Looking in the Mirror

by Kevin Berrill

In July, my partner Chuck and I took part in a nine day Vipassana retreat at the Insight Meditation Society (IMS), a beautiful and friendly Buddhist retreat center in Barre, Massachusetts. I had been to IMS before, and this retreat was very similar to the others, consisting of intervals of sitting and walking meditation from dawn till bedtime. Each evening we listened to a talk given by one of three dharma teachers. We also met periodically in small groups that were facilitated by a teacher. The food was delicious and varied. Our rooms were monastically simple; mine looked up a steep hillside of ferns and fragrant pine trees. The cool, dry air was a welcome relief from the oppressive heat and humidity of Washington, DC, where we live together.

As I walked the lovely grounds of IMS on that first evening, I felt relieved to be there again, and slightly nervous about how my experience of the retreat would unfold. The quiet and peace of the place offered the possibility of serenity, and I did have my serene moments. There were also plenty of moments when my mind was like a noisy theme park. At those times, I felt as if I were lost in a funhouse, wandering through a gallery of mirrors. I took a look in those mirrors and did my best to make friends with whom I saw.

Upon our arrival at IMS, we were assigned a daily “yogi job.” On previous retreats, I had washed pots or run the dishwasher. When I was asked to water and tend to the plants, I thought, “Perfect!” I pictured myself a beacon of serenity, a Buddhist Martha Stewart, gliding through the place with my watering can, exquisitely mindful, full of ease and joy.

That might have been the case, were I not still caught up in some very old habits around work: a struggle with perfectionism, a tendency to over-commit my time, a difficulty pacing work, a fear of making mistakes and being criticized, and a habit of merging with what I do. So, I found myself relating to my assignment as if it were some new high-powered Washington job. Since I knew next to nothing about plants, I read carefully the laminated care instructions in each pot. Sometimes, I was so focused on the instructions, I never even stopped to notice the plants. That provoked a little judgement; and I was unnerved to discover that some plants didn’t come with care instructions. Fear. The housekeeper was nowhere around; I didn’t know what to do. Doubt. I wondered: Was I over watering? Was I under watering? Was I killing a plant and not knowing it? I accidentally “pruned” several healthy branches off a Wandering Jew. Would I be rebuked? Sent off to wash pots? It was soon
What to do With Hurt Feelings
by David Richo, PhD

We humans have a long history of being mean to one another. In the face of this unfortunate fact, the ego has a repertory ready to be employed: attack in a vengeful way or withdraw in an alienating way. What is the alternative adult spiritual response when someone hurts your feelings, acts inconsiderately toward you, or is downright mean to you?—Practice loving kindness. As you live in accord with standards that transcend your ego's habitual strategies of flight and flight, you evolve.

Here is what the defense-less and resource-full alternative might look like:

I let myself feel this hurt fully without any defense against it.
I vow not to retaliate.
I declare directly to the person the impact of his/her behavior on me without blaming or shaming.
I accept the fact of occasional inconsiderateness or meanness as a given of the human condition.
I am determined not to be mean myself.

(continued on next page)

I handled sitting and walking meditation in much the same way I tended the plants. My efforts to stay present in the moment were often a struggle. As I tried to concentrate, the muscles of my mouth, forehead and jaw tightened. As I investigated these feelings and sensations, I realized that my struggle was fueled by a subtle but powerful desire to improve myself. Without being aware of it, I was using meditation as a tool to get somewhere, to get myself fixed, to become—more effective, productive, smarter, better. I also realized that if practice hinges on becoming rather than being, then there is an agenda outside the present moment, where the practice is grounded. Because expectation kept me leaning forward into the future rather than resting in the present, there was always the underlying question of whether I would get what I desired. Caught between wanting and fear-of-not-getting, struggle was inevitable.

The striving in my practice mirrors my outer life. Ever since adolescence, I have been preoccupied with improving myself. I practiced the softball throw to avoid humiliation in gym, went to therapy to become heterosexual, and read self-help books on how to relax. More recently, I pushed myself too hard in a rewarding, insane, ten year stint as an organizer with a national gay civil rights organization. Exhausted and in poor health, I left that work a few years ago for a less demanding and inspiring job, where I remain to this day. Although I am better able to care for myself, I am no longer as appreciated, useful, “important,” or visible in the media. I'm not particularly interested in returning to the adrenaline highs of professional activism; but I still yearn for meaningful and challenging work that will also permit me to have a balanced, healthy life. Although this desire is reasonable and wholesome, sometimes it is so strong that it clouds my openness to what is good and true in the present.

