How Practice Shapes Our Sensitivity
by David Richie, Ph.D.

As our Buddhist and psychological practice progresses, we begin to learn more about ourselves. We begin to see how our feelings, bodily and mental states provide us with a wealth of natural evidence about ourselves. Envy, for example, gives us a clue to what we really want. When we take the hint envy provides, it ceases to be a cause of suffering and becomes information about where our untapped potential may be hiding. Another example is blushing: we humans are the only creatures who blush ("or need to," says Mark Twain). Blushing can be an inborn give-away of guilt. Perhaps this is natural evidence that we are internally geared to expose our truth to those around us rather than covertly advance our own interests.

We become more conscious of suffering and no longer want to be agents of it. In our relationships, for example, we catch ourselves being manipulative or ungenerous or controlling. We now openly admit what we are up to. We love when others point out our behavior if we miss seeing ourselves. Such a combination of openness and honesty—not perfection—is...
GBF Fundraising Effort Successful
by Alan Oliver

Twice a year we ask people on our mailing list to support GBF. Our second request for 1998 was mailed in November, and the response has already been very generous. As of January 21, we have had over 105 responses and have raised a total of $4,400. The highest contribution was $250, and most of the other contributions fell into the $25-$50 range. This has been the best response we have ever had! We are especially moved when people who live outside the Bay Area, who cannot attend our meetings, sittings, and social events, feel that GBF is important enough to support from afar.

The Newsletter is our principal means of communicating and our major expense. In addition, we now have two other crucial means of outreach: the GBF Website and the E-mail Sangha. The E-mail Sangha, started just last December, now reaches 70 people and is feeling its way into more dialogue on a greater number of issues. Work continues on an introduction to GBF guide and the Taking Refuge ceremony. We’re also talking seriously about finding a permanent space—a "GBF Central."

Below are a few of the comments that accompanied the donations: "Thanks for being." . . . "It is fantastic to have you all in my life. Thanks for your work and support. It is deeply appreciated!" . . . "I live all we can ask of ourselves. We do not incite jealousy in former partners or rejoice in their suffering at seeing us with someone else. We do not stop acting lovingly when we stop loving.

When someone hurts us, we make it a point not to retaliate. We allow the consequences of others’ acts to catch up with them—or not. We do not impose the sentence or even pronounce it. We are neither the executioners nor the jury, only the fair and alert witnesses. We are not glad “they got theirs”; we only hope they can wake up. This is living the Bodhisattva’s vow for universal enlightenment.

Reconciliation after aggression is a characteristic of all primates, since they need each other’s solidarity for future survival. Buddhist practice reinforces this sense of solidarity. We want to reconcile with those who have hurt us and to help our friends reconcile with each other. We see capital punishment as controlled vengeance, another form of suffering. We protest every murder and every execution of murderers. We are always on the lookout for ways to mend breaks in relationships. We seek inclusive solidarity with all humans. We are always looking for ways to collaborate; we never rejoice over alienation. Individual love is a conditioned response that becomes unconditional when it grows into universal compassion.

We do not look down condescendingly on those who use drugs irresponsibly or deleteriously. The Viagra-and-poppers joke is only funny to those who do not die that way. We feel compassion for those who are so caught up in sex-with-drugs that they lose their reason and put their health in jeopardy. Their actions are sad, not humorous. They are brothers, not inferiors. We look for ways to share information, not to disparage the unfortunate.
We do not abandon others no matter how inadequate, unintelligent, or insensitive they are; we only have roomier hearts for them. The "maha" in Mahayana means "all-embracing." We ask ourselves:

Can we maintain ourselves in a circle of love while including all our fears, our wounds, and our inadequacies?

Can we keep others in that circle of love while they scare us, wound us, or tell us we are inadequate?

To understand the origin of these increased sensitivities, we look to our practice. Our Dharma heart practice does not emerge from moralism and rules; it comes from an inner loving kindness. We are born with it, or we learn it by practice. It is a generous instinct, a genuine caring about others, a capacity to be touched by suffering as Buddha was. In fact, that was precisely the origin of his path to awakening. The First Noble Truth came from the heart of compassion, not from the fist of ego.

Excavated graves from prehistoric times show that communities kept the infirm and deformed among them. This evidence suggests that the origin of compassion is in accepting those who do not please us and may even repel us. But when we consider some of the ways we interact with other Gay men, we see how easily we forget this fundamental principle. The man who is continually on the make, certainly, is far from being mindfully compassionate. He is intent on finding that particular "someone"; if we are not a candidate, he shows no interest in us. In fact, he looks over our shoulder.

But as our practice deepens, we come to see that so much of sexual attraction is intuitive and a matter of physical and psychic chemistry. It is not to be taken too personally. To let go of ego is to let go of taking things personally; it is all OK with us. We can graciously accept someone ignoring us or saying no to us. We simply step aside to make room for an appropriate alternative person! By the same token, we thank people who show an interest in us. If we are not interested, we say no gently. We do this with great care not to hurt his feelings. Saying no to someone cruising us does not have to hurt or be rejecting.

Our practice shows us that it is commendable to express love in every possible way. We can hug one another, hold one another, put an arm around one another while we are talking or walking or expressing a feeling, kiss one another on the cheek when we meet (as we Italians seem to do so easily). These acts need not imply anything sexual. No intrusion is intended; there is nothing to be embarrassed about. Showing affection in these ways will become second nature if we do it as a practice of brotherly love. If someone interprets our actions sexually, we can explain that we didn’t mean them that way. If someone acts toward us in a sexually unwelcome manner, we can gently pull away and show we decline. We can always decline without hurtful rejection. (continued)
GBF Committees

We always want and need interested participants, so please, JOIN IN! Call the contact person on the committee, or talk to him (or anyone on that committee) at a GBF sitting or event. This is a great practice opportunity!

Steering Committee
Clint Seiter, Contact Larry White, Robin Levitt
Ding Hao Ma Paul Dalwigk
Clarence Wong Nick Kolivas
Bill Kirkpatrick Alan Oliver
Howard King

Social Committee
Clarence Wong,

Newsletter Committee
Tom Hurley, Editor Alan Oliver, Assistant Editor, Mailbox
 tghurley@aol.com Greg Eichler, Managing Director
Dexter Young, Editor Don Cristosto
ghsf@hotmail.com, Larry Hermann, Assistant Managing Director
Clarence Wong, Art Director
Francis Gates, Assistant Managing Director
Nonprofit Mail Robin Leavitt
Snake Woolington, Mailing List
Mail Party

Practice Committee
Alan Oliver, Contact

Development Committee
Clarence Wong, Contact

Thursday Night Sittings
Bill Kirkpatrick Clint Seiter
Lee Robbins Larry White

Website Committee
Clarence Wong,

Hamilton House
Clint Seiter, Contact

Sunday Sitting Facilitators
Larry White, Contact

We come to understand the true value of a mentor relationship with a younger man. Such a relationship is platonic; it has no sexual component. It involves a sharing of ideas and guidance. It is a non-compulsive, mutually acceptable spending of time together in activities that lead to more wisdom and more mindfulness. Encouraging younger men and pointing out their good qualities is a sane and beautiful way for older men to love them.

We come to understand our right to the entire spectrum of human feeling. Our parents may not have permitted us to be physically exuberant. The religion of our childhood may have frowned on the pleasures of the senses. A spiritual practice that has an ascetic, dualistic, or monastic orientation—even Buddhism—may be subtly or obviously puritanical in its precepts. All through life, in fact, people may have interrupted the “Wheel” of our sensuality. But it is always a necessary part of self-advocacy that we preserve our sensuality, our eroticism, our exuberance, our enthusiasm, our joy in loving, our earthiness. It is wonderful to be romantically in love, wildly enthusiastic, physically close, intensely angry, autoerotic, humorous, outlandish. All that matters is that these things happen with mindfulness, gentle respect, and compassion—with neither too great attachment nor too great aversion. To be a Buddhist does not take away even one of our human rights or our human capacities.

We make an act of faith in survival. Suicide will not be an option. We trust that we can take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha all our lives in every predicament. We see the Three Jewels as precious and reliable. We are thankful for them every day.

We hold an abiding commitment to be of service while not having answers to life’s dilemmas and contradictions. The best response is one that comes from action, not from intellect. When someone asks, “If love rules the world, why do children starve?” our answer is, “I feed hungry children.” If someone asks, “How do you make sense of the fact that so many good people die violent deaths?” we respond, “I work with the dying.” When we realize our abiding and intense interconnectedness, compassion is the only possible response.

This sensitivity may seem well-nigh impossible, but we can reach it. That is what practice is for. ♥

My thanks to David Sunseri and Alan Oliver who helped me with these ideas.
February 7 Meeting To Consider
GBF'S Governance Structure
by Tom Hurley and Clarence Wong

Eight years ago the Gay Buddhist Fellowship started as a small Bay Area sitting group; today it not only offers a number of local opportunities for practice and service but also supports the practice needs of Gay Buddhists around the world. In addition to regular sittings, GBF’s current activities and plans include:

- classes, workshops, and seminars on the Dharma and how it relates to the practice of Gay men
- development of a formal teaching curriculum geared towards Gay Buddhist practitioners
- development of instructional literature for newcomers
- communication media for Gay Buddhists such as The Newsletter, Website and E-mail Sangha

Recently, however, members of GBF have begun to discuss whether our organizational structure and decision-making processes are sufficiently robust to support these activities and address the needs of the future.

When it started, GBF had a limited calendar of events and no need for much formal structure. Today we continue to operate with a very informal system inherited from the early days: a steering committee and several working subcommittees, with the steering committee functioning as a coordinating and policy-making body. None of the committees (including the Steering Committee) has a fixed composition. There are no officers or directors. There is no voting process to make decisions or resolve conflicts.

For some members of GBF, this method of decision-making works well. For others, this system makes it difficult to decide exactly what GBF should be doing and how it should develop.

On Sunday, January 10, the Development Committee and other interested GBF members held a spirited discussion on governance. Out of this meeting came the determination to evaluate our current system and compare it to others. Over the next few months, the Development Committee will hold a series of meetings to discuss such issues as:

- informal vs. formal governance structures
- using our nonprofit corporation status
- decision-making and conflict-resolution procedures
- elections for officers
- accountability of officers
- roles of committees in governance
- formal reporting on planning, deliberations, decisions and financial status

(continued on page 6)

Thrift Store Donations

Thrift store donations benefit GBF and our community. Bring your extra clothing and other items to Community Thrift Store at 623 Valencia Street between 10am and 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.
Please inform the staff you are donating on behalf of GBF. Our ID number is 40. ▼

Thursday Evenings—New Format For GBF Sittings

We are refocusing our Thursday evening sittings to emphasize in-depth learning from key books or Buddhist texts. The new format started in January with the recently published book by Lama Surya Das, Awakening The Buddha Within (paperback, Bantam Doubleday Dell, $15). As usual we start at 7:45pm with brief socializing, followed by a 35-minute silent meditation, then tea, sweets and conversation leading to a discussion of sequential chapters in the book. The session ends with either a brief five-minute meditation or a dedication of merit at 10pm. ▼

GBF Website:
http://www.gaybuddhist.org
Help Recycle Unused AIDS Medicine
by Paul Shepard

GBF members have an opportunity to practice social engagement with Positive Humanists & Friends (PHF), a San Francisco organization that gathers unused AIDS medications from people who have either changed medications or died. PHF sends these medicines to groups in the developing world that distribute them to people who cannot afford medications. Operating for the last four years, PHF has sent medicine to Chile, Peru, Cuba, Thailand, Mali and Nigeria.

Horner Hobi, a San Franciscan on HIV disability who created the organization, urgently needs more volunteers to keep up with demands. The nonsectarian PHF comes out of the Humanist Movement which operates in sixty countries to foster social justice and end violence.

Several service opportunities exist in three major areas:
1) medicine handlers collect, sort, catalogue, and package medications, prepare shipping documentation, transport meds to the airport, and work with foreign consulates and coordinators;
2) outreach volunteers hand out flyers and contact potential sources of meds donations such as hospitals, doctor’s offices, and hospices; 3) media volunteers write press releases and arrange newspaper, radio and television interviews. Referring those with unused meds to PHF would also be of great service. Positive Humanists & Friends would welcome your response (continued from page 5)

Above all, we want to ask ourselves: how is the Dharma present in all that we do? How does our system of governance serve the practice of GBF members? How does it promote their Enlightenment? How does it contribute to the Enlightenment of all beings?

At the end of these deliberations, a set of recommendations on governance will be presented to the Sangha. But we need your involvement now. Opinions differ on these questions, and for GBF to truly serve the Dharma, we need to be mindful of all points of view. Please take the time to share your thoughts with us by attending one or more of these meetings.

The next meeting will be at 2pm, Sunday, February 7, at Clarence Wong’s home.

Please join us! ▼

Taking Refuge Ceremony
by Alan Oliver

Over the past six months, GBF has posed the question of whether we should offer our own Taking Refuge ceremony. After much discussion, we have decided to go ahead with a commitment ceremony which would be meaningful to Gay men and draw on forms and practices from other Buddhist traditions. We did research with two of our trained Gay Buddhist teachers, Daishin David Sunseri and Jim Wilson, created a basic structure for the ceremony, and distributed it for comments and reactions. Although there are still details to be worked out, we believe we now have a ceremony that will help participants strengthen their commitment to practice and their understanding of the role of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha in their lives.

The basic words of this commitment are familiar to all Buddhist traditions: “I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the Dharma, I take refuge in the Sangha.” By Taking Refuge within a Buddhist tradition, you acknowledge your commitment to study and practice Buddhism. You participate with others in a ceremony that is designed to help you strengthen and support this commitment. It is not a commitment which is exclusionary to others you have made.

A Taking Refuge ceremony, the first for GBF as a practice center of its own, will be held on the evening Sunday, of May 2. We chose this date because it falls during the time from late April to early May when many traditional
Buddhist centers celebrate Buddha’s birth and Enlightenment. Those who wish to take refuge in this ceremony may register between February 1 and March 31. In April there will be two evening meetings for participants to meet together and bond as a group, ask questions and discuss this event in relation to their practice. A registration form is included in this newsletter, and forms will be available at all Sunday sittings up to March 28. There is no cost to participants. Participants may invite guests.

According to The Venerable Khenpo Kathar Rinpoche, “The benefit of Going for Refuge and difficulty of not going for refuge is summed up in the idea of refuge as spiritual foundation, as a spiritual grounding...That background is provided by refuge because refuge serves to center one’s intention, one’s aspiration in the vision of Buddhahood, and the teachings which proceed from that Enlightenment and in the community that follows it...Refuge in a Buddhist sense conveys an idea of protection...In the ultimate sense, we are powerless in the face of [life], and so it is the whole mass of suffering of life that...we seek to be protected from when we go for refuge” (from his lecture, On Taking Refuge).

Please ask questions so you can make a conscious, enlightened decision. This ceremony will help you expand and go deeper within yourself, but we understand that many people are leery of sacred, social rituals—ceremonies have a power that can be restrictive. This ceremony, however, has been designed to be safe and supportive.

Since this is the first time we have offered a Taking Refuge ceremony, there will be a newness and a beginner’s mind attitude that can be unnerving and creative at the same time. This social ritual can have a powerful influence in your life and will directly support your practice. In future years it will feel more comfortable. This new “Gateway” will enable a limited, self-defined group to enter, commit and to experience the safety of the Dharma. It will enable each of us to make a direct connection to Buddha and his teachings, and it will strengthen our GBF Sangha.

In his book, Awakening The Buddha Within, Lama Surya Das writes: “I personally believe you must have a sincere commitment to the possibility of spiritual awakening and enlightenment, combined with an open heart, an inquiring mind, and daily awareness practice based on ethics, meditation and wisdom.” He also takes the act of Refuge beyond the self to the larger world of all sentient beings: “Taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha is not only the way to Enlightenment; it is also the way to let the Buddha’s vow for universal Enlightenment work itself out through you. Surrender to that vow and enter onto the great highway of awakening, plunging into the timeless current of all those beings on the path to Buddhahood.”

I will be registering for this ceremony, and I urge you to join me there to deepen our practice together.

volunteers. Contact GBF member Paul Shepard or Homer Hobi or refer to the website: www.humanist.org/~hobi ▼

Help for Newcomers And Members

Periodically, GBF has offered a Foundations of Buddhism workshop. This has proved to be an inadequate response to our many new members who would like some guidance as they explore Buddhism and how it can be applied to their lives. We can now offer a twice-a-month opportunity to ask questions about meditation, Buddhist principles and GBF. Although prompted by the needs of new members, it is also for anyone who has questions they want to explore. We will do our best to share what we know and direct the questioner to other sources.

To participate in this 45-minute session, show up at 9:30am on the first or third Sunday sitting and take a seat near the altar in the front room. A senior member of GBF will be there to lead the session. If this format works, we will expand it to all four Sundays in the next several months.▼

GBF Homeless Project

If you are available to volunteer your time to the Hamilton Family Center on the third Saturday of any month, please contact Clint Seiter. A dinner is prepared by GBF volunteers, funded by GBF.▼
"Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as I or mine. 
Whoever has heard this truth has heard all the Dharma. 
Whoever practices this truth has practiced all the Dharma. 
Whoever realizes this truth has realized all the Dharma."

—The Buddha

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.
Local Dharma

A list of local Dharma centers is available on our website and will be available as a handout at our Sunday sittings. We encourage our members to explore what these other Dharma centers can offer to their practice.

---

Meditation Groups in Sonoma County

There are currently two Buddhist meditation groups affiliated with GBF in Sonoma County. One group, for Gay men, meets in Santa Rosa (and sometimes in Graton). For more information, please contact Avery Freed.

A second group meets near the town of Sonoma every other Tuesday evening. Although at present group members are all Gay men, the group is open to Lesbians and non-Gay practitioners. For more information, contact Bob Hass.

---

Local Dharma


Thursdays, 12:30-1:30pm: Mindfulness Meditation for People living with chronic or life-threatening illness. Instruction, practice, talk. Led by Eugene Cash & Frank O'Kestis. Zen Hospice Project., Information 415.285.7502.


Wednesday, February 3: Meditation and Dharma talk, led by Ajahn Amaro of Abhayagiri Monastery, 746 46th Avenue, SF. Information: 707.485.1630.

Mondays, February 1 and February 15, 10:30am-12pm: East Bay Sitting Group for Gay and Lesbian People. 4120 Oakmore Rd, Oakland. Information: 510.482.2860.

Saturday, February 6, 1:30pm-5pm: Old and In the Way: Buddhists face Mid-Life Crisis, led by Darlene Cohen and Basya Petrick. San Francisco Zen Center, 300 Page St, SF. Information: 415.863.3136.

Friday-Sunday, February 12-14, 5pm-7pm: Kuan Yee Valentine’s Retreat: Opening the Heart. Nyingma Institute, 1815 Highland Place, Berkeley. Information: 510.843.6812.

---


Saturday & Sunday, February 13 & 14, 1pm-5pm: Movement and Meditation, led by Shunsen Barbara Kohn. San Francisco Zen Center. Information: 415.863.3136.

Saturday, February 20, 10am-5pm: Coming Back to Life, led by Joanna Macy. Spirit Rock. Information: 415.488.0164 (ext 0).

Saturday, February 27, 10am-5pm: Establishing a Meditation Practice. Nyingma Institute. Information: 510.843.6812.


If you would like to recommend a Dharma event for this column, please e-mail information to: kong@GayBuddhist.org