GBF Calendar

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

San Francisco Events

2 Dec., Steering Committee Meeting, 7:15 pm, at the home of Larry White.

4 Dec., Thursday Sitting, 7:45 pm: meditation, at the home of Bill Kirkpatrick.

7 Dec., Sunday Sitting 9:30/10:30 am SFBC, 37 Bartlett St.

11 Dec., Thursday Sitting, 7:45 pm: meditation, at the home of Lee Robbins.

14 Dec., Sunday Sitting, 9:30/10:30 am SFBC, 37 Bartlett St.

18 Dec., Thursday Sitting, 7:45 pm, at the home of Mark Marion.

20 Dec., GBF’s Feed-The-Homeless Project at the Hamilton Family Center. To participate, contact Clint Seiter.

21 Dec., Sunday Sitting/Holiday Potluck, 9:30/10:30 am SFBC, 37 Bartlett St. Potluck will follow sitting. Details at the Sunday Sittings.

28 Dec., Sunday Sitting, 9:30/10:30 am, SFBC, 37 Bartlett St.

4 Jan., Sunday Sitting, 9:30/10:30 am, SFBC, 37 Bartlett St.

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Gay Buddhist Fellowship Mission Statement

The Gay Buddhist Fellowship exists to support Buddhist practice in the gay community. Our understanding of practice includes, but is not limited to, traditional Buddhist practices such as meditation and mindfulness, individual forms of practice, compassionate service in the community, and relationships with teachers and spiritual friends. The GBF is a forum in which all of the distinct Buddhist traditions can be brought together to address the spiritual concerns of gay men.

We respect and care for each other in a compassionate way as an expression of the full realization of the Dharma. We recognize that every aspect of our lives is practice. We cultivate a social environment that is accepting, open, inclusive, and caring. We acknowledge and support the growing network of gay practitioners in the United States and around the world. In addition, we intend to create programs that contribute to the well-being of the larger community.

The Gay Buddhist Fellowship Newsletter is published monthly by the Gay Buddhist Fellowship. It provides news of interest to GBF members, as well as writings by living Buddhists teachers covering a broad cross-section of current Buddhist thought. It also serves as a forum where gay Buddhist practitioners can address spiritual concerns regardless of their form of practice or tradition. All signed articles express the opinions of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the GBF. c 1996 Gay Buddhist Fellowship. All rights reserved.

QUEER DHARMA

Contributors to QUEER DHARMA, a collection of writings by Gay Buddhists edited by Winston Leyland, will read on Sunday, December 7, at A Different Light Bookstore, located at 489 Castro St. Readers will include Myo Lahey from the Zen tradition, Mark Marion from the Vipassana tradition and Tony Richardson, M.D. from the Sakya lineage of Tibet. The reading begins at 7:30.

Other participants who appear in QUEER DHARMA include Daishin David Sunseri, John Kilarcy and Michael Hyman.

In West Hollywood there will be a reading Sunday, December 14, at A Different Light Bookstore. Vajra Karuna, Trebor, and Don Tatum will be reading.
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6 Jan., Steering Committee Meeting, 7:45 pm, at the home of Larry White,

8 Jan., Thursday Sitting, 7:45 pm, at the home of Bill Kirkpatrick,

11 Jan., Sunday Sitting, 9:30/10:30 am, SFBC, 37 Bartlett St.

15 Jan., Thursday Sitting, 7:45 pm, at the home of Lee Robbins,

17 Jan., GBFs Feed The Homeless Project at the Hamilton Family Center. To participate, contact Clint Seiter,

18 Jan., Sunday Sitting, 9:30/10:30 am, SFBC, 37 Bartlett St.

22 Jan., Thursday Sitting, 7:45 pm, at the home of Mark Marion,

25 Jan., Sunday Sitting, 9:30/10:30 am, SFBC, 37 Bartlett St.

29 Jan., Thursday Sitting, 7:45 pm, at the home of Larry White,

Gay Buddhist Fellowship; A Case Study

Roger Corless

Wherever there have been humans there has been homosexual as well as heterosexual conduct, and we can be sure that there have always been followers of the Buddha Dharma who have engaged in same sex affectional or erotic behavior. What appears to be new to the American scene is the social and political visibility of persons who identify themselves as gay and who wish to practice Buddhism in the conscious acceptance of their gayness. Whether or not this produces a Gay Buddhism (whatever that might mean) or even a group of humans who can be called, or who call themselves, Gay Buddhists, the phenomenon focuses simultaneously on Buddhism and gayness and thereby cuts across the lineage and cultural lines which Buddhism has established in Asia. It is producing a distinctively American, or at any rate Western, Buddhism.

