**GBF Calendar**

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

- 3 Nov., Sunday Sitting (East Bay), 10:30 am, at the home of Geoff McEnany.
- 5 Nov., (Tuesday), Steering Committee Meeting, 7:00 pm, at the home of Larry White.
- 7 Nov., Thursday Sitting, 7:45 pm, at the home of Bill Kirkpatrick.
- 9 Nov., (Saturday), Relationship Forum, sponsored by GBF, 9 am–5 pm, Kairos House, 2128 15th Street (near Market), SF. Pre-registration required.
- 10 Nov., Sunday Sitting (SF), 10:30 a.m., 273 Page St. Speaker: Tibetan Buddhist nun The Ven. Robina Courtin.
- 14 Nov., Thursday Sitting, 7:45 pm, at the home of Lee Robbins.
- 16 Nov., Day of Meditation, 8 am–4 pm.
- 21 Nov., Thursday Sitting, 7:45 pm, at the home of Mark Marion.
- 24 Nov., Sunday Sitting (SF), 10:30 a.m., 273 Page St., SF. Open discussion.
- 28 Nov., Thursday Sitting, 7:45 pm, at the home of Edward Sams.

---

**Ven. Robina Courtin to Speak Nov. 10**

Our speaker on Sunday, November 10, will be the Venerable Robina Courtin. Robina has been a Tibetan Buddhist nun for over 18 years, having received gelongma ordination in December of 1994.

Originally from Australia, she spent 10 years working for Wisdom Publications, and has also taught and worked at various centers around the world for the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition.

She is currently the editor of *Mandala Magazine*, and lives in Soquel, CA. Robina commutes biweekly to lecture to her students at Tse Chen Ling Center for Tibetan Buddhist Studies in San Francisco. Her dynamic style and sense of humor are not to be missed! ☺

**Space Limited for Relationships Forum**

In its discussions last month, the Relationships Committee shifted from a limited sign-up *workshop* format to a more open *forum* format. Unfortunately, we did not fully consider the space limitations of Kairos House, which we had already reserved and paid for.

Instead of postponing the November 9 event, we have decided to proceed as announced in the October newsletter, but with a limited sign-up. To attend, please call the GBF voice mail number, 415/974-9878, press 5, state your desire to participate, and leave a name and phone number.

(continued on page 5)
The Local Dharma
November 1996

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

3, 10, 20 Nov. and 5 Dec. “Dr. Ambedkar: 40 Years of the Dharma Revolution in India,” a series of public talks (and slides) by Param Bodhi of the Western Buddhist Order. On Oct. 14, 1956, Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, chief architect of independent India’s constitution, converted to Buddhism by taking the Refugees and Precepts from India’s most senior bhikkhu, U. Chandramani. Dr. Ambedkar, in turn, administered the Refugees and Precepts to the crowd of 500,000 Hindu “untouchables,” thus starting the mass conversion movement and revival of Buddhism in India. Today it is estimated there are up to 20 million ex-untouchable Buddhists in India. SFBC

8-11 Nov. (Fri.-Mon.) “Practicing Peace: A Mindfulness Retreat on Healing and Transformation” led by Maxine Hong Kingston, Arnie Kotler, Wendy Johnson, and Therese Fitzgerald. This retreat for veterans, their friends, families, loved ones, and everyone interested in peace and transformation will take place on Veterans’ Day Weekend at a Tibetan Buddhist monastery in the Santa Cruz mountains. There will be an opportunity to sit, walk, eat, enjoy tea, and share the practice of mindfulness of our body, feelings, and mind. There will be guided meditations and writing exercises as a Sangha to help heal the wounds of war within our hearts. Cost: $125-175. 4:00 pm (Fri.)-2:00 pm (Mon.) CML

14 Nov. (Thu.) “Singing the Pine Trees Home: An Autumn Evening of Tea and Poetry” with Randall Weingarten and Sarah Seiter. One of a series of evenings in the study of the Way of Tea (Chanoyu). Please bring a poem or two to share—your own or one by a favorite poet. Cost: $15 Please register in advance; limited to ten people. 7-9 pm. GGF

17 Nov. (Sun.) “Translating Judaism, Translating Buddhism: a Jewish-Buddhist Retreat” with Rabbi Alan Lew and Abbot Zoketsu Norman Fisher. The encounter between the traditions of Judaism and Buddhism can magnify and freshen our understanding of both, and of ourselves. How does the practice of mindfulness relate to the practice of prayer? What is the existential dimension of a mitzvah? What does the word “God” really mean? The day will include traditional Jewish liturgy, Buddhist meditation practices, and discussion centered around texts of both traditions. Cost: $35. Please bring a bag lunch. GGF