During a talk at the retreat, one teacher distinguished between aspiration and intentional planning, on the one hand, and preoccupation on the
other. She said that when thoughts about becoming are repetitive or obsessive, it is a lot like running in a gerbil wheel. Despite all the activity, we don't get anywhere and nothing really changes. Consumed by our schemes, we behave like the hungry ghosts described in tales by Thich Nhat Han. These huge-bellied spirits can never consume enough because they have tiny little mouths and thin necks. They are perpetually aching to be filled, but never are. One theme repeated over and over at the retreat is that the present moment is sufficient; it contains all kinds of riches if we just open to it. Constant preoccupation with the future means missing opportunities to learn, serve, love, be loved, and simply be. Peace is not contingent on improving or changing ourselves, only on receiving ourselves wholeheartedly.

During group interviews, I spoke about how meditation often feels more like a demanding project than a joyful, liberating practice. One teacher replied that struggle, force, and judgement in meditation don't lead to peace or enlightenment; they merely lead to more struggle, force, and judgement. Although he didn't say it directly, the teacher seemed to suggest that meditation done unskillfully or for unwholesome purposes actually creates suffering not only during the practice itself but in our outer lives as well. That was a sobering thought. He encouraged me to be aware of my motives for practicing, to be gentle, and to relax my body when I was caught in struggle.

For the rest of the retreat I explored my intention. Before most sitting and walking meditations I asked myself, why was I doing this practice? There were all sorts of answers: to become “better” in some generic sense. To be happier. To prove I'm willing. To be more loving. To find my right livelihood. To be at peace. To be less anxious and fearful. So, rather than trying to judge these different motives as good or bad, I allowed myself to be more aware of them in a friendly way. If I got lost in mind storms or the muscles in my face contracted, I returned to my intention: was I engaged in some kind of self-improvement project in that moment? Quite often, the honest recognition of meditation-as-enterprise permitted me to soften and relax back into the moment. Sometimes I returned compulsively to new schemes and ideas for improving my life. To the extent I could, I allowed myself to be with the ache and the longing that lie under the story line, and to return to the breath, my anchor.

Early in the retreat, the teachers introduced us to the practice of metta or loving kindness. Legend has it that some of the Buddha's disciples went to a particular forest to meditate but were scared away by malevolent tree spirits. The Buddha sent them back into the same forest armed with a simple meditation practice aimed at cultivating love and kindness towards themselves, the tree spirits, and all creatures living there. The practice was so powerful that the spirits welcomed and aided them in their practice.

I dedicate these five vows to the welfare of others, both those who are hurt and those who do the hurting. May compassion increase in me and flow from me as a result of what I suffer. May love grow in others as the result of my commitment not to inflict suffering.

When I commit myself to non-violent ways of responding to hurt, my self-respect grows accordingly. I let go of the vulnerability of a victim. I like myself more as I access such courageous gentleness no matter what the cost or provocation. Anyone may hurt me and I will not only survive, but become more spiritually conscious in the process. This is the basic meaning of grounded-ness: no longer moved off-center by what others may do. “When love is my only defense, I am invincible.” —Tao

David Richo is a Tibetan Buddhist and guest speaker at our June 14 Sunday sitting.
The practice of metta involves the repetition of certain phrases, such as “May I be safe and protected from harm,” “May I be happy and peaceful of heart,” “May I be healthy and strong of body,” “May I accept my limitations with grace,” “May my outer life be filled with ease and joy.”

Sending metta to myself and others transformed the retreat. Metta created a safe container in which the experience could unfold, a little like meditating in a loving mother’s lap. Beginning my meditations with metta was also a way of announcing my intention. When I started to meditate and my mind moved towards planning for the future, the quiet repetition of “May I be happy in this moment,” often brought me home to the here and now. When I was agitated and couldn’t settle down in meditation, I also experimented with sending forgiveness into my mind and body. The forgiveness practice was like a balm on resentments I held against myself for past mistakes or for what was unresolved in my life. As I began to send metta to everyone attending the retreat and to all beings, I began to feel part of the whole web of existence. Instead of just my peace, my meditation, my progress, the practice opened up to include so much more.

Since the retreat, I have been using metta practice more than ever—on my bike to work, when I jog, and often when I sit. When I actively incorporate metta in my life I’m a little gentler with myself and others. One morning at home not long ago, I suddenly remembered I had an important appointment downtown. I was already late for it. Because of the metta practice, I felt no need to punish myself, as I usually do. Instead, I phoned the person I was supposed to meet, calmly announced I would be late, and made a simple apology. Without rushing madly, I arrived at my appointment a half hour late, feeling composed and balanced in a way that I rarely do even when I’m on time.