This article will discuss the emerging phenomenon of the practice of Buddhism in the gay community, and the problem of how best to study it, by focussing on a particular case, the Gay Buddhist Fellowship of San Francisco.

Observing and Participating

When I came to America I found that it was common to be asked "What is your methodology?" I was perplexed by the question, which seemed to me oddly Teutonic, and I would reply "I don't have one. I'm English. I simply proceed." This is how I study the phenomenon of Buddhism in the gay community. Trained as a textual critic, first in Biblical Studies and then in Buddhology, I was accustomed to material that was static, dead, objective, and mute until I gave it voice. I was quite unprepared for the study of a community that is constantly changing and alive, which involves me emically as a participant as much as etically as an observer, and is not only vocal but opinionated. In order to make sense of what was happening I had to draw on another side of my experience, my non-professional training as a practitioner of Buddhism. I was also required to come out, or rather to come further out, as a gay man.

I am not sure that I did either of these things on purpose. Studying the Gay Buddhist Fellowship was something that just seemed to happen. My former colleague in the Buddhist Studies program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Jeffrey Hopkins, gave a paper at the Gay Men's Issues in Religion Group of the American Academy of Religion. Hearing his paper I thought, more or less on a whim, "Why don't I do that?" So I did, and almost instantly

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became notorious. I discovered that the field of Buddhism and homosexuality was even more sparsely populated than Pure Land Buddhism, my official specialty, and that if I published anything at all in the field I would be considered an expert. So, in 1994, Ken Tanaka of the Institute of Buddhist Studies, Berkeley, invited me (calling from a Buddhist hot tub in Jemez Springs, New Mexico, as I remember) to give the lecture on Buddhism in the gay community in the Numata series on "Buddhisms [sic] in America". To gather material for the lectures I spent the summer in San Francisco, where I quickly came upon the Gay Buddhist Fellowship. I was accepted at once as a Buddhist and a gay man and, before I could do anything about it, was recognized as a participant-observer.

Up to the present, I remain the only formally trained Buddhist who is a member of, or rather has a consistent connection with, GBF. This position has the advantage that I am able to analyze both the Buddhist and the gay elements in GBF with reasonable professional accuracy, and the disadvantage that my presence actively and intentionally pollutes the sample. As a member of the Steering Committee told me, when, during a meeting which I was attending to observe and take notes, I strongly suggested that GBF act in one way rather than another, "You are the worst fly on the wall I have ever known!"

My actions might be called in question as being thoroughly unacademic. On the other hand, they can be used as a focus for discussion on the merits and demerits of so-called objectivity in scholarship. I have argued elsewhere that, in so far as academic method claims to be objective, it is not only incoherent but anti-Buddhist, and that when such scholarship is used to study Buddhism it can only result in reducing it to absurdity. Were I, then not to be a participant in GBF I would not be able to observe it, not simply because I might not be fully trusted, but because the Buddhist teaching of interdependent arising, if true, renders the notion of totally objective, non-participatory observation unintelligible. The observer must participate in some way, either as an aloof and disturbing robot or as a member of the group. I choose to participate as a member. Because of this, as will already be apparent, it is necessary for me to speak in the first person rather than to pretend to the objectivity of the grammatical third person.

It follows that the data is not capable of being displayed in a static, Aristotelian grid. It is both inside and outside, emic and etic, and it changes not only as it is being collected but due to the very means of the data collection itself. The most obvious consequence of this is that by the time any information is published it is already out of date. Publication in a book, the format favored by the Humanities, is clearly unsatisfactory except for the purposes of historical records. Articles, even if they can be brought out speedily in the manner customary amongst the Sciences, are only marginally better. The only way in which dynamic, participatory data can be authentically made known is through constantly updated, browser-interactive, multimedia web sites with periodic capture and archiving of the cache so that significant changes can be tracked. However, such a web site is not yet available so I will, for the moment, work within the traditional constraints.