19 Nov. (Tue.) “The Bodhisattva Precepts and Interdependence” with Tenzin Rab Andorson, Senior Dharma Teacher, Zen Center. Insight into the Buddha’s teaching on interdependence is central to realization and awakening to actual reality. The Precepts are a pivotal part of creating the causes and conditions for our own insight. This exceptional teacher will illuminate these interwoven topics. Suggested donation: $5-$10. 7:45-9 pm. HSZC

23 Nov. (Sat.) Clearing the Land— “Living Peace Patch” Walk with the Living Peace Meditation Community. As we clear the land of non-native exotic plants, we are preparing the space for plants that nourish and support the lives of the birds and all native creatures. So too, as we become aware of old habits and perceptions, creating a greater spaciousness of being, we nourish our seeds of beauty, love, and compassion. Propagating wild strawberries which help to stabilize the dune habitat offers us a time of personal grounding and connection. At Fort Funston, SF. Information: Karen, 415/346-3923.

(continued on next page)
Ideas on International Activism for Engaged Buddhists

The summer 1996 issue of Turning Wheel, a publication of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, contained a number of practical suggestions for Buddhists who wish to study and apply principles of compassion and lovingkindness at an international level. We offer them here for members of the GBF community. We also encourage readers to send in their own experiences with engaged Buddhist practice and responses to books they have read on this topic so we may share them with others.

1. Study and Inquiry

We would like to suggest a few books from among the many that relate to Buddhist activism at the international level.

- Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia edited by Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. Kin.
- Ancient Futures, Learning from Ladakh, by Helena Norberg-Hodge (Sierra Club Books, $12).
- Seeds of Peace by Sulak Sivaraksa (Parallax Press, $12).

2. Personal Practice

Consider the ways in which you feel connected to people struggling in other parts of the world. Notice what strengthens those feelings of connection. Find newspapers, magazines, and radio or TV news reports that you trust, and follow the international news.

Correspond with friends overseas by mail or electronically. Support people in your own community when they travel to international conferences, and listen to their reports when they return. Host travelers from abroad.

(continued on page 5)

In Brief

Starting Times for Sitting Groups

The East Bay Sunday sittings begin at 10:30 a.m., and not at 10:00 a.m. as reported in last month’s calendar. Also, beginning in November, the Thursday night sittings will begin at 7:45 p.m. rather than 8:00 p.m.

As with all GBF sittings, participants are requested to arrive five to ten minutes early. Doing so creates an intentional calmness and harmony that is most conducive to group meditation.

Second Mailing Party Coordinator

GBF is seeking a second person to help coordinate the monthly newsletter mailing “parties.” This person would alternate months with the current coordinator, Mark Marion, in hosting the get-togethers. To find out more about the job or to volunteer, please contact Mark at

Local Dharma (continued from page 2)

29 Nov. (Fri.)-8 Dec. (Fri.) Rigpa Fellowship’s Fall Retreat with Sogyal Rinpoche. This year’s retreat will be at Konocti Harbor Resort and Spa on Clear Lake. Information: 510/644-3922.

2-7 Dec. (Mon.-Sat.) Sesshin Retreat at Sonoma Mountain Zen Center.

This is a silent meditation intensive for experienced sitters to “still the mind” in a rigorous schedule which begins at 4:45 am with prostrations, 10 periods of meditation, chanting, mindful work, Dharma talks, and private interviews, ending at 9 pm. It begins at 7:30 on the first day and will end at 4 pm on the last day. Special arrangements can be made for those who cannot come for the entire retreat due to work commitments. $200 SMZC

Contributors 🌟🌟🌟🌟🌟

Thanks to the following people who helped with this issue of the GBF Newsletter: Alan Oliver, Bob Hass, Brian Shelley, Clint Seiter, Daishin David Sunseri, David Holmes, Jerry Gagnon, Ken Harper, Mark Marion, Robin Levitt, Steve Peskind, and Tom Moon.

