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.

Prison Time
by Terry Stein

The most profound horror of prisons lives in the day-to-day banal occurrences that turn days into months, and months into years, and years into decades. Prison is a second-by-second assault on the soul, a day-to-day degradation of the self, an oppressive steel and brick umbrella that transforms seconds into hours and hours into days. While a person is locked away in distant netherworlds, time seems to stand still...

—from Live from Death Row, by death row inmate Mumia Abu-Jamal

Perhaps time expresses impermanence like no other concept: it is ever moving, ever present, ever past, ever future. Yet according to Mumia Abu-Jamal and the prisoners I have met, time often stands still in prison and can thus become a permanent and excruciating reminder of an eternity behind bars. For some prisoners, sitting in meditation and writing about one's experience can be avenues through time; they can both expand awareness and deepen meaning.

I have been sitting and writing with men and women in prison for over a year. While I have formally served as their teacher in meditation and journal writing classes, these men and women are, in fact, also my teachers, sharing their deep suffering and wisdom with me as we serve time together. Unlike them, I am allowed to leave the prison building when I finish the class, but I also know now that we are similarly incarcerated within the mental walls of self that create a lifetime sentence for each of us. The designated prisoners have shown me that liberation can only be discovered within and that its denial can never be imposed by the jailer alone.

I began teaching weekly meditation and journal writing classes in jails and prisons one and one half years ago as part of my service commitment in the Buddhist Peace Fellowship-sponsored Buddhist Alliance for Social Engagement (BASE), which brings individuals together to spend six months in service or social action work combined with Buddhist practice. From January until November of 1998, I conducted one class in a men's substance...
Jim Wilson Responds to Clear Englebert

May 18, 1999

Dear Editor,

This is in response to Clear Englebert's excellent letter in the May 1999 Newsletter. First, I do not mean to convey the impression that I consider the celibate monastic lifestyle wrong or invalid. When I give a talk to GBF I only have about thirty minutes, and often I find that I do not have the opportunity to give a more nuanced presentation. If I gave the impression that I oppose monastic Buddhism, I apologize; that was not my intention.

Regarding crankiness: I don't think Clear and I disagree. I only spoke from my personal experience and others I have spoken to. Six years of a celibate monastic lifestyle certainly left me cranky (incidentally, I kept my precepts rigorously). It became clear to me that I was not suited to such a way of life. But I do not mean to generalize to others from my own experience.

The food metaphor, like all metaphors, has its flaws, and Clear certainly found a central flaw. I compare sex and food because the two constitute regularly recurring biologically based desires. I also like to compare the two because such a comparison tends to bring sexual desire down to a more ordinary level.

I believe Clear misunderstood my symphony/Sangha metaphor, or I expressed it badly (maybe both). I was not comparing monastics to

abuse unit in a San Francisco jail, and I have continuously taught two similar classes at the Federal Correctional Institution and Camp (FCI) for women in Dublin since March 1998. The classes are between one and a half to two hours long. They consist of brief stretching exercises, sitting and walking meditations, a period of reading and writing about topics such as anger, the first day in prison, empowerment, or remembering dreams, and time for discussion. From eight to fifteen women attend the classes, most on a regular basis. Some of the women are experienced meditators, having been taught meditation before entering prison or in previous classes at FCI; others are meditating for the first time. Many report significant deepening of their sitting practice and improvement of their experience in prison while attending the class. Because the members are self-selected, these positive outcomes reflect the women's interest in the class and their motivation to attend it regularly.

The stories told in these classes can be both heart-breaking and heartening. Invited to write about her first day in prison, one woman recalled stepping off the bus which brought her to prison, looking at the arid ground at her feet, and deciding to plant flowers. She was assigned to a gardening job and created a flower garden. The blossoming of the flowers in her garden paralleled an internal growth in self-esteem and understanding; she was able to confront the conditions that brought her to prison and to prepare to return to her family and life with a new found clarity and dedication. In response to the same assignment, a man reported his terror upon witnessing a murder on his first day in prison. The stunned silence of those of us listening to his story revealed our own terror in simply imagining this event.