First, I note that I am, in this paper, restricting myself to the GBF. I do this because, although there are other groups of gay men practicing Buddhism, none that I have found raise the dual issue of gayness and Buddhism quite so clearly. Secondly, I am not here concerned with lesbians practicing Buddhism. My preliminary contact with groups such as the East Bay Lesbian Sangha (in Berkeley) and the Dharma Sisters (in San Francisco) intimates that the energy and direction of lesbian groups might be very different from the energy and direction of gay male groups. Lesbian-led Buddhist groups and gay-led Buddhist groups may indeed turn out to be different forms of American Buddhism. This is a matter for further study.

My data is in the form of ephemera (primarily the Gay Buddhist Fellowship Newsletter), interviews, and attendance at meditation sessions, Dharma Talks, and business meetings. As a fully participating observer, I contribute to the Newsletter and give Dharma Talks. In particular, to collect data for this paper, I lived in San Francisco between 25 December 1996 and 10 January 1997, attended the regular meetings of GBF, and interviewed ten members prominently involved in GBF activities. Nine of the interviewees were Caucasian, one was Thai-Chinese. With each interviewee I discussed, in no particular order and without the use of a formal questionnaire, the following topics: lineage, authority, practice, sexuality, precepts (shila), and community. I concluded with the intentionally provocative question "Do you think that there is, or will be, a Gay Buddhism?" I chose these questions as being central to traditional Buddhism and to gayness. My intent was to discover how both Buddhism and gayness had changed by their interaction.

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The Awakening of the Posture Queens

When we think of the gay community in San Francisco we usually think first of the Castro, one of those areas of "the City" whose boundaries seem to be as clear to the residents as they are invisible to visitors. The center of the Castro is a single block of Castro Street between 18th and Market Streets. Three blocks west along 18th Street is Eureka Street, and half a block south on Eureka is the purple-painted Metropolitan Community Church. Founded in Los Angeles by a Baptist minister, Rev. Troy Perry, as a ministry to gay and lesbian Christians, MCC has expanded to reach out to all oppressed persons (its Third World missions are largely heterosexual) and has become effectively a separate denomination, although, as Rev. Jim Mitsui, pastor of San Francisco MCC, says, it is "Protestant by default".

The meeting rooms of San Francisco MCC are always busy, home not only to gay Christians but to gay Twelve Step meetings and HIV support groups. It was a natural place in which to gather to discuss whether one could be gay and still be a good Buddhist; the topic, according to Steve Peskind, of the first meeting of what was called the Gay Buddhist Group, on April 6, 1980. The Gay Buddhist Group or Club apparently died out in the mid-eighties and revived as, or was replaced by, the Gay Buddhist Fraternity (as GBF was first called) in the mid-nineties.

The original, as it were the founding question, of how to be fully gay and fully Buddhist, is still being asked in GBF. But in the opinion of Ding-hao Ma, the only Asian who is prominent in GBF, someone who asks such a question indicates that, although they might claim to be Buddhist, they are really Christian at heart and have a lot of unresolved Christian expectations. Westerners need, he thinks, to be accepted by a religion and they feel bad when the Church excommunicates them. But why, he asks, cannot they excommunicate the Church?

Ding-hao's observation prompts us to ask the larger question "Is Buddhism a religion?" Something about coming to America seems to require the Buddha Dharma to take on ecclesiastical and doctrinal features, to make it a separate "thing", to espouse a philosophy and a metaphysic: in short, to transform itself from a set of practices (the Triple Practice of conduct, meditation, and wisdom-study) into a pseudo-Christian religion somewhat in the way American Judaism has changed from being a people, or a tribe, into "the Jewish faith". It was notable how many members of GBF advanced high metaphysical explanations for the importance of GBF.

David Holmes, who is regarded as a teacher by many members, strongly argued for the existence of a "gay spirit", an ancient and universal calling to living shamanistically "between the worlds", and saw GBF as one of the places where gays could come together to realize who they are and what their cosmic purpose is. Ding-hao, on the other hand, goes to GBF for quite pragmatic reasons; in order to meet other gay men who might be Buddhist and so might have more to offer than the men he meets in the usual gay scene. Being "gay and Buddhist" is a non-issue for him. His only regret (perhaps, he admits, due to Confucian sensibilities) is that he will not have children who will continue the family line.