At the beginning of the retreat I wondered what it would be like for Chuck and me to be in such close proximity for nine days without talking. Neither of us had been together in silence for any significant time. At first it was awkward. Chuck avoided even minimal eye contact with me. (IMS teachers discourage eye contact outside of interviews because it can distract from our inward journey.)

We wanted to acknowledge each other’s presence, but not engage. About mid-way through the retreat, just as I was the most self-absorbed, Chuck became present in the most touching ways. One evening I found outside my door a garland of clover that he had woven together for me; the next day it was a glittering stone. Thus began an exchange between us of little gifts: pine cones, acorns, flowers, the discarded shell of a baby bird. The presents, which were left spontaneously and surreptitiously, became a natural, easy way of staying connected without talking.

In the final days of the retreat my awareness shifted. I became more sensitive to sounds. The flowers were more vividly colorful. I felt a rare calmness. I still got lost in thoughts about the past and future, but often those mind states and the judgements I had about them dissolved in the
light of awareness. The process reminds me of when, as a kid, I body surfed at the ocean shore. When I stiffened against a big wave, I got knocked silly. I resurfaced with sinuses full of sea water, bathing trunks full of sand, and a scraped bottom. But when I rode with the waves, my ride was smoother, more fun, and less bruising.

Sitting on my cushion late one afternoon, I felt the sun’s warmth flooding through the open windows of the meditation hall. Birds were singing. I noticed I was deeply happy. This happiness wasn’t accompanied by feelings of excitement or expectation that I associate with happiness. More predominant were feelings of ease, serenity, and gratitude.

Then came the inevitable pang of fear and dread about losing this joy, followed by thoughts about how to hold on to it. Instead of stiffening against this wave of thought, I lightly turned my attention to my fear and attachment. I welcomed these feelings because they, too, were part of this moment. Since I wasn’t in a mood to wrestle with them, they floated away. My joy returned—and eventually left—never to bloom again in such exquisite fullness. Rather than engage in a futile pursuit of those pleasant feelings, I relaxed into gratitude simply for having had them and for my capacity to open to such peace.

During the last day of the retreat, one of the teachers said to us, “You may be wondering, ‘How can I hold on to the peace and stillness I found on this retreat?’” He answered the question with a big smile: “Don’t worry, you can’t.” There was a burst of nervous laughter in the hall. Many of us had already begun to worry about “losing it.”

The fear of losing it hit me hard. On the ninth and final day, the silence broke. The conversation at breakfast seemed deafeningly loud. Feeling completely over-stimulated, I didn’t know who to talk to or what to talk about. When I opened my mouth to speak, I spoke too fast; I was uncontrollably agitated and sincere. At the same time I was seized by thoughts about the past and future. Chuck also had a difficult time with the ending of the silence. His strategy for coping was simple: avoid conversation. Part of me wanted to do the same thing; part of me was offended, because he wasn’t talking to me!

I recovered. This wasn’t a crisis, I eventually decided. I was merely undergoing an uncomfortable adjustment back into ordinary life, and needed to let go of judging and evaluating myself. In retrospect, I think my confusion and anxiety stemmed from a secret wish: to emerge from the retreat impervious to suffering, like a soldier fresh from dharma boot camp.

During retreat one of the teachers quoted a Tibetan sage who once said, “The issues you are struggling with right now are the issues you will be struggling with for the rest of your life.” If that is true, the practice isn’t about getting rid of bad habits or unpleasant feelings, or becoming someone “better.” It’s about relating mercifully to whatever arises—wanted or unwanted, temporary or permanent. Very slowly, I am learning to relate differently to what is difficult in and around me. I’ve even...

GBF Qualifies At Community Thrift

GBF is the latest group accepted to benefit from donations to Community Thrift Store, a nonprofit & collectively-run fundraising resource in San Francisco. Now GBF members can donate their quality cast-offs and GBF will receive a quarterly check based on the volume of items sold on our behalf.

Here’s how it works: bring your treasures to CTS at 623 Valencia St from 10am to 5pm any day of the week. The donation door is around the corner on Sycamore Alley (parallel to and between 17th and 18th) between Valencia and Mission. Tell the worker you are donating to GBF. Our ID number is 40. Accepted donations are tagged with identifying codes and put out in the store. As items sell, a running total is kept for each of the non-profits registered with CTS. Quarterly checks are sent out based on the volume of items sold which were donated in that non-profit’s name.