The stories told by the prisoners in these classes are not necessarily typical of the experiences of people in jails and prisons. The very fact that these classes are offered suggests, perhaps, a less punitive and more supportive environment. Nonetheless, each person who enters jail as a prisoner, regardless of the harshness of the setting, experiences a dramatic sense of loss of control and dehumanization. The capacity to use such an assault on the self as an opportunity for self-examination and personal liberation is undoubtedly unusual both inside and outside of prisons.

For myself, witnessing in prisons the possibility of turning suffering into healing and energy has profoundly affected my appreciation for the connection between suffering, compassion, and love. I began my prison work with considerable naiveté, trepidation, and ignorance about the conditions of imprisonment. During the past year, this work has helped to deepen my Buddhist practice and my access to the Dharma. I have enormous gratitude to both BASE for providing me with the opportunity to begin this work,
and to the men and women in prison who have opened their hearts to me. Hopefully these classes have in some small way helped the participants to experience less degradation and oppression and more movement of time while in prison. I feel fortunate that I have also been able to extend my practice of the Dharma in prison by coordinating a new BASE program for ten individuals working in prisons or engaging in prison advocacy work.

As Bo Lozoff reminds us in his book We're All Doing Time, there is no separation between the suffering of those who are incarcerated and those who live on the outside. Our Buddhist practice challenges us to awaken to the connection between our own suffering and the suffering of all beings; working in prisons also provides an opportunity to glimpse the liberation that can result from diving compassionately into the suffering that humans create when they imprison each other, whether behind locked doors or within closed minds.▼

No Separation: Connecting with Prisoners Through Letters
by Don Wiepert

We are all of us interrelated—not just as people, but animals too, and stones, clouds, trees... We rationalize ourselves into insensitivity about people, animals, and plants, forging manacles of the mind, confining ourselves to fixed concepts of I and You, We and It.

—from The Mind of Clover by Robert Aitken

First Experience: 1990
I am driving Stefano Mui Barragato through a poor rural community of trailers and pickups in New York State, then down a winding road until an overpowering large, granite, fortress-like building emerges: Napanoeh, a maximum security prison. (I am very tight; why am I doing this?)

Visitors enter through a small door into a small room, with metal bars at the far wall. A guard admits us, checking lists in various piles of paper, confirming that permission had been granted for me to enter as an assistant to Stef, who is an official chaplain. I surrender my wallet and keys, which the guard keeps, am given a clip-on badge, and pass through a metal detector. (It's disconcerting to be without wallet and keys, repeatedly experiencing the anxiety of patting pockets, and then remembering why I don't feel the comforting objects.)

We put our hands through a small window in a glassed-in room full of electronic controls: the hands are stamped with ultra violet ink. The rear doors slowly slide open, and we enter into an area with another set of bars in front of us. The entry doors slide shut, and in a few very long seconds, the rear doors open. We walk down a long vaulted hall ending with another set of musicians. Rather, I was comparing the relationships of the lay community to monastics and the relationship of non-musicians (or, if you will, lay-musicians) to the symphony orchestra. In both instances the "lay" community finds it worthwhile to support an institution which does not give forth any obvious economic benefits.

I was not aware that Shasta Abbey followed traditional monastic discipline, but I am happy to hear about it. I have sent several students to Shasta who wanted a more monastic form of Buddhist practice, and I am glad to find that they will encounter what they were looking for.

Having said the above, I can perhaps clarify where Clear and I might disagree. I have not observed that the monastic approach to Buddhism is more conducive to realization than the life of a lay person. This does not mean that I consider the monastic life invalid. But I do consider claims that enlightenment can only happen within a celibate and monastic lifestyle to not be borne out, either by history or by my own observation and experience.