The majority of the fifty or so persons who attended the first meeting of the Gay Buddhist Group or Club were Buddhist, with a minority identifying themselves as Hindu. Of the Buddhists, members of Zen Center (founded by Suzuki Shunryu Roshi and located in a large, airy building at the corner of Page and Laguna Streets) and its offshoots predominated, but there were also practitioners of Insight Meditation, and students of Trungpa Tulk. Multi-lineage membership is a feature that has remained constant. Individuals may have their own teachers and lineage affiliation outside of GBF but within GBF they tend to form what David Holmes called an "affinity group" or, as another member characterized it, "a community of friends" brought together by their common interest in practicing Buddhism as gay men and producing a "Group Mind". GBF is not a pre-existing organization which one joins: it creates and maintains itself interdependently with the needs of those who consider themselves members. Somewhat on the model of Twelve Step groups, anyone can be called a member if they call themselves a member. There is no membership fee and nothing, really, to join.

The feeling of interdependence seems to be related to the decentralized source of authority. Some members are considered "elders" (Lee Robbins calls them "people of wisdom") whose views are accorded a greater measure of respect, but there is no formal teacher. A Steering Committee, open to anyone, oversees the general organization. The meeting which I attended on Tuesday, January 7, 1997, was marked by free discussion moving towards consensus. I was told that this format was typical. My suggestion that it was the Sangha as a whole that was the teacher and leader was accepted as a reasonable characterization.

The most famous, or notorious, member of the Gay Buddhist Group or Club was Issan Dorsey, a former drag queen turned Zen Master, who helped organize the subsequent, regular meetings of the association at 57 Hartford Street, the location (one block east of Castro Street, between 17th and 18th Streets) which became the Hartford Street Zen Center. He was elected its Abbot and, after his death, HSZC was named Issanji (ji is Sino-Japanese for Buddhist Temple) in his honor. Issan was ordained in the lineage of Suzuki Shunryu Roshi, and David Sunseri, a current member of GBF whom many

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referred to as a monk, said that he had received tokudo (priestly ordination) from Issan. The Zen element, which was thus so prominent from the beginning of the experiment in which persons met as explicitly and simultaneously gay and Buddhist, continues to modify the multi-lineage make-up of GBF. GBF practice, like that of many other Buddhist groups formed largely by white converts, is almost entirely limited to “sitting” with little or no direction and a conspicuous absence of ritual. “Sitting” tends to be perceived as a common denominator of “Buddhism”, or of “Zen”, which is often regarded as synonymous with “Buddhism”. I found, during my December 1996 to January 1997 visit, no evidence of members being aware that what they are doing is actually quite modern and, perhaps we might say, sectarian, being an adaptation of the self-consciously anti-religious reform of Buddhism in Meiji Japan. A truly multi-lineage association of Buddhists could be expected to practice according to a variety of identifiable lineages and to employ their attendant ceremonies, rituals, and traditions of chanting. To the contrary, however, I found attitudes ranging from suspicion to outright hostility vis-à-vis ritual. Images, rosaries, offerings, incense, and all the other workaday trappings of any Buddhist temple are entirely, and apparently deliberately, absent from GBF meetings. Zafus and a kin (a small cup-shaped gong), struck to mark the beginning and end of sitting, are the only items of traditional Buddhist furniture.

Although many members are vocal on the subject of sexuality and gayness in the abstract, or metaphysical, sense, and frequently bring up the topic of gay relationships, the actual practice of sex is rarely discussed. David Sunseri said that, due to his ordination, he holds the Ten Precepts. No other member felt it necessary to mention the Precepts by name. Alcohol is not forbidden and there are no guidelines for wholesome sexual conduct. A provocative article in the GBF Newsletter for January 1997 on Buddhism and casual sex was often referred to in conversation but the issues it raised have not been resolved. Only one letter (opposing the views expressed) has appeared in response to the article (in the April 1997 issue). The view most commonly expressed by GBF members is that the Precepts are not important in their literal sense but in their intent: they are general ethical guidelines which each person may interpret as he thinks fit. This private, psychologized, understanding of ethical conduct appears to owe more to American individualism than to traditional Buddhist views of the Precepts as rules for training the body-mind complex by controlling the actions of body and speech.

