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.

Sex and Spirituality: A Gay Buddhist Reflects on a New Phase in Gay Liberation
by Paul Shepard

In the May GBF Newsletter, Larry Herzmen wrote about his experience in a group called Sexuality and Spirituality (S&S). Formed out of GBF, S&S held weekly meetings from October 1998 through May 1999 that focused on sexuality in the light of the Dharma. I would like to offer thoughts about my own sexual history as it unfolded in the group. I invite others to contact me about forming a second group.

My sexual issues have dealt with sexual compulsivity. I came out during the seventies in the Land of Oz, when boogie nights created the bogus daze that he who has the best sex wins. I have been in a Twelve Step Fellowship (SLAA) which focuses on sex and love issues. That program is still an important Sangha for me. I had also become involved in the Buddhist Alliance for Social Engagement (BASE), a program of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship. Although BASE was set up to focus on work as practice, I was struck by how much work on personal relationships we had done. Most of the time I had thought of my sexual behavior as separate from my spiritual practice, but now I was conscious of wanting to change that. Sexuality as practice emerged as a concept worth exploring.
How much I wanted to change became clear to me one day when I listened intently to the Dedication of Merit, usually given at the end of weekly GBF meetings. The prayer refers to Buddhist practice in general; what I ideally wanted was to be able to dedicate not just the concept of my sexuality but the practice of my sexual activity. I wanted to be able to frame having sex in terms of the Dedication of Merit, adding the italicized words in the opening phrase:

By the power and truth of this practice of my sexual activity,
May all beings have happiness and the causes of happiness,
May all be free from sorrow and the causes of sorrow,
May all never be separated from the sacred happiness which is without sorrow,
And may all live in equanimity without too much attachment or too much aversion,
And live believing in the equality of all that live.

I knew that the revised dedication would be quite a challenge to incorporate into my daily life. Would others be willing to join in the challenge, and ask for support? The BASE group had worked for me. The possibilities of a sexuality practice group excited me.

Since there is virtually no traditional Dharma on being Gay, I prepared a handout for the first meeting of S&S. It included a list of basic Buddhist principles: the Three Refuges, the Four Noble Truths, the Five Hindrances, the Eightfold Path, and last, but hardly least, the ten major prohibitory precepts (the number varies with different sources), which include the prohibition against sexual misconduct. I also suggested the format of the BASE meetings: a half-hour of sitting, a brief reading, check-ins, a talk on Dharma, or a subject pertinent to the group interest.

We closed membership in the group at five. As the weeks progressed, the small number allowed for greater depth in our work. In fact, it seemed that ninety minutes was never long enough, given the energy that would arise at each meeting. By constantly referring to our Buddhist practice, we kept the group from just being a rap or quasi-therapeutic session. Due primarily to the synchronicity of finding kindred spirits, and because we had time to witness each other’s histories in depth, our rare level of intimacy was exhilarating.

Core Work in the Group

We quickly got into the nitty gritty of why we were in the group. We were seeking more equanimity in our sex lives. It became clear that the more we disclosed, the more insight we gained, and the less suffering our sexuality caused.

At first I was fearful, as I had been in the BASE group, that the others’ response to MY problems would make me feel ashamed. Our weekly topics, however, clarified my sexual issues. I came to frame my problem with sexual compulsivity as one of attachment to sex as a pleasure without which I could not be happy. For example, I would often go cruising out of sheer habit. Practicing mindfulness while in the S&S group has helped me with that. A day after the group began, for example, I was driving south in Berkeley headed for Oakland. I unconsciously turned west to go to a cruising park, caught myself, steered south, inadvertently turned west again, before repeated mindfulness brought me back to Oakland.
The S&S group also provided broader insights. For most of my Gay life, I have had about as much sex as I could manage, thinking that eventually I would feel great about myself. Didn’t happen. Even when I was in longer relationships, the post-Stonewall period unleashed a long repressed libido so insatiable that no amount of activity would release the grasping. Feelings of joy were offset by guilt over investing a lot of time and energy in a little connection. I used to think that not harming myself or someone else was the only operative (and PC) guideline. Now, however, not harming someone means more than mutually consensual sex. I’ve begun considering what messages my sexual behavior sends to the Gay community at large, not because I’m co-dependent, but because we’re interdependent.

Examining the role of casual sex in my life, I find that I can project on the face of the encountered any thought that will fit my fantasy. I don’t know if I’m doing it with a “straight” who will not become more intimate as long as he can get just sex, or a Gay guy who is using sex as an avoidance drug—just as I did for years. These things are impossible for me to discern in a single encounter. During one S&S meeting, the group also helped me sort through my quandary over use of recreational drugs, especially if my partner uses them. In addition, I have a tendency to sexually objectify men, and to feel sexually objectified. I know from my experience that in obsession about a potential romance, I can behave however I imagine the object of desire would want.