New Mailing Party Volunteers Needed

GBF would like to increase the number of people we can count on to help with our monthly newsletter mailing “parties,” which are held the last Sunday of each month from 3:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. Since the get-togethers occur on the same day as our Sunday sitting, many sangha members have found this to be a convenient time to help. The mailing parties are a fun way to help the sangha and to get to know some of your fellow GBFers a little better. If you can assist on a fairly regular basis, please contact Mark Marion at
Meditations in an Emergency

by Jerry Gagnon

[From the author: "I wrote the following pieces, along with many others, a few years ago at a time in my life when the suffering I perceived around me seemed hopeless. Buddhism offered me a path and a promise. As I continue to study Buddhism, I find myself embracing aspects of Christianity as well, hearing in the words 'be still and know' the same message as Buddha’s and Dogen’s."]

Right Thought, Right Action

The unfortunate effect of abstract words like God [good] and evil is that we tend to externalize them. We assume God is out there and we’re apart from God. We perceive evil as something or someone else. In doing so, we fail to realize our capacity to unify these poles of dualism.

Our character is revealed through our actions, words, and thoughts. If I act in a way that is harmful to myself and others, it may be described in moral terms as evil, or it may be viewed in nonjudgmental terms such as ignorant or unskillful.

We understand that there is willful harming of others and ourselves. This can take the form of ecological destruction of the forests, oceans, and rivers. It can also manifest as physical violence, or mental and emotional duplicity.

But there is also willful good, and that too can be a dangerous thing. The willful good of the missionaries in California destroyed the culture of the Indians and introduced syphilis into their population. During the Inquisition, willful good manifested as religious fanaticism, resulting in widespread torture and killing of persons convicted of heresy against the Roman Catholic Church.

Our character is revealed through our actions, words, and thoughts.

How then do we know if our actions are truly good? We must look closely at the results of our actions. Is someone’s life better as a result of our work? Have we relieved suffering? That, it seems to me, is the definition of good work, and not how many “souls” have been saved or how many temples have been built.

The work of the artist may be seen as a celebration or spreading of “the word” of good. The carpenter makes shelter; the gardener brings seeds to harvest. All of these are equally good.

Interbeing

We’re freed when we say good morning to the beggar, not seeing him or her apart from our pain. We’re freed when we tend to the dying in the AIDS ward or the cancer ward. We’re freed when we help our children read and write. We’re freed when we step forward and say no to pollution, war, and starvation. Each of us can do something. Each of us can contribute.

We’re freed when we embrace our mutual condition of being human. With that freedom comes the power and the choice to enhance our culture and community by being a participating member—and not someone who lives in a gate-guarded mentality.

Repeat and Ritual

Perhaps the most difficult part of accepting religious notions of discipline is the idea of ritual, which involves endless repetition. Nothing is more tedious to someone used to composing or writing or some other creative pursuit that thrives on inspiration. Yet life itself involves endless repetition.

The process of repeating certain thoughts, prayers, or actions may lead us to a deeper level of understanding. Prayer, japa, or meditation on a mantra are tools to help us transcend our dilemma and lead us away from our preoccupations. Chanting, the repetition of songs of praise, or the recitation of vows can be equally helpful.

Having created form, in the shape of music, poetry, or art, or in the structure of religious discipline, we may then honor that form, knowing it comes from chaos and returns to chaos, just as the forms of our bodies return to the elements.

Enlightenment

We have to go “a little crazy” once in awhile. That’s what my grocer tells me every time he gets my bill mixed up. This “craziness” is very different from the kind of anger which leads to violence. It is a letting go of the need to be right, good, or enlightened.

We don’t have to strive to be divine; we are divine, even in our imperfect lives. More than this, we are simply human, and that is enough. We don’t have to put labels on it.

Washing the dishes, drying them, and returning them to the cupboard is a ceremonial act of our everyday lives, and is not apart from anything we may call enlightenment.
Bare-Bones Practice

It may not be necessary to engage in ritual at all. It may not be necessary to employ tools for meditation or worship. Just sitting, Dogen says, is the practice and the goal. Everything else is secondary. Just walking. Just sitting. Just brushing my teeth, with no other preoccupation.

Beginner’s Mind

I don’t believe anyone who is interested in pursuing a spiritual path or discipline and which involves an organization can ever be too skeptical.

What are the professed goals of the group and what are its achievements? Have people given up thinking for themselves? We shouldn’t be afraid to question the leaders of such groups. In fact, if dialogue is not encouraged, it is likely there’s a policy of withholding information—a hidden agenda.

Does the personal behavior of the leader serve as a mature role model?

The group may be a means for individuals to achieve power. How does the leader live compared to his or her spiritual followers or students? That kind of visible discrepancy can reveal a lot. How does the leader treat the followers? Are there instances of sexual exploits or drug abuse? Does the personal behavior of the leader serve as a mature role model? Finally, is there an opportunity to form warm and fulfilling relationships in the group, or is it a closed community that doesn’t encourage growth, self-sufficiency, and emotional maturity?

Jerry Gagnon is a poet, Buddhist, GBF member, and an aspiring playwright who lives in San Francisco.

International Activism
(continued from page 3)

You might choose a particular trouble spot to which you feel a connection: Burma, Chiapas, Rwanda, Bosnia, Chechnya, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, etc.—there’s no shortage of places to choose from, unfortunately—and educate yourself about that place.

Be a conscious consumer. Pay attention to where your food and clothing come from, what they’re made out of, whether people and the environment had to be poisoned in the course of their production, [and the working conditions and pay of the workers who produced those goods]. Forgive yourself for not being able to research all the karmic effects of everything you touch.

If and when you travel, keep eco-tourism in mind. Notice to whom your tourist dollars go.

3. Community-Based Action

Look into the ways your community is involved. Are there sister cities programs you can support? A local church project? Keep your eyes open for local film showings, benefits, and events sponsored by nonprofits working for human rights around the world.

Host a gathering at your home to raise consciousness about a particular issue. Have a speaker come, show slides, or show a video. The BPF office will be happy to send you a video on loan from our growing collection. We are compiling a complete list, but in the meantime we recommend the following: “Ancient Futures—Learning from Ladakh,” “Three Women Speak Out” (about Sri Lanka); “Satya: A Prayer for the Enemy” (about Tibetan refugee nuns); and “Caught in the Crossfire” (about women in Burma). Or show one of these videos to a community group you’re already a part of: your sangha, a school group, a book group.

Have a letter-writing party. The “Readings” section of Turning Wheel always lists several urgent issues that need your letters of support.

Remember to think globally and act locally; and think locally and act globally.

This article was reprinted with permission of Turning Wheel and the Buddhist Peace Fellowship.

Relationships Forum
(continued from page 1)

Attendance at this first relationship event will be limited to 30 people. All others will be notified that the forum is full. Participants should bring a bag lunch. Also bring any written notes and thoughts you have so we can continue to build on our insights.

For the next relationship event, which may be held in January, we intend to secure a larger space so that all who wish to attend will be able to.
“To be a spiritual seeker, or just to be living honestly with oneself, I think, needs a lot of courage. However, it is very easy to lose sight or get scared and go on auto pilot again. I have been doing that many times myself. I think life is like an Asian doll with a round bottom. Whenever you hit the doll it will bounce back again and again. In the quest to know oneself, we have to be able to get knocked off our feet and then get the courage to stand up again and again. It is very easy to not want to stand up again. Putting oneself out of one’s cultural or normal surroundings will help us to see things better. I was thinking back to the time when I was living in Thailand. That was the time I learned most about myself.”

“There are times that I feel being gay has helped me tremendously to develop myself spiritually compared to straight people. Going through all the frustrations and difficulties has helped me to be kinder.”

“It is quite different to ‘think’ Dharma and to actually feel it in the heart. When I look back and evaluate my spiritual practices, it seems that I’m back at square one! Well, at least better to know that I still have a long way to go rather than not to know it at all.”

[S—In 1995] “It was only a year ago that I started to come to terms with myself for being gay. I am afraid to say I am still very much in the closet about this aspect of my life. When I came across the book, Street Zen, I was very excited as I found an opportunity to connect with other gay people. This has led me to write to the Hartford Street Zen Center and now to your organization.”

[S—In 1996] “The last two weeks have been quite significant for me. I told a few of my friends that I am gay. Unlike my expectation, they were supportive of who I am. I’m really glad I told them. I feel like I’ve passed another milestone in my life. Not needing to hide behind a facade feels good. I feel like the burden that I’m carrying is beginning to become lighter. It might be quite some way to go before I am fully comfortable with my whole being, but at least I can see a possibility that I will reconcile with myself.”

“You know, as a gay man in China, I always wanted to find a spiritual organization. GBF now is coming to me. Thank you. I think I am a member of...
GBF now, aren’t I? For many reasons the homosexuals in China have been silent for a long time. Now we are eager to express ourselves. So I think it’s a good chance for us to share our happiness and pain and experience, and also our practice.”

“ For me, practice means peaceful life and happy heart and strength. You know, in Chinese culture people act like they don’t like themselves. That’s sad. We smile when we don’t want to smile. We do things we don’t want to do. That’s really stupid—especially as a gay man. We have a lot of pressure from family and society. In China, when a man hasn’t married in his twenties or thirties, the parents, the friends, and the other people will give you big pressure. For these reasons, most gay men in China act [pretend] in their daily lives. The homosexual men in China are tired, but some of them begin to come out. I think I will come out to all of the world sooner or later. Proudly: ‘I am a homo. I am proud of myself.’”

“About two or three thousand million people in China are homo. In every city there is a secret society for them. Fortunately, though, we have [created] so much pressure, the government is more open than before, and more and more people around us begin to accept homo love. ‘This is just a kind of love’ they say.”

“In these days, we have organized several meetings to discuss GBF. They think it’s a good idea to practice. We believe that in a way that draws forth the Dharma—the truth of Buddhism and of a person’s actual life. What was going on was meditation and mindful daily living. I think I am Buddhist now. I have to own everything, including my fears and anxiety attacks. We all have that feeling. You know, Buddhism is quite traditional in China. We gays in China have confidence that we shall succeed. We feel deeply grateful to GBF for helping us continue as practicing Buddhists. We are planning to form a GBF Sangha in our city.”

A note to our gay Asian Buddhist friends: If you would like to correspond with a GBF member in the U.S., send a letter to our post office box and we will run a short notice for you in our “Sangha Exchange” section.

**Following the Buddha’s Intention**

by Steve Peskind

About 2,500 years ago a man, Siddhartha Gautama, worked honestly and hard to show up for his appointment with life, to investigate his heartfelt desire to experience truth beyond the suffering of illness, old age, and death.

He practiced and looked deeply in order to see. His life’s path included extremes of pleasure and indulgence as a sheltered prince, and austere, life-threatening asceticism as a forest yogi. He then came to realize that he needed to honor the given necessities of a human life, taking care of himself in moderation in order to honor his heart’s desire. He came to see that a cared for human life is the vehicle for awakening. As a human being he showed that human life and awareness are precious opportunities for freedom and happiness.

The man Siddhartha sat under a tree and, interdependent with all aware beings—including a friend who brought him food—vowed to realize the true nature of his experience. He did. He is said to have fully awakened to the truth of what is, and was then called The Buddha or Awakened One. Countless beings have been profoundly affected by that event, 2,500 years ago.

The Buddha reflected long and hard on whether to teach. When he decided to teach, he did not say; “Worship Buddha.” He said, “Be a lamp unto yourself.” He recommended practicing the way of moderation with others of like intention.

The teachings of The Buddha are known as the Buddha Dharma, or the truth of “what is,” which is seen from the awakened mind. The Buddha taught that the experience of “what is” is marked by change, interdependence (no completely separate independent anything exists), and suffering. He described suffering as a sense of something lacking due to 1) delusion or not truly seeing what is; 2) attachment to or grasping at changing experience; and 3) fear and aversion of and anger at things as they are.

He then described his view of the way to freedom from suffering, articulated as the Four Noble Truths: 1) the existence of suffering; 2) the origin or pattern of suffering; 3) the cessation of suffering; and 4) the way to freedom from suffering. The Four Noble Truths and instructions on the way to freedom are the foundation of all Buddha Dharma.

To hear of the Buddha’s experience and teachings and to practice them is very fortunate. To meet our suffering and others with the honest intention to support each other in learning and practicing the way of freedom is the gift of a Gay Buddhist Fellowship.

One might guess that men come to the Gay Buddhist Fellowship to nurture and feed their hearts, and not with a spiritual trip or evangelical rhetoric, nor the relative judgments of religious tradition presented as absolute truth. I come to hear and consider with others common sense teachings that point to freedom from suffering and the real possibility of happiness.

Together we can look at, listen to, and perhaps loosen the delusion, grasping, craving, fear, anger, pride, and jealousy which obscure our freedom and happiness. And in our heartfelt commitment to freedom and happiness, we can love each other more deeply.

Steve Peskind is a coordinator of the Buddhist AIDS Project and a member of the GBF Sangha. He is also editor of an upcoming anthology on Buddhist practice and living with HIV.