Transgendered Buddhism

We come now to the question of Gay Buddhism. Is there, or could there ever be, such a thing? Does the term even make sense? Most respondents, when asked the
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seems that we suffer as many reversals as successes in the courts and at the polls. But we can still move on to propose the restructuring of the status quo symbology along other than heterosexist lines. Such a move may even preempt the legal and electoral reversals. By challenging the universality of sexual bifurcation, the symbology of the Other, and suggesting a symbology of Another Me, the non-duality which Buddhism preaches but too often does not practice may be strengthened. That is the subject of my next book.

Notes:

This article is edited from a paper given at the conference Buddhism in America: Methods and Findings of Recent Scholarship, Harvard University, May 23rd, 1997.

I use the term "Western" in the cultural, rather than geographic, sense as suggested by Marshall Hodgson.

As will be made clear, there is no formal membership of GBF.

By contrast, The Gay Way of Buddhism by Randolph Conner, David Sparks, and Mariya Sparks (The Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review, Fall 1996, pages 22n25) is misleading and unbalanced since none of the authors is trained in Buddhism.

"How is the Study of Buddhism Possible?" Method & Theory in the Study of Religion 2:1 (Spring 1990) 27n41.

For a more general study, see the revised version of my 1994 Numata Lecture, Coming Out in the Sangha: Queer Community in American Buddhism in Faces of Buddhism in America, edited by Charles Prebish and Kenneth Tanaka (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming).


Interview, at a friend's apartment in the Haight, Friday, January 3, 1997. (All locations are in San Francisco unless otherwise specified.) Other informants said that the group was known as the Gay Buddhist Club.

Information on the history of the GBF/GBC and its successors is drawn largely from the interview with Steve Peskind, who admits that his memory is somewhat sketchy for the crucial period of the mid 'eighties to mid 'nineties since he was living in Orange County, California at the time (where he started a gay Buddhist group that is still active). A more formal history was written by the partner of Gary Weiss, owner of Ixia, a flower shop at 2331 Market Street, San Francisco, but neither Gary nor anyone else can find it and I have therefore been unable to consult it. Whether to regard GBF as a new organisation or a revival of GBF/GBC is something of a judgement call since there appears to have been a hiatus but many of the members of both groups are the same.

Interview at his apartment in the Mission, Wednesday, January 8, 1997. Ding-hao was born in China to a Teochiu-speaking family as Bae Tenghow. The Mandarin pronunciation of his name was adopted when the family moved to Thailand.

For the characterization of Judaism as a tribe I am indebted to my colleague Kalman Bland of the Department of Religion of Duke University.

Interview at the China Court Restaurant, Castro at 19th Street, Tuesday, December 31, 1996.

Interview with Lee Robbins, at his home in the Castro, Monday, December 30, 1996.

Interview with Alan Oliver, Sunday, December 29, 1996.

As of January 1, 1997, $15 a year is being requested as a subscription for the (GBF) Newsletter. The size of the newsletter mailing list is usually cited in lieu of a membership figure.

In April 1997 this matter came up again for discussion and a feeling developed that an association with a recognized teacher would be beneficial.

David Schneider, Street Zen: The Life and Work of Isan Dorsey (Boston and London: Shambhala, 1993). Issan dubbed the practitioners at HSZC "posture queens".

In particular, a Relationships Forum held by David Sunseri at Kairos (an HIV resource center) on November 11, 1996, was well attended and well received.

The Intimate and the Archetypal: Can the Buddhist Dharma be Applied to Casual Sex? by Clint Seiter (GBF Newsletter, January 1997). Clint's interest in addressing this topic is understandable in the light of the fact that he writes erotic fiction under a nom de plume.

One member expressed the fear that there is a tendency in GBF to rationalize existing behavior and say, for example, that cruising is Buddhist practice as long as it is done with an attitude of non-attachment. He said he has brought this issue up occasionally but received no response.