Earlier in the AIDS epidemic, I might have expressed indifference about safe or unsafe sex, as long as it was consensual with serostatus disclosure. What the hell, I thought, it’s their life. Since working in our group, however, I think differently: I think of the Dedication of Merit. I want no harm to come to any Gay brother and others with whom they will sexually connect, no matter how much “informed” and out of denial they are, no matter how long I guess they’ve been barebacking, no matter if they figure they’re HIV-positive and it doesn’t matter to them. It matters to me.

It’s been painful having to realize, with the help of SLAA and S&S meetings, how often my cock has acted as my highest power (the Gay duo Romanofsky and Phillips have a song, “Don’t Use Your Penis For a Brain”). The S&S group has helped me work on attachments and aversion to sexual energy, and to value that energy—but not any more than I value my ability to see, hear, create, walk, think, breathe—maybe even bodysurf. I like nothing better than feeling sexual, except, maybe, feeling loved, feeling gratitude, or sorrow, feeling part of something larger (community, communion, Sangha?), any combination of the above. Bacchus and Buddha are not mutually exclusive natures.

**Shadows Revealed**

Preparing this essay has made me aware of a major insight which I haven’t even yet shared with the S&S-ers. I never thought I’d have to cope to internalized homophobia. I discovered my distrust of Gay men by noting how initially I was very judgmental of the sexual practice of the others in the group: one was too sexually inactive; another hopelessly romantic; a third gave too much time to unavailable men; the last dealt too slowly with his relationship issues. I realized I had a problem when I noted these thoughts about men to whom I felt very close.

I had projected the cause of my shadow self, sexual compulsion, onto the Gay community, separating my anxiety from the suffering of other Gay men. In the May Newsletter our Sangha teacher, Jim Wilson, was quoted as saying: “I’m not convinced that Gay men are by nature promiscuous.
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!

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The following committees are currently without chairs:
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If you are interested in volunteering, please contact us at 415.974.9878.

I suspect that’s part of recent history. You know, like it has to do with cultural suppressions and the psychology of coming out and all those kinds of issues in our culture at this time. Because when I look at the literary remains, and I admit that they are very few and far between, I don’t see that kind of manifestation.” I subscribe to his insight. For years, however, I thought it was dogmatic to put the highest premium on sex if you were Gay.

Another aversion that I unearthed is my ageism. Sadly, there’s not a whole lot of socializing—and I mean mixing, not dating—between the younger and the Stonewall generations. I have to guard against idolizing and sexualizing youth—otherwise I help perpetuate the prevailing aversion to aging. During one meeting, the S&S group brought in pictures of ourselves when we were younger. We spoke out truths about how we regarded our bodies and our sexuality then and now. The dating pool is now harder to access, in part because a lot of us eventually get tired of bars. We also often give up on relationships, internalizing the ageism rampant in the Gay and mainstream cultures.

Practice in the Second Phase
In analyzing my experience with the S&S group, certain aspects stand out which I would suggest for future meetings. Although it may seem obvious, gathering with fellow Buddhists was an integral part of the process. My guard is up against the harsh patriarchal thinking I learned from my father and the Vatican. The Gay Buddhist framework can, with practice, provide some safety from the male mindset prone to interpersonal competitive power struggles. Rotating the role of facilitator shows us how to share empowerment and activates individual participation in group process. Meditation and mindful reference to principles such as Right Speech, Right Effort, and Right Concentration help to differentiate a Buddhist group from other formats our larger urban centers offer.

I feel spiritually deprived by the paucity of ritual in our society. Among Gays and disenfranchised groups, this lack has been caused by our abandonment of rituals we learned from social, religious, and political institutions which abused their power. As a consequence, I honor the collective process and spiritual base of the Twelve Step model, as well as the ritual readings, meeting protocol, and closing prayer. The meeting plan of the first Sexuality and Spirituality group also included ritual: it began with a brief meditation to ground us, then the check-ins as a formal way of acknowledging each other, discussion of a topic related to the practice which brought us together, and a closing Metta where we could express deep heart feelings. I would feel supported by incorporating more form into the S&S model, similar to the BASE program: weekly spiritual readings (e.g., formal Dharma, excerpts from notable teachers, personal poetry and journals, as they relate to the group); short periods of silence to help retain mindfulness, especially with a topic as provocative as sexuality. Rituals can help open the heart and give spaciousness to the mind.

The benefit of sharing spiritual histories was a new gift to me. My own growth as a Gay man. I came into much sharper focus. A fog which had hovered since my coming out had been lifted: I could celebrate my sexuality, deal with homophobia, manage AIDS. I have attempted in this essay to highlight discoveries, gleaned from S&S meetings, of who and what had served me well on my spiritual journey, as well as to identify the obstacles. The non-dualistic nature of our practice helped me to see my sexual experience in terms of what brought me peace and what caused suffering, instead of categorizing autobiographical details as good or evil. I am learning (continued on page 7)
GBF Calendar
October 1999 San Francisco/Bay Area Events

Sunday Morning Sittings,
9:30am and 10:30am: San Francisco Buddhist Center, 37 Bartlett St,
between 21st & 22nd, one block west of Mission St.

October 3  Jim Wilson
    Monthly Speaker

October 10 Discussion

October 17 Howard King,
    GFB Member,
    Guest Speaker

October 24 Michael Broderick,
    GFB Member,
    Guest Speaker

October 31 Christian
de la Huerta'
    Guest Speaker

'Christian de la Huerta is author of
"Coming Out Spiritually," and host
of "Spirit Wave," an online radio
program heard weekly at www.gaybc
.com. He is founder of Q-Spirit, an
international network of Gays and
Lesbians in spirituality. Graduating
with honors from Tulane University,
de la Huerta holds a degree in
Psychology. He has been a seminar
leader and group facilitator for the
past nine years. As a Certified
Rebirther (Breathwork Practitioner),
he leads groups and has a private
practice which he serves as spiritual
coach and counselor.

Thursday Evening Sittings:
Have been suspended for an
indefinite period, due to reduced
attendance.

Tuesday, October 5, 7:30pm:
Steering Committee Meeting (open
to all GFB participants), Howard
King's home, 2008A Ward Street,
Berkeley, 510.649.1697.

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
at 415.386.3088. A dinner is
prepared by GFB volunteers, funded
by GFB.

Your Thrift Store
Donations Earn Money
For GFB

GBF members can donate their
quality cast-offs to the Community
Thrift Store (CTS) and GFB will
receive a quarterly check based on
the volume of items sold. This is a
great way to support our Sangha,
and the community. Bring your
extra clothing and other items to
CTS at 623 Valencia St 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. Tell
the worker you are donating to
GBF. Our ID number is 40.
Information 415.861.4910.

East Bay Meditation and
Discussion Group

Wednesdays, 7pm–9pm: Meditation,
tea, and discussion. For more
information, call Howard,
510.649.1697.

GBF Website
http:\\www.gaybuddhist.org

Saturday, October 16, 1pm–5pm:
Beginning Buddhism: A Class in
Buddhism for Beginners. To
preregister and for further
information, call Howard King at
510.649.1697.

Sunday, October 24, 2:30pm:
Newsletter Mailing Party. Snake's
home, SF, 415.552.6378.

Saturday, October 30, 7pm: GFB
Potluck Dinner Party at the home of
Snake Woolington, 82 Douglass
Street (at 17th), SF, 415.552.6378.
Local Dharma Centers
A list of local Dharma centers is available on our website and as a handout at our Sunday sittings. We encourage members to explore what these Dharma centers can offer to their practice.

Meditation Group in Sonoma County
A Buddhist meditation group meets near the town of Sonoma every other Tuesday evening starting at 7pm, and GBFers are always welcome. The group now has Gay and non-Gay practitioners. For more information, contact Bob Hass, 707.938.8868.

Ongoing Meditation Group On Monday Nights
Led by Jon Bernie, a meditation teacher in San Francisco with thirty years meditation experience (including eleven years of Zen Buddhist training and seven years of Vipassana training). The group is free and open to all; donations gratefully accepted. Quaker Meeting House, 65 9th Street (between Mission & Market), 7pm–9pm.
For more information, call Jon at 415.621.7314.

Local Dharma
October 1999 San Francisco/Bay Area Events

Saturday, October 9, 9am–5pm: One Day Sitting for Gays and Lesbians. Sit, walk, and eat together in safety, with respect and affection for the wholeness of life. Led by Fuyu Nancy Schroeder, a priest since 1986 and the head of Zen Practice at Green Gulch. Cost $40; $25 for members. Green Gulch Farm, 1601 Shoreline Highway, Sausalito. Information: 415.383.3134.


Ongoing Meditations

Tuesdays, Thursdays, & Fridays, 10:30am: HIV Sitting Group, Hartford Street Zen Center, 57 Hartford St, SF. Information 415.863.2507.


Thursdays, 12:30pm–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.


Sundays, October 3 & 17, 10:30am–12pm: East Bay Sitting Group for Gay and Lesbian People, 4120 Oakmore Road, Oakland. Information 510.482.2860.

Saturday, October 23, & Sunday, October 24, 9:30am–5pm: Gay and Free Vipassana (Insight) Meditation Retreat for Lesbians and Gay Men. Led by Arinna Weisman and Eric Kolvig. This nonresidential retreat is composed of silent sitting, walking, eating meditation, group discussions, and interviews. It is open to beginners and experienced meditators alike. $30 for each day (bring lunch). Spirit Rock Meditation Center, Marin County. Information: 415.488.0164.


If you would like to recommend a Dharma event for this column please e-mail information to: <halburt@aol.com>.
that if we attempt to be present, listen, and validate other people’s stories as well as our own, we strengthen our awareness of interdependence. And this group practice surely serves in slowing our reactions when we find ourselves resenting lovers, family, neighbors, nations.

Sexual minorities are no different from other communities defined by common values and split by intolerance. In my history, I see myself changing in a changing universe. The task is simply to accept change. Attempting to stop change futilely clashes with the reality of the universe. Since sexuality is a defining difference for sexual minority groups, arising collective sexual mores warrant continuous analysis, and so I advocate the formation of groups such as S&S. I am eager to continue observing how my sexual energy permeates my life, changing as my self