please call Alan Oliver or Daishin David Sunseri as soon as possible, so that course materials can be sent to you in time to be read before the first session. ♥

GBF Steering Committee

Below are the names and telephone numbers of the current GBF Steering Committee members. We encourage you to contact any of us whenever you have an idea or concern you want to discuss. Feel free to speak with us at GBF events or to call us at home.

Paul Dalwigk
Avery Freed
Peter Goetz
Bob Hass
David Holmes
Robin Levitt
Ding-Hao Ma
Tom Moon
Alan Oliver
Edward Sams
Clint Seiter
Larry White
The Local Dharma
June–July 1996

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

Special Events

7-9 June (Fri.-Sun.) “A Peaceful Heart.” A weekend mindfulness retreat led by Arnie Kotler and Therese Fitzgerald. This retreat will be a time to practice mindfulness together, in the setting of a lovely Tibetan Buddhist monastery, nestled in a serene redwood forest. It will be an opportunity to sit, walk, eat, enjoy tea, and share the Dharma in mindfulness. Fri. 4 pm–Sun. 2 pm. Cost: $90–120. CML

7 June (Fri.) “The Quantum Paradigm and its Implications” with George Weissmann, Ph.D. This evening program is part of an ongoing series of lectures known as the Consciousness and Science Discussion Group, offered free-of-charge by the Bhaktivedanta Institute. The speaker will address what this new vision of the quantum theory implies for embodied beings, and will discuss some remarkable parallels with the views of Buddhism and Taoism. Room 300, Health Sciences West, UC San Francisco. 7:30–10 pm. 510/465-7618.

7 June (Fri.) “Jailing the Truth: An Evening of Inquiry With U.S. Army Capt. Lawrence Rockwood.” An engaged Buddhist who was court martialed for voluntarily witnessing the conditions of political prisoners held in Haitian jails, Rockwood will speak about his own case, and the suffering of others that is often masked when society fails to address military issues. Berkeley Unitarian Fellowship, Cedar and Bonita Sts. 7:30 pm. BPF

8 June (Sat.) “The Beauty and Wisdom of the Buddhist Teachings” with the Venerable Lama Tharchin Rinpoche. This Dzochen master of Vajrayana Buddhism will discuss the basic principles of Buddhism and be available to answer your questions regarding the Buddhist path. East West Bookshop, 342 Castro St., Mountain View. 415/988-9800. Cost $8. 7:30 pm.

22 June (Sat.) “Zazen in Motion” with Darlene Cohen. We tend to pick and choose the moments that we think are worthwhile to be alive and then we numb to the rest. In this workshop, participants will learn to use ordinary daily tasks to develop mindfulness, practice gentle movements that facilitate body awareness; discuss strategies for dealing with pain; and explore the importance of pleasure in creating a generous spirit. 1-4:30 pm. SFZC

4 July-1 Aug. (Thursdays) “Buddhist Psychology” with Senior Dharma Teacher Reb Anderson. In this class, participants will deeply study the psychological processes that give rise to bondage and suffering, as well as the processes and practices of liberation. 7:30-9 pm. Register by phone. SFZC

Beyond the Bay

12-16 June (Wed.-Sun.) “Insight Meditation & Deep Ecology” with Wes “Scoop” Nisker. Through creative use of the traditional Buddhist “Four Foundations of Mindfulness,” participants will examine their biological heritage, understand the animal body and survival aspects of their personalities, and finally examine the nature of consciousness itself. LMB

28-30 June (Fri.-Sun.) “Transforming the Mind” with Geshe Kalsang (continued on next page)
Meditation Retreat for Gays, Lesbians in NY

Vipassana teachers Eric Kolvig and Arinna Weisman will lead a retreat for lesbians and gays on July 18-21 at Zen Mountain Monastery in Mount Tremper, New York. Over the last few years they have led many Buddhist meditation retreats together around the country. Here is their brief description of the retreat, titled “Liberating Sexuality.”

“For lesbian and gay people, bringing together our lives and spiritual practice means forging freedom in the cruele of discrimination, AIDS, cancer, and institutions that often condemn us for who we are. We will use the spiritual tools of mindfulness and acceptance to work with the negative patterns that can impede our happiness. This retreat will be about wisdom and love: how to cultivate a clearer mind and more open heart, and how to live more empowered lives.”

Participants will follow a rigorous monastic schedule, including silent sitting, walking, and eating meditation. There will also be time each day for talks and group discussion. For further information or to register, call or write: Zen Mountain Monastery, P.O. Box 197, South Plank Road, Mt. Tremper, NY 12457; 914/688-2228; fax: 914/688-2415.

Ajahn Jumnien to Teach at Spirit Rock

Ajahn Jumnien, Thai forest monk and meditation master renowned for his metta (lovingkindness), returns to Spirit Rock this July. When Ajahn Jumnien taught here last year, he charmed and amazed everyone with his Dharma wisdom, energy, and lovingkindness. In turn, he was delighted to be at Spirit Rock to teach the Dharma.

Ajahn Jumnien teaches a daylong on Sunday, July 14; a weeklong retreat July 15-19; and a daylong on Saturday, July 20. The cost is $25 per day (no lunch). Contact codes: AJ1 (7/14); AJ2 (7/15); AJ3 (7/16); AJ4 (7/17); AJ5 (7/18); AJ6 (7/19); AJ7 (7/20).
From the beginning of Buddhist practice in this country there were people who wanted to experience traditional monastic training, but rarely were they willing to completely abandon their worldly connections. As a result, a unique type of Western Buddhist monasticism developed: an eclectic fusion where monastics maintained secular careers, married, and raised children. Because of this change, most of these modern Buddhist monastics did not get much experience with extended communal living, sharing their lives with other students, and studying continually with a teacher under varying circumstances—all vital and transformational aspects of monastic practice.

Most of the lay practice that goes on among new converts in America is a slightly watered-down version of monastic practice, and most of the monastic practice is a slightly glorified version of lay practice. At most Zen centers frequently nobody can tell the difference between a monastic and a layperson, except for the way they dress. Monastics usually wear black robes and lay practitioners wear robes of another color.

Most American monastics live in the world, not in monasteries. They don’t shave their heads, and they don’t take vows that are any different from the vows that lay practitioners take. This results in ambiguity and confusion. To me, this hybrid path—halfway between monasticism and lay practice—reflects our cultural spirit of greediness and consumerism. With all the possibilities, why give up anything? “We want it all.” Why not do it all?

Within the Mountains and Rivers Order we accent the differences between monastic and lay training because the beauty of the relationship between the two practices depends upon those distinctions. You can’t have co-origination and interdependence without differences. If everything were the same, there would be no possibility of a relationship or, for that matter, realization.

Monastic practice and lay practice are and always have been in dynamic relationship, one supporting the other. You would have a very short-lived lay practice without monasticism and a very short-lived monasticism without lay practice. That has been the history of the Buddha-dharma—2,500 years of it—with its vitality and lifeblood depending on the contrast, the contact, and the integration of these two streams.

The enlightenment of a monastic and a lay practitioner are not different. Both monastic and lay practice can result in deep, profound realization—one indistinguishable from the other. What are different are the respective occupations of monastics and lay practitioners, the difficulty of attaining realization, the depth and breadth of training, and the possibility of formally completing one’s study.

In the secular world, we have many responsibilities and gravitate in many directions: family, job, property, children, neighborhood. As one develops as a lay practitioner, one’s life takes place within the matrix of
the dharma, but the main focus remains either on one's family, on one's career, or both. For lay practitioners it is difficult to receive consistent guidance. They do not live with a teacher or senior students and thus have no ongoing models for daily practice. The only time this is available to them is when they are able to do periods of residency or meditation retreats at a training center.

In contrast, the focus of a monastic's life is the dharma itself. A monastic is married to the dharma. The major occupation of a monastic is the dharma—nothing else—one hundred percent of the time, every day.

In traditional Zen writings, the term “monastic” is not used; rather, there is the word unsui. Unsui literally translates as “clouds and water.” Clouds and water are free. Clouds follow the wind; water takes the shape of the terrain. Nothing holds them back. If you try to stop a stream, it just builds up behind the obstruction and goes over it. The journey to the ocean is unstoppable. The biggest dam in creation can't hold back the river in its flow. It is persistent, continuous, flexible.

Yet in a practical sense, one can ask, “What good is a monastic?” Our society certainly poses that question, not just in relation to Zen monastics, or Buddhist monastics, but concerning monastics in general. What does a monastic produce? In a materialistic culture, where such incredible value is placed on productivity, what does a monastic contribute? What good is such a life? What is the relevance of a monastic to the world?

In his Asian Journal, Thomas Merton wrote:

"Are monastics and hippies and poets relevant? No, we're deliberately irrelevant. We live with an ingrained irrelevance which is proper to every human being. The marginal person accepts the basic irrelevance of the human condition, an irrelevance which is manifested above all by the fact of death. The marginal person, the monastic, the displaced person, the prisoner—all of these people live in the presence of death, which calls into question the meaning of life. They struggle with the fact of death in themselves, trying to seek something deeper than death, because there is something deeper than death, and the office of the monastic or the marginal person, the meditative person, is to go beyond death, even in this life, to go beyond the dichotomy of life and death and to be, therefore, a witness to life."

Is this, then, a life of total freedom? From one point of view, those who haven't renounced the world are caught up in the world, and are controlled by the world. They are not free to go from one place to another. They have responsibilities and obligations. At the same time, a monastic, following a strict schedule and bound by vows, is completely in the hands of the teacher in a way that no lay practitioner possibly could be.

Shukke-tokudo, the Japanese word for monastic ordination, literally means “leaving home,” giving up one's last name and taking on a monastic's name. Home leaving is the defining characteristic of the monastic form, the heart of all the vows of a monastic. In home leaving, monastics renounce their genetic lineage and enter the family of the Buddha. Initiates are expected to be free of worldly obligations, have no dependents relying on them, and have no financial or personal debts, other than the infinite debt of gratitude for this life.

Bows made to our parents during the ordination ceremony are bows of appreciation and farewell: “Thank you for this life.” With monastic ordination, the relationship between parent and child completely changes. The child's duty to care for the parents is replaced with a vow to serve all sentient beings equally, without discrimination.

Leaving home doesn’t mean ignoring one's family, however. That is one of the tremendous misconceptions about Buddhist monastic practice that persists in this country, one that I personally don’t accept and don't practice. Yet Zen literature does present examples that seem to imply that leaving home requires cutting family ties completely. Master Tung-shan, for example, disregarded his mother when she became very old and asked to be admitted to his monastery. She was clawing at the door, crying for help. He wouldn't let her in. She died, according to the story, of a broken heart.

The story then continues, telling how she was reborn in some heaven and thanked her son for not breaking his vows as a monastic. Well, I don't buy it. If one takes a vow to save all sentient beings, surely that includes one's own mother. She shouldn't have to suffer under the handicap of having given birth to a monastic. She deserves, at least, an equal opportunity with the rest of sentient beings.

At Zen Mountain Monastery a monastic can either practice celibacy or be in a stable monogamous relationship. In my experience, the argument that monastics have to be celibate falters because there are very few people mature enough to enter that type of practice. There are exceptions; there are a few people for whom celibacy works. But, in
general, forced celibacy leads to frustration, bitterness, and regrets.

To practice a stable relationship there has to be a willingness to grant complete spiritual freedom to one's partner. The clouds and water image persists within the relationship: the two people are related, yet free. Although a monastic may have a life companion, that does not necessarily mean they will share the same home or raise a family together.

The monastics at Zen Mountain Monastery agree not to procreate. If they have a child, then they're a parent, not a monastic. Having brought another life into this world, to take care of that life becomes the imperative. They have to take off their robes and raise the child until he or she is independent. Only then can they put their robes back on and continue their monastic practice.

Similarly, if someone has unfinished business with their family, they need to take care of that before taking monastic vows. This doesn't mean that monastics ignore their parents or other family members. If a person is in need, and they're the most appropriate one to give them nourishment and take care of them, it's fine for them to do it. I like to think of our practice as a very human endeavor.

Every fifth day the monastics shave their heads and chant the Gatha on Shaving the Head. The gatha says:

In the drifting, wandering world, it is very difficult to cut off our human ties.
Now I cast them away and enter true activity.
It is in this way that I express my gratitude.
As I shave my head, I renew my vows to live a life of simplicity, service, stability, selflessness, and to accomplish the Buddha's Way.
May I manifest my life with wisdom and compassion,
And actualize the Tathagatha's true teaching.

These five vows distinguish the Mountains and Rivers Order monastic from a lay practitioner.

The vow of simplicity means renouncing worldly possessions and stripping yourself of distractions. It means burning your bridges behind you. Simplicity is the letting go of all the "stuff" we hold on to. It includes a vow of poverty. Monastics receive no salary and are not permitted to own any property. There are no inheritances, no safeguards. As a result, they become totally dependent upon the lay practitioners. If suddenly all the lay practitioners disappeared, the monastics would have to go out and work in order to feed themselves. Food and shelter are provided by the lay sangha, and in return the monastics offer their service to the community in a spirit of selflessness. This mutual dependency between the monastics and the lay practitioners creates an essential part of the dynamic. It allows the practice of true giving.

Central to the vow of service is giving your life away to others. Monastic life is being a servant to the Three Treasures—to the whole world and to all beings. It is a pure bodhisattva vow. Monastics serve the teacher, the fellow monastics, and the community. They respond to the needs of the people as circumstances unfold; their own life and needs become a secondary focus.

The vow of selflessness is the practice of forgetting the self and realizing the 10,000 things. It is a vow of intimacy, a whole body and mind combustion of this life, a vow of realization and actualization of the Buddha Way.

The vow of stability means having completed the major changes in one's life. That is, no vows, above the vow to the dharma, are functioning. There are no other superseding responsibilities or obligations. This means that we are dealing with an emotionally mature adult. It is hard for a 17-year-old to be that resolved and clear in forming a commitment.

The monastics, with their dedication, are the continuation of this dharma. Their vows assure that the dharma of this monastery will go on, even after the buildings disappear and the mountain itself crumbles. No matter where, no matter how, it will continue.

And it is for this reason that it has been so important to me, to my teacher, and to his teacher, to have completely dedicated monastics among our successors. On a larger historical scale, the stability provided by monasticism directly affects the well-being and the vitality of Buddhism in general. Whenever there was a decline in the vigor and authenticity of monastic practice, there was a parallel weakening of the religion itself. The spiritual spark has somehow always found a sanctuary within monastery walls.

The last of the five Mountains and Rivers Order monastic vows does not say "accomplishing the Buddha Way," as is usually said in Zen monasteries, but "accomplishing the Buddha's Way," that is, to live the life that the Buddha lived. The Buddha Way is the teachings of the Buddha. All practitioners make the vow to accomplish the Buddha Way. The monastic's vow is to accomplish the Buddha's Way, that is, to make real in one's own life the life of the Buddha.

To accomplish the Buddha's Way is not a place. It is not a goal. It doesn't have anything to do with time
time and space. It's a continuum that goes back to the beginningless beginning, a continuum that proceeds into the far-distant future, that verifies the life of all buddhas and is the realization of all buddhas.

The central continuity that we have had from year to year, over the past 15 years, has been maintained by the monastics. The comings and goings of the lay practitioners are quite dramatic. People come into residency for a year or two and then they leave. Others appear. Stability rests with the monastics. It is paramount to understand that the dynamic of monastic practice/lay practice, the interpenetrating of sacred and secular, is a two-way street. You can't do it with one or the other alone.

When you have the two components, you have what it takes. The bee and the blossom are both necessary in order for the fruit to appear on the tree. If there's no cross-fertilization, you don't get any fruit. If there's no fruit, there's no ripening. If there's no ripening, there are no seeds. If there are no seeds, there are no succeeding generations.

The interdependence between monastic practice and lay practice is the juice, the vital energy that will keep the dharma alive on this continent for many generations to come. It's important that we, as the Western sangha, recognize our responsibility to these future generations of Buddhists. The imperative of 2,500 years of monastic practice challenges us. It lies in our hands.

John Daido Loori is the abbot of Zen Mountain Monastery in Mount Tremper, New York. He is the author of Two Arrows Meeting in Mid-Air, published by Charles E. Tuttle Co., Inc.

Member Survey Results

There were 23 GBF members who returned the survey that appeared in the February 1996 newsletter. Pete Nelson of Los Angeles won the drawing and received a copy of the book, How the Swans Came to the Lake, by Rick Fields, a very readable history of Buddhism in America. The highlights of the survey responses follow:

- Most people liked the variety of newsletter articles. In particular, they appreciated articles on applying Buddhist teachings to daily life, and specifically to the experience of gay people.
- Other newsletter ideas included printing dharma talks, summarizing Sunday discussions, poetry, quotes from the Sutras, more articles by GBF members, and a section for gay Buddhists living outside the Bay Area.
- Opinion was divided on the logo. Several felt the pink triangle had negative connotations. Some suggested using the rainbow flag in the logo. A few requested more male images in the newsletter.
- Almost everyone responded enthusiastically to the idea of purchasing tapes of GBF talks from Sunday meetings and workshops.
- A slim majority liked the idea of GBF t-shirts. Those who didn’t thought it was too commercial.
- A number of people were interested in hosting a GBF speaker in their area, and possibly forming a group similar to GBF.

Classifieds Corner

Housing in Marin County/SF Bay
Professional learning holistic medicine, seeking housing in Marin County. Will also consider East Bay or other warm location in SF Bay Area. Ideally looking for one-bedroom apartment; alternately, renting two rooms in a shared household OK. Need to move between June and September 1996.

Housing for London Traveler
Zen Buddhist practitioner in his fifties who lives outside London seeks (paid) accommodations while in SF, preferably with a member of GBF. Expects to visit U.S. later in 1996. Also willing to reciprocate the hospitality to GBFers traveling to London.

GBF Meditation Retreat Planned for September

The fifth annual GBF weekend meditation retreat will take place on September 13-15, 1996, at Vajrapani Institute in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

This time of meditation, mindfulness, and fellowship is a great opportunity for us to practice together in the quiet and beautiful redwood setting of Vajrapani. This year we will combine traditional practices of sitting and walking meditation with some Dharma discussion and a group hike. We held our weekend retreat at this location last year, and have been warmly welcomed back by the residents of Vajrapani.

More detailed information about this event will be forthcoming during the next few months. Remember to mark your calendar for our annual retreat.

Contributors

Thanks to the following people who helped with this issue of the GBF Newsletter: Alan Oliver, Bob Hass, Brian Shelley, Daishin David Sunseri, David Holmes, John Krowka, Ken Harper, Mark Marion, and Robin Levitt.