Mention of "family" is so common in the Newsletter and in conversation with GBF members we could almost give it a passim reference. One example will suffice: Andrew Hudson writes of his experiences forming a gay sitting group in Washington DC under the heading We Are Family, GBF Newsletter, May 1996.

This is how Anne Klein approaches Buddhism. (Anne C. Klein, Meeting the Great Bliss Queen: Buddhists, feminists, and the art of the self, Boston: Beacon Press, 1995). Note that the French jouir, "to enjoy", has the slang meaning of "to come (sexually)" and is used by feminists in full consciousness of the pun.

The Local Dharma
December '97/January '98

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

Special Events

New Year’s Vajrasattva Retreat. December 21-January 3. VI

Suzuki Roshi Memorial Service and Dinner at December 21. Please reserve by December 17. SFZC

There will be a Winter Holiday Party on Saturday, December 20 at the SF Zen Center. Supper is at 6:30 and the party will begin at 7:30. SFZC

At the SF Zen Center there will be a midnight sitting on 12/31/97 and on the morning of January 1, 1998. Call the SF Zen Center at 415/863-3136 for details. SFZC

At Green Gulch a Sensory Awareness Workshop will be held December 12-14. For information call 415/383-3134. GGF

New Year’s Meditation Celebration at Green Gulch December 31, 8:00-12:30. GGF

SF Zen Center presents a series of lectures and workshops called At Millennium’s Edge. Robert Thurman will begin the series January 31-February 1. For a series brochure: 415/863-3133, e-mail: sfzc@pacbell.net, or visit their website: www.zendo.com/~sfzc. SFZC

Support for Ram Dass. Although Ram Dass is recovering from his stroke, he still needs support for medical expenses. Please send donations to: The Hanuman Foundation c/o Jai Lakshman, P.O. Box 478, Santa Fe, NM 87504.

Dharma Centers

[Each center offers ongoing programs and activities. If interested, please contact them directly.]

- BSC: Berkeley Shambhala Center: 2288 Fulton Street, Berkeley. 510/841-6475.
- CDS: California Diamond Sangha, P.O. Box 2915, Petaluma, CA.
- CML: Community of Mindful Living, P.O. Box 7355, Albany. 510/527-3751.
- DI: Dudjom International, P.O. Box 40155, Berkeley. 510/849-9928.
- EGZC: Empty Gate Zen Center, 5707 Oakgrove Ave., Oakland. 510/653-5991.
- EHMC: Enlightened Heart Meditation Center. 415/255-0798.
- NI: Nyingma Institute: 1815 Highland Place, Berkeley. 510/943-6812.
- ODD: Origyen Dorje Den: 410 Townsend #406, SF. 415/382-7181.
- POL: Pema Osel Ling: 2013 Eureka Canyon Road, Corralitos. 408/761-6266.
- SBC: Saraha Buddhist Center, 3145 Geary Blvd. #515, SF. 415/731-5973.
- SCZC: Santa Cruz Zen Center, 113 School Street, Santa Cruz. 408/457-9056.
- SFBC: San Francisco Buddhist Center: 37 Bartlett St., SF. 415/282-2108.
- SFSC: SF Shambhala Center: 1630 Taraval St., SF. 415/731-4426.
- SFZC: San Francisco Zen Center: 300 Page Street, SF. 415/863-3136.
- TCL: Tse Chen Ling Center: 4 Joost Ave., SF. 415/333-3261.
- VI: Vajrapani Institute, P.O. Box 2130, Boulder Creek. 408/338-6654.
- ZHP Zen Hospice Project, 415/863-2910.

Contributors

Thanks to the following people who helped with this GBF Newsletter: Alan Oliver, Scott Stulmaker, Larry White, Dori Weipert, Howard King, and Roger Corless.
Dharma Gateways

Each of us helplessly and forever contains the other.

-James Baldwin

How to Reach Us:

GBF Sangha: Send correspondence and address changes to GBF, 2261 Market Street #422, San Francisco, CA 94114. For 24-hour information on GBF activities or to leave a message, call 415/974-9878.

GBF Newsletter: Send submissions to: Editor, GBF Newsletter, 2261 Market Street #438, San Francisco, CA 94114. If possible, include a DOS or Windows disk in Word or as a text file, along with your hardcopy. ♦