Clearly there is room for discussion on this issue. Perhaps GBF could host a panel on this topic? I know that Ding Hao has well thought out views, as does Clear. I envision this as a discussion as opposed to a debate. In any case, I appreciate Clear's letter and look forward to further discussion with him and others.

Best wishes,
Jim Wilson
bars, about fifteen feet tall. Stef cheerily greets the lieutenant in his office
and other guards at desks. The officer at the end, not looking up, has us sign
in, and a large gate is swung open. We enter a vaulted area, perhaps twenty-
five feet high, teeming with men streaming in all directions, wearing olive
green clothes. (I imbue them with power, and feel small, like a child in a play-
ground who fears the strong older children who command the play area.)

Upstairs in a small room, while eight or nine men busily finish mopping the
floor, others take blankets out of a closet and set up a zendo: two facing rows
of blankets mounded into facsimiles of zabutons and zafus, with Stef's place
facing the rows. There is an informal check-in: who is coming, arrangements
for tonight. I am introduced. I shake hands formally, but there isn't much eye
contact. Stef changes into robes, and emerges as Mui, the teacher. We all sit
close together, with faces only about four feet apart. (It's so strange in this
place, yet it's so ordinary and routine: like Mui's Sunday sitting group when we
set up in the same way, creating a sacred space where there was none.)

We repeat the rituals used in the Sunday
group. Bells ring for chanting, sitting,
walking; teaching follows. Outside is very
noisy, with shouts from downstairs, and
more muted noise from the yard, where
hundreds of men are milling around in the
large walled area, with the beautiful
mountains not too far away.

Mui leads a discussion, and everyone in
turn tells what the teaching, the usual enigmatic koan, means to them. Mui encour-
gages us all: whatever we say is true and
right, no matter what. An intimate expe-
rience, with halting explorations in trying to
be right shared by all. (During these, being
here becomes like any ordinary sitting, listen-
ing carefully to each other. I say to myself,
"Why didn't I think of that?"—a frequent
response of mine.) After service, our infor-
mal conversation feels uncomfortable. We search for a common topic to dis-
cuss in the uneasy manner men use when they begin to know strangers.

The leaving begins, accouterments and blankets are stored, Mui changes into
Stef’s clothes, and the enormity of our separate existences makes itself pres-
ent. (This is the most powerful part of the night’s experience. Stef and I go back
to our lives, and the men go to theirs behind these bars. I’m struck by the very
ordinariness of sharing the Dharma, and then the separation into them and us.)

Writing Prisoners

I have sat many times since with these men. Once I had the privilege of
attending a very moving first Jukai experience for the prison Sangha. Often I
had the same reaction, moving from a place of judgment and ego to a com-
mon sense of our humanity. I am grateful to the prisoners and Mui for this
powerful teaching, which moves from the extraordinarily ordinary experience of connection in the Dharma to the wrenching separation the bars impose as we leave, and the prisoners remain behind.

I reconnect by corresponding with Gay prisoners about their lives, the issues they have about their Gayness in prison, and sometimes how hard it is for them to reconcile their lives with their connection to the Dharma. Each contact starts out as a request for a pen pal. We fumble the first few letters until we get to know each other. It’s clear to me that I am not a formal teacher, steeped in the sutras, but often in the beginning they assume I am. But our differentness dissipates as we share the commonplaces of our lives, and our experience of Buddhist practice and teaching. It settles into a pattern. We might talk about how the recognition of our sexuality has affected our life, or how it affects us now. Or all the talk may be about practice. We become each other’s teacher.

Sometimes only a few letters are exchanged, though in one case we wrote back and forth fourteen times. Not all relationships take, as our expectations become clear to each other. When one does take, I guess we are both writing from our hearts. I have received such good heart energy from my teachers, and the Sanghas I have been in. The Gay Buddhist Fellowship is one of these places, and this is what enables me to continue in this practice.

In “Prison Time” (in this issue), Terry Stein writes about the loneliness in prison. Mui often told me that the men appreciated my presence. This was strange to me, since I really said little. But what they appreciated was the simple presence of someone from outside. The same gratitude is in the letters which all of us who write receive. Just to get a letter, to be able to talk about life, is something so desired by prisoners.

On a practical level, those of us who write are supported by the Buddhist Peace Fellowship and the San Francisco Zen Center, which jointly sponsor the Prison Meditation project. Letters are exchanged through their addresses, and sometimes books can be sent, besides our Newsletter. There will be a workshop in the next few months for members of the Fellowship, sharing letters and the teaching they offer to us.

Without the precepts as guidelines, Zen Buddhism tends to become a hobby, made to fit the needs of the ego... The student is drawn back and forth, from outside to within the Zen Center, tending to use the Center as sanctuary from the difficulties experienced in the world. In my view, the true Zen Buddhist center is not a mere sanctuary, but a source from which ethically motivated people move outward to engage in the larger community.

—from The Mind of Clover by Robert Aikins

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Registration Form
7th Annual GBF Retreat
September 10–12, 1999

Name ________________________________
Address ______________________________
City __________________ State ______ Zip ______
Phone ________________________________

Special Dietary or Health Considerations

Accommodations (please check one): ( ) Dorm ( ) Campsite

Transportation:
( ) I can provide transportation
( ) I need transportation

Volunteer Needs:
Please indicate availability:
( ) I can help out with the retreat (i.e., bell-ringer, timekeeper, welcoming)

Payment: Sliding scale of $90 to $140. Please pay as much as you can afford. Enclosed is $______________
( ) full payment
( ) deposit ($50 minimum)

Please MAIL form and check payable to GBF to:
Bill Kirkpatrick
37 Frederick Street
San Francisco, CA 94117

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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
Call
415.974.9878
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Robin Levitt
Ding Hao Ma
Marty Cole
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Hamilton House
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Sunday Sitting Facilitators
Call
415.974.9878

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

If you are interested in volunteering, please contact us at 415.974.9878.

For A Long Time
by Jarvis Jay Masters

For a long time I had been my own stranger, but everything I went through in learning how to accept myself brought me to the doorsteps of dharma, the Buddhist path.

During my death penalty trial, Melody, a private investigator working on my case, sent me books on how to meditate, how to deal with pain and suffering, how to keep my mind at rest. She had broken her ankle and was trying to keep still. She and I were both trying this meditation gig, and like me, she was confronting a lot of things in her past. She was also writing and encouraged me to do so as well.

I began to get up early to try to calm my mind so I wouldn’t panic. It was as if my whole life was being displayed on a screen during the death penalty case. Things I had never realized about myself and my life were introduced to me and the jury at the same time. Questions I’d never asked my mother—like how long she’d been abused, on the street, an addict—were being asked now. Through meditation I learned to slow down and take a few deep breaths, to take everything in, not to run from the pain, but to sit with it,

confront it, give it the companion it had never had. I became committed to my meditation practice.

While I was in the holding booth during the jury’s deliberation on whether I should get life without parole or the death penalty, I started leafing through a Buddhist journal Melody had left there. In it was an article called Life in Relation to Death by a Tibetan Buddhist lama, Chagdud Tulku Rinpoche. I thought, "Wow! This is right up my alley!"

I sent a letter to the address in the journal and got a reply from a woman named Lisa, one of Rinpoche’s close students, with a copy of his booklet, Life in Relation to Death. At the time, I’d gotten into some kind of trouble and was in isolated confinement, stripped down to a pair of shorts and a T-shirt, with only two blankets. In her letter, Lisa asked if I needed help. I always needed help, I still need help, and because of the help she offered, we began corresponding. Then she began to visit me and eventually brought Rinpoche to San Quentin.

When I first saw Rinpoche through the glass in the small visiting room booth, I thought, “Oh, shit, I’m in trouble now. I’m messing around with a real lama. He’s from Tibet. Check him out. I bet everything he’s got on is blessed.”

I figured there were two ways I could introduce myself. I could greet him in an ordinary way, or I could bow. I bowed. Then he bowed. Why’d I think he wouldn’t? He’s been bowing all his life.

I thought, “I’ve been reading about lamas for the last three years and now I have a real one in front of me.” I knew that all I could do was tell him exactly what I think. If I lied or shied away from him, he’d know it.

I fell in love with him for the same reasons everybody else does. His life history was my key. He had been a rebellious kid. He wasn’t born with
We Hope You're Still There!

We're performing our annual checkup on GBF's mailing list, to be sure the folks who are on the list want to continue receiving the GBF Newsletter. There are three ways you can remain on the mailing list:

1) Clip and mail this coupon (with your address label on the back) to us
   2336 Market Street #9
   San Francisco, CA 94114

2) If you're in the Bay Area, bring this coupon to a Sunday sitting

3) Call 415.974.9878 and leave a message that you want to stay on the list

To receive future issues of The GBF Newsletter, please contact us in one of these ways!

If your name or address is different from what's on the mailing label on this issue, please give us the correct information:

Name __________________________
Street/Apt. ________________________
City/State/Zip ________________________

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Finding Freedom, from which this piece was taken, was published by Padma Publishing in 1997.

Buddhism Behind Bars

"Buddhism Behind Bars," an introduction to the problem of prisons in the United States and how Buddhists can practice with this problem, will be offered at Green Gulch Farm Zen Center on five Sundays, July 11 to August 8, from 8 to 9:15pm. Coordinated by GBF member Terry Stein and other members of the Prison Meditation Network, the course will offer orientation to the GBF prison correspondence program coordinated by Don Weipert. Registration fee is $50 ($30 for Zen Center members). Register by calling Green Gulch at 415.383.3134. For information, call Terry Stein at 510.836.6050.

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Annual GBF Picnic In August

Be sure to mark August 15 on your calendar for the annual GBF potluck picnic! By then summer will be in full swing, and we'll all be able to put on our lighter down parkas. The picnic will be held again in Tilden Park. Further details will be provided in next month's issue.

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a silver spoon. He was a feisty guy who would discipline me when I needed it. He knew what he was talking about, and would say it in a way that I'd get it. He had a certain shrewdness. Compassionate ferociousness. He was a lama who ate beef jerky, got upset, and had jewels of compassion in him. The only thing he didn't do was say all this to me. I just felt it. I thought, "Here's a guy who can take me out of prison even as I remain here. He won't dress me in Buddhist garb, but accept me as I am." I knew he was a tough character.▼

--Jarvis Jay Masters was born in 1962 and has been in foster care and institutions almost continuously since he was 12 years old. In 1981, at age nineteen, he was sent to San Quentin Prison following conviction for a crime spree. Subsequently he was found guilty of being an accomplice in the murder of a prison guard (he was accused of sharpening a piece of metal that was allegedly used to make the spear with which the guard was stabbed) and sentenced to die in the gas chamber. He has been on death row since 1990. Jarvis became a practicing Buddhist while on Death Row, and is now a writer. His first book,
This is It, # 2

This is It.
This is really It.
This is all there is.
And it's perfect as It is.

There is nowhere to go
but Here.
There is nothing here
but Now.
There is nothing now
but This.

And this is It.
This is really It.
This is all there is.
And It's perfect as It is.


In memory of James Broughton, great gay poet of the spirit and the flesh.

How to Reach Us

GBF Sangha
Send correspondence and address changes to: GBF, 2336 Market St. #9, 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, 2336 Market St. #9, San Francisco, CA 94114.

If possible, include a Mac 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: <halburt@aol.com>.

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