In order to remain on the list of beneficiaries, we must accumulate a gross sales total of $600 per quarter. Please make sure donated items are clean and in good condition. Pickup can be arranged within San Francisco for furniture, but major appliances, medical and exercise equipment, and other specific items are not accepted in any condition. If you have any questions about a donation, telephone them at (415) 861-4910.

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Letters to the Editor

Special thanks to Alan Oliver for his many contributions to the May ’98 Newsletter! Also, thank you to all of the well-wishers whom have come up to me with comments about the newsletter, including, but not limited to: Larry White, Rob DelRe, Scott Stalsanker, Howard King, Doug Hall, Rolf Andersen, and Bob Haas (through Ding Hao Ma). I am most grateful.

Nick Kolivas

I received the newsletter last Tuesday. By the way, you did a masterful job. I love it! Thanks for taking on all the responsibility, and doing it so well.

Clint Setier

“Meditate on knowing and not knowing, existing and not existing. Then leave both aside so that you may be.” —Shiwa

“If you are not happy here and now, you never will be.” —Taisen Derhamaur

Submitted by Rob DelRe

Reminder

Please send in your letters to the editor, newsletter comments, questions, articles, Dharma lessons, and poems by the 10th of the prior month, via snail mail, to:
Editor, GBF Newsletter
2261 Market Street, #422
SF, CA 94114

We do reserve the right to edit for clarity or brevity.

GBF Calendar: San Francisco Events

Saturday, May 30, 7pm: GBF Pot Luck Dinner at the home of Clarence Wong

Thanks to the efforts of Clarence Wong and the generosity of GBFers who volunteer their homes, GBF will be having a monthly Pot Luck on the last Saturday of every month. The only exception is June's Pot Luck which, due to Gay Pride conflicts, will be held instead on Saturday, June 20, 12 noon, at the home of David Van Varden (please call for directions). This will be a garden party. Please bring a veggie entree, bread, side salad dish, dessert, or meat dish; beverages will be provided.

Tuesday, June 2, 7:30pm: Steering Committee Meeting (open to all GBF participants), at the home of Larry White

Wednesday, June 3, 6pm: Informal gathering at Asian Art Museum (first Wednesdays are always free). Please look for David Holmes, et al, near the entrance. Enjoy Buddhist iconography from various Asian countries.

Friday, June 12: Movie Night

GBF June movie outing will be “Brazil” at the Red Victorian Movie theatre, 7pm, 1727 Haight St (@ Cole). “Brazil” is described as “great slapstick comedy and mind-bending imagery”. Meet at Jammin’ Java Cafe, corner of Cole and Waller, 6:30pm. For more information, call Clint Setier

Sunday Morning Sittings:

San Francisco Buddhist Center,
37 Bartlett St, between 21st & 22nd, one block west of Mission St, beginning at 9:30am & 10:30am respectively.

June 7
June 14 Guest speaker David Richo (see below)
June 21 Guest speaker Jim Wilson (see below)
June 28

Please also note that we will be having the GBF Newsletter Mailing Party on the third Sunday of every month, at 2:30pm, at Snake’s house (415) 552-6378.

David Richo is a Tibetan Buddhist who has written several books concerning spiritual life. He will speak on how mindfulness helps with psychological as well as spiritual integration.

Jim Wilson (formerly known as Tundra Wind) is a gay man and a Zen Buddhist monk who has studied in Japan and Korea, was a former abbot in the Chogyen Zen Center in New York, and currently teaches the householder form of Zen practice in Sonoma County.

With much gratitude, we announce that Jim will be giving Dharma talks to the GBF community on the first Sunday sitting of each month.

Thursday Evening Sittings,
7:45pm: Sittings are held at participants’ homes and are open to all GBF participants. Please speak to hosts for directions to their homes.

June 4 Bill Kirkpatrick
(415) 621-8549
June 11 Lee Robbin
(415) 552-9800
June 18 Mark Marion
(415) 241-9005
June 25 Larry White
(415) 626-8107
Local Dharma

**Tuesdays**, 12:30pm to 1:30pm: Mindfulness Meditation for people living with chronic or life-threatening illnesses, Zen Hospice Project.


**Sundays**, 1pm to 5pm: Drop-in Life Drawing and Painting classes, San Francisco Buddhist Center. Information 282-2018.


**Saturday, June 6**, 9am to 4pm: Vipassana Retreat Day with Michael Zucker, Spirit Rock Meditation Center (408) 460-0476.

**Saturday, June 6**, 10am: Zenshin Philip Whalen, resident teacher/speaker, Hartford Street Zen Center.


**Saturday, June 13**, 10am: Seido Lee deBarros, San Francisco Zen Center priest/speaker, Hartford Street Zen Center.

**Sunday, June 14**, 9:30am to 1:30pm: Pilgrimage Walk—Connecting with the Natural World. Meet at Fairfax Bell Market parking lot, carpool to Bon Tempe Dam parking and hike Kent and Stocking trails. Leader: Libby Ingalls, Spirit Rock Meditation Center (408) 460-0476.

Thursday, June 17, 7:30pm to 9pm: Sangha Evening: Cynthia Kneen will talk about her teacher, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, their friendship, and his teaching style, Hartford Street Zen Center.

**Wednesday, June 24 to Sunday, June 28 (4 nights)**: Meditation and Inquiry Residential Retreat, Angela Center Santa Rosa, with Howard Cohen and Debra Chamberlin-Taylor. Cost: $200. Information (415) 488-0164, ext. 364, or Spirit Rock Meditation Center (408) 460-0476.

**Bay Area Dharma Centers**

- **Berkeley Shambhala Center** 2288 Fulton St, Berkeley (510) 841-6475
- **Berkeley Zen Center** 1933 Russell St, Berkeley (510) 845-2403
- **Buddhist Church of San Francisco** 1881 Pine St, SF (415) 776-3158
- **California Diamond Sangha** P.O. Box 2915, Petaluma
- **Community of Mindful Living** P.O. Box 7355, Albany (510) 524-3751
- **Dudjom International** P.O. Box 40155, Berkeley (510) 849-9928
- **Empty Gate Zen Center** 2200 Parker St, Berkeley (510) 845-8565
- **Enlightened Heart Meditation Center** (415) 255-0798
- **Green Gulch Farm** 1601 Shoreline Highway, Sausalito (415) 383-3134
- **Hartford St. Zen Center** 57 Hartford St, SF (415) 863-2507
- **Land of Medicine Buddha** 5800 Prescott Rd, Soquel (408) 462-8383
- **Living Peace Meditation Community** 1650 Clay St, #2, SF (415) 346-3923
- **Nyingma Institute** 1815 Highland Place, Berkeley (510) 843-6812
- **Orgyen Dorje De** 10 Townsend, #406, SF (415) 826-7181
- **Pema Osel Ling** 203 Eureka Canyon Rd, Corralitos (408) 761-6266
- **Rigpa Fellowship** 816 Bancroft Way, Berkeley (510) 644-1858
- **San Jose Tibetan Temple** 300 South Tenth St, San Jose (408) 280-6827
- **SF Buddhist Center (Friends of the Western Buddhist Order)** 37 Bartlett St, SF (415) 282-2018
- **San Francisco Zen Center** 300 Page St, SF (415) 863-3136
- **Santa Cruz Zen Center** 113 School St, Santa Cruz (408) 457-0206
- **Saraha Buddhist Center** 3145 Geyer Blvd, #515, SF (415) 731-5973
- **Shambhala Center** 1630 Taraval St, SF (415) 731-4426
- **Sonoma Mtn Zen Center** 6367 Sonoma Mtn Rd, Santa Rosa (707) 545-8105
- **Spirit Rock Meditation Center** 5000 Sir Francis Drake Blvd, Woodacre (415) 488-0164
- **Tse Chen Ling Center** 4 Joost Ave, SF (415) 333-3261
- **Vajrapani Institute** P.O. Box 2130, Boulder Creek (408) 338-6654
- **Zen Hospice Project** (415) 863-2910

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**Looking in the Mirror**

(continued from page 5)

I began exploring the idea that life’s troubles are not something merely to tolerate, but to embrace, albeit lightly. That which is difficult and unmanageable has a lot of juice and creativity; the difficult, after all, is what brought me on retreat. Within the unwanted reside the seeds of my aspiration for a deeper, happier life. When I am not denying any part of myself or my experience, when I’m not picking and choosing which parts of me to own and love, I can relax and smile in the mirror.

**Kevin Berrill** is a gay Buddhist practicing with the Mintwood Zendo in Washington, DC.

**Mintwood** is a small sangha for gay, lesbian, and bisexual Buddhist practitioners. Kevin has been practicing seriously for the past four years. Mintwood has been a sangha for about 14 years.
Dharma Gateways

The thought manifests as the word
The word manifests as the deed
The deed develops into habit
And the habit hardens into character
So watch the thought
And its ways with care
And let it spring from love
Born out of respect for all beings.

Dharma Quote

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, #422, San Francisco, CA 94114. If possible, include a DOS or Windows disk in Word or as a text file, along with your hardcopy. You may also send your submissions via e-mail with your documents attached to: