Gay Buddhist Fellowship

The Gay Buddhist Fellowship supports Buddhist practice in the Gay men's community. It is a forum that brings together the diverse Buddhist traditions to address the spiritual concerns of Gay men in the Bay Area, the United States, and the world. GBF's mission includes cultivating a social environment that is inclusive and caring.

Conflicts and Healings Among Gay Buddhists
by Lee Robbins

Though not myself much involved in GBF decision-making nor a member of the Steering Committee, I have been closely involved with the Fellowship for five years. It's of considerable value in my practice and my life. When I was asked, as a relative neutral, to facilitate the Sunday discussion this past January 31 and, later, a meeting of the Development Committee on February 7, I agreed. It may be helpful to share a few impressions of these meetings with the rest of you.

Dissension, confusion, conflict have, perhaps suddenly, emerged among us. Words, perceived by the recipient as angry or belittling, have been exchanged by e-mail, in person and on the phone. Individuals and groups
of individuals believe they see potentially irreconcilable differences—differences in how decisions should be made and in the right direction for future efforts. Some, more intensely involved, have come to think that “the other side” has a “take it or leave it” position and that “they” are trying to “take over” GBF or, on the other hand, to “keep it from growing.” While I believe there are real differences, I still honor the efforts and the intentions of the many people eager to contribute to practice and spiritual work.

To better understand the nature of the differences, it may be helpful to identify three roots. I arrived at my understanding of these roots by examining the comments made and recorded at the meeting of the Development Committee, the comments made at the general Sangha meeting of Sunday, January 31, the February Steering Committee meeting, and discussions with individual members. These conclusions have been checked with others, but I alone am responsible for any errors:

- feelings of hurt and anger stemming primarily from angry or critical speech
- communications which are often fragmentary or unclear
- how much control should be exerted over GBF activities—a way of describing the central substantive disagreement

No single one of these suffices to create our present suffering. Were the issues purely substantive, I believe they could be largely or entirely dissolved though calm examination and creative solutions—certainly they could be sufficiently dissolved to avoid the current rancor and pain. Such solutions might mean compromises, or they might even mean different groups working relatively separately in different arenas, perhaps using differing styles of governance and decision-making suited to their tasks and personal preferences.

Specific substantive issues include:

- whether or not to have a defined list of members and explicitly designated leaders
- whether to strive towards owning or renting our own Sangha space
- whether there should be any control over what messages can go out over our e-mail list
- whether we should have a specific teacher or authenticator of skillful Dharma practice

Substantive issues may cluster into two visions or paths: one of limited GBF activities and, at most, slow growth, and the other of energetically spreading the Dharma and intensifying Sangha with considerable intensity and speed. For the former, a very loose structure seems sufficient; the latter, in most organizations that expand, coincides with a tighter structure and more control. I note parenthetically, as an organizational development teacher and consultant, that even the latter path contains
other looser models such as Twelve-Step Fellowships (Alcoholics Anonymous et al.) or the Quakers; these looser models are, however, relatively uncommon.

These substantive differences alone, however, do not account for the hurt feelings, suspicions and anger recently apparent among us. They were magnified by incomplete and unclear communications, making real differences appear ever larger. Fearful thoughts, thwarted desires, intense aversions led to angry, critical, or belittling words. One angry word or critical statement perceived as belittling easily led to another. That’s often how wars start. Once feelings are jangled, people fearfully or angrily stop communicating and reject the very idea of compromise. Any substantive solutions suggested by “them” are viewed from a perspective of suspicion. It’s so easy to take that route, and before you know it, a happy peaceful land is littered, if not, fortunately, with real bodies, at least with injured sentient beings—ourselves.

So what is to be done? We have made a start in the last several meetings in remembering the positive things our old friends among “the others” have contributed, in noting that even we and “our” group, sometimes miss in our efforts to perfectly follow the Eightfold Path.

Communications have increased. Intentions—“theirs” intentions, as they become clearer—seem, just perhaps, less malicious, even conceivably productive.

In one of the groups I facilitated a participant suggested that people often think that if someone suggests a divergent idea, we are obliged to choose between wholeheartedly contributing our time and money to it or, alternatively, adamantly opposing the idea. Instead, said he, we might each use our energies and resources to build our contributions in one or several areas and welcome—or at least accept—others contributing in differing ways without our direct involvement.

Some of us have begun to think that different views and energies and even desires—those desires described in the Dharma from which we are never free—may require some separation or divergence among us. This need not be a bad thing, for we may each contribute in our own ways while comfortably working more with those who share both our particular interests and our preferred styles of control.

There are several petals struggling to unfold in our lotus. Though subtly different, they can together create the beauty of the realized blossom for Gay men and other sentient beings. Some of us are even working on our loving kindness and forgiveness practices. If we can remember that Right Speech means avoiding words which others could or might see as wounding or belittling, a little time may allow our hearts once again to grow warm and fond of each other. 

composed Gatha!). It is also a wonderful way of getting to know our Sangha brothers. The next mailing party is on Sunday, March 21, 2:30pm at Snake’s home, Please join us!

Transcribing Dharma Talk Gatha

In recognition of all the past speakers, especially Jim Wilson and David Sunseri who have given Dharma talks at Sunday Sittings, and the volunteers who have helped transcribed them, the following Gatha is dedicated to your wisdom and inspirational work of love and kindness.

As I transcribe this Dharma talk, boundless joy and peacefulness arise.

With each word, my mind calms.

With each sentence, my intentions are purified.

With each paragraph, my heart opens up to the here and now.

If you are interested in transcribing a Dharma talk, we have a collection of audio tapes from previous talks held in Sunday sittings. This is a great way to hear the Dharma for a second time, and share it with other readers. To help, please contact Dex

With your support and help, we are completely grateful.

With your dedication to the Sangha, we vow to work for all sentient beings.

Following the Breath Gatha

From Thich Nhat Hanh

Breathing in, I calm my body.

Breathing out, I smile.

Dwelling in the present moment, I know this is a wonderful moment!
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
Larry White, Ding Hao Ma
Bill Kirkpatrick
Robin Levitt
Clint Seiter
Howard King

Newsletter Committee
Tom Hurley, Editor
Dexter Young, Editor

Larry Hersmen,
Art Director
Greg Eichler,
Managing Director

Robin Levitt
Mailing List
Francis Gates,
Nonprofit Mail

Snake Woolington,
Mailing Party

Thursday Night Sittings
Bill Kirkpatrick
Clint Seiter
Lee Robbins
Larry White

Website Committee
Dexter Young,

Hamilton House
Clint Seiter,

Sunday Sitting Facilitators
Larry White,

The following committees are currently without chairs:
Development Committee
Website Committee
Social Committee
Practice Committee

If you are interested in volunteering,
contact Larry White

One Man’s Vision of GBF
by Clint Seiter

Lately there has been a lot of talk within GBF about the direction the organization should be taking. Unfortunately, the discussions concerning these issues have been generating more heat than light, and it has been difficult for many within the general membership to determine just what’s at stake. The core issue essentially focuses on two competing visions: GBF continuing on as a decentralized organization run by member consensus, or actively pursuing a policy of growth and greater structure. The intent of this article is to provide a little clarity on this debate and to present an argument in favor of decentralization.

GBF was organized seven years ago as a Sangha in which Gay men from all three Buddhist traditions could gather together to meditate. The group was small and loosely structured, run by a Steering Committee whose membership was open to whoever attended the monthly Committee meetings. Decisions on issues concerning the operation of GBF were made on a consensus basis. It was generally felt that a rigidly defined hierarchy of officers and members did not suit the spirit of the group, and an organizational structure was deliberately chosen for its simplicity and flexibility. GBF has grown significantly over the past years. Its membership has increased by several fold; it has taken on additional activities (the Thursday sittings/Dharma discussions, the Hamilton Center feed-the-homeless project, the meditation retreats, the guest speakers, the Website, and GBF’s incorporation as a non-profit organization). The Steering Committee has never resisted this growth, and, in fact, has supported these various projects as they have been developed. But neither has it pursued a policy of “growth for growth’s sake.” The current debate concerns whether GBF’s original vision of a simple, loosely structured organization is still valid or must be changed to reflect where the organization is today and where it might want to go tomorrow. The specific points of concern are as follows:

1. Should GBF have a more structured governing body, consisting of elected officers?
2. Should some criteria of membership be established?
3. Should GBF seek to buy a building to serve as a center?
4. Should GBF pursue an active campaign of growth, involving expanding into other geographical areas and establishing an outreach campaign?

I believe that the answer to all these questions should be “no.” In my opinion, a rigidly defined hierarchy focused on a campaign of expansion is antithetical to what GBF is all about. This is essentially a question of spirituality versus organized religion. Each point listed above, if adopted, would ultimately take something from what makes GBF so special today.

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Let's take this discussion point by point:

1. All GBF members have accessibility right now to how the organization is run. To have one’s voice heard, one merely has to show up at a Steering Committee meeting and cast his vote. A governing body of officers removes that accessibility and places much of the power in the hands of a few. Whatever may be gained by efficiency in this arrangement is more than offset by the consolidation of control.

2. What criteria could be used to establish membership? Geography? Participation in the Sunday meetings? A membership fee? The way it stands now, every Gay man who desires to can participate fully and equally in GBF. Establishing criteria for a voting membership would have to be based on some at least partially arbitrary distinction that would create “in members” and “out non-members.”

3. Buying a building in San Francisco would be a huge financial commitment for GBF. Even if GBF were able somehow to finagles the resources, it would have to be through grants, fund-raising events, and other similar means. This would involve a major shift of commitment and energy from spiritual practice to raising capital and managing real estate. It has also been my experience that valuable assets have a miraculous ability to sow discord and rancor within previously peaceful communities.

4. A commitment to growth for growth’s sake is based on the dubious premise that “bigger is better.” “Empire building” will do nothing but threaten the intimacy and immediacy of the current Sangha. Those who argue against some kind of massive outreach campaign are accused of “lacking vision” or “being small-minded.” Frankly, I believe that “small is beautiful” is a very Buddhist concept.

The current governing body we have in GBF is simple, flexible, and provides access to all participants in GBF. GBF has been thriving, and I see no reason to try to “fix” what isn’t broken. This doesn’t mean we can’t take a hard look at how GBF is run, and how groups in general deal with a consensus model (the Quakers, Alcoholics Anonymous, Joan Halifax’s training from Thich Nhat Hanh), staying open to the possibility of improving GBF’s governing system. But I believe we should remain dedicated to the idea of simplicity and participation by all as we work together to create conscious friendships in Sangha. A vision of expansion and outreach, of power consolidation, of a permanent center for Gay Buddhist practitioners may have validity elsewhere, perhaps as a sister organization to GBF, but I don’t think that this vision is suitable to what GBF itself has been, is today, and hopes to be tomorrow.

Advice for Sustaining The Community

As long as the followers of the way hold regular and frequent assemblies, they may be expected to prosper and not decline.

As long as they meet in harmony, break up in harmony, and carry on their business in harmony, they may be expected to prosper and not decline.

As long as they do not authorize what has not been authorized already, and do not abolish what has been authorized, but proceed according to what has been authorized by the rules of training;

As long as they honor, respect, revere, and salute the elders of long standing who are long ordained, fathers and leaders of the order;

As long as they do not fall prey to desires which arise in them and lead to rebirth;

As long as they are devoted to forest lodgings;

As long as they preserve their personal mindfulness, so that in the future the good who are among their companions will come to them, and those who have already come will feel at ease with them;

As long as the followers of the way hold to these seven things and are seen to do so, they may be expected to prosper and not decline.

—from the Mahaparinibbana Sutta
In discussing these visions, it became clear that the current governance structure was not adequate to support them and would need to be changed. After this realization, the Development Committee began working on ways to promote a structure conducive to these visions.

The current Steering Committee meets the first Tuesday of each month from approximately 7:30pm until 9:30pm. It consists of non-elected GBF participants varying in number from three to eight per meeting. Any participant who attends the Tuesday meeting is immediately considered a member of the Steering Committee. There is no time commitment for service, and decision-making is loosely based on a consensus model.

Sangha for their decisions and were not representative of the whole fellowship; 2) GBF was not adhering to its articles of incorporation; and 3) the consensus model allowed for one or two opinions to preclude acting on proposals, which often resulted in the postponement of decisions on contentious issues. These concerns about governance and the overall development of GBF led to a series of meetings of the Development Committee. These three-to-five-hour meetings were open to all GBF participants and took place on October 25 and November 29 of 1998, and January 10 and February 7 of 1999.

What went wrong?

In our opinion, the answer revolves around radically different visions of GBF’s future, and communication surrounding these visions. The varying visions of members of the Steering Committee created conflict. Conflict created disharmony. Disharmony reflects dualism. Unfortunately, this dualism led to personal attacks between and among several of the Steering Committee members on both sides of the vision discussion.

It should be stated that this process has been a great practice opportunity for all those intimately involved in it. It is the weeding of the garden which brings us face to face with the truth. We do, however, have to consider the effects of rancor on our Sangha as a whole. And, it is not fair for new students of Buddhism to be involuntarily absorbed into this process. It is with great regret that we saw walls built up

In the view of Steering Committee members Alan Oliver, Clarence Wong, and Nick Kolivas, the main concerns with the governance structure of the current Steering Committee were that: 1) members were not held accountable to the

1. Buying or renting a property to serve as a GBF Practice Center with a meditation room, office space, and in-house resident teachers and students

2. Outreach to the Gay community including elders, youth, and people with AIDS

3. Developing the infrastructure to facilitate GBF’s World Wide Web presence and to facilitate the practice of Gay Buddhist practitioners world-wide

4. Creating a budgeting and fundraising strategy to support these visions
between the conflicting visions. It is with great compassion that we must now mindfully tear down those walls and care for each other.

In order to prevent any further disharmony, and to begin to repair the relationships between members of both the Steering Committee and the Development Committees, a new group is being formed. This group is an outgrowth of GBF and intends to focus on the development and practice visions that were discussed in the Development Committee. This group will be designing a vision and complementary organizational structure primarily to enhance and facilitate “practice” in the Gay Buddhist community, locally as well as world-wide. Its underlying tenet will be that of cherishing others: benefiting sentient beings. The planning group for this effort will be Daishin David Sunseri, Alan Oliver, Clarence Wong, and Nick Kolivas.

Interactive ties to GBF will be maintained not only due to the fond personal affiliation with our brothers in GBF, but also to further expand Buddhist practice opportunities for everyone. GBF will remain more of a support fellowship of Gay Buddhist practitioners. It is envisioned that the outgrowth group will cater more to those who wish to participate in engaged Buddhism, and to study the BuddhaDharma more intensively. Since we feel that many Gay Buddhist practitioners fall into both categories, the groups will complement each other. As this decision was made just recently, much more information will become available and will be announced in the ensuing months.

In the new group, focused practice will be expanded: it is envisioned that this new group will sponsor increased practice opportunities. This may include more direct instruction from a council of knowledgeable practitioners. It may also include a teaching curriculum of courses. And it may include a more formal path in which to engage in the BuddhaDharma.

It will also be inclusive: it is anticipated that all GBF participants will be invited to participate in the new group. It will also be an opportunity for Gay practitioners, past and present, who may have wanted more formal instruction and guidance on their Buddhist paths to return and participate. It is therefore with great optimism that this new group is being formed.

We wish to express our loving-kindness for each and every participant in GBF. And we particularly wish to convey our gratitude to the members of the Steering Committee and the Development Committee for their efforts and generosity. We also wish to apologize to anyone who may have felt hurt or uncomfortable with this process in any way, for it has never been our intention to cause anyone any harm. We sincerely wish to benefit you in your practice in some way, now and in the future.

**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.

**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.

*In a battle, the winners and the losers both lose.*

—The Buddha
Wisdom tells me I am nothing; love tells me I am everything. Between the two, my life flows.

—a great Indian master
Sexuality and Spirituality For Gay and Bisexual Men: A Workshop at Esalen
by Justin Hecht

I'll be leading a workshop on "Sexuality and Spirituality for Gay and Bisexual Men" at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California from Sunday, May 24 through Friday, May 28, 1999.

As a psychologist, I have been particularly interested in how people derive meaning and purpose in their lives. Many of our hetero brothers and sisters find that the "ready-made" meaning systems of mainstream religions work just fine. Many Gay men, however, experience mainstream religion as either discounting or invalidating our lives and inner natures. As a constructive alternative to the exclusionary practices of some religions, many Gay men are now developing their own formal and informal spiritual communities.

My aim at Esalen is to gather men from a variety of religious traditions to share how we come to grips with our sexuality, understand our spirituality, and discuss whether, when, and how these two vital areas intersect, conflict with, and support each other.

The workshop will be largely unstructured. I will provide a reading list and will introduce topics each day with short readings and meditations, but other than that, participants will be free to share their perspectives with each other and develop our own community. There's no particular point of view, and part of my role as facilitator will be to ensure that each person's religious or spiritual tradition is respected.

Esalen, one of the best things that remains of the wonderful spirit of California in the Sixties, is a center for humanistic psychology, spirituality, Eastern/Asian/Native American philosophies, nature exploration, and bodywork. Situated on a ledge between the Santa Lucia mountains and the Pacific Ocean, Esalen's views are beyond description.

The cost for the week ranges from $425 to $885 and includes food, lodging, and the program itself.

Gay Zennist Seeking Room in Bay Area

Moving to San Francisco in June for graduate studies at California Institute of Integral Studies. I am 43, of mixed heritage (Black-Japanese), love music, books, arts, food, movies, television, sports. Seek easy-going, mindful household or a roommate(s). Email:

Wanted: Sublet or Housesit

Apartment in San Francisco, without roommate from May 1 to August 1. Can exchange house in Santa Barbara. Call Dave at

Seeking Gay Buddhist Home

Buddhist practitioner interested in creating an intentional Dharma home to share with others in San Francisco. We value conscious cooperative living, mindfulness and mutual support for our practice. If interested, please call David

East Bay Dharma Book Group

This new reading group will meet weekly. For more information call Howard
GBF Calendar
San Francisco/Bay Area Events

Sunday Morning Sittings,
9:30am and 10:30am: San Francisco Buddhist Center, 37 Bartlett Street, between 21st and 22nd, one block west of Mission Street. There will be no formal instruction given to beginning meditators this month. If you are a beginner, please feel free to approach any GBF Sangha member when you attend the sitting. We will be very happy to answer any questions you have.

March 7 Jim Wilson, Monthly Speaker
March 14 Darlene Cohen, Guest Speaker
March 21 Discussion
March 28 Venerable Hyunoon Sunim, Guest Speaker

Thursday Evening Sittings:
7:45pm: Open to all GBF participants. Please speak to hosts for directions to their homes.
March 4 Bill Kirkpatrick
March 11 Lee Robbins
March 18 Clint Seiter
March 25 Larry White

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

Saturday, March 6: A Morning of Meditation led by Daishin David Sunseri has been cancelled.

Local Dharma
Tuesdays, Thursdays, & Fridays, 10:30am: HIV Sitting Group. Hartford Street Zen Center, 57 Hartford St, SF. Information 415.861.6160.

Thursdays, 12:30–1:30pm:
Mindfulness Meditation for People living with chronic or life-threatening illness. Instruction, practice, talk led by Eugene Cash and Frank Ostaseski. Zen Hospice Project. Information 415.285.7502.

Mondays, March 1 & 15, 7pm–9pm: SF Mindfulness Community—followers of Thich Nhat Hanh meet. Hartford St Zen Center. Information 415.252.8476.

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

Friday & Saturday, March 5 & 6, 7pm–9pm: Art of Enlightenment: Tibetan Sacred Art. Nyingma Institute, 1815 Highland Place, Berkeley. Information 510.843.6812.

Saturday, March 6, 1:30–4:30pm: Discriminating Awareness Workshop: direct experience of our body and mind, led by Paul Haller. San Francisco Zen Center, 300 Page St, SF. Information 415.863.3136.

Saturday, March 6, 10am–5pm: Soul Without Shame: workshop on presence and the inner critic, led by Byron Brown. Spirit Rock, 5000 Sir Frances Drake Blvd, Woodacre. Information 415.488.0164 (x369).

Sundays, March 7 & March 21, 10:30am–12pm: East Bay Sitting Group for Gay & Lesbian People, 4120 Oakmore Rd, Oakland. Information 510.482.2860.


Friday, March 19, 7pm–9pm: Lama Surya Das Dharma Talk. Berkeley Zen Center, 1933 Russell St, Berkeley. Information 510.845.2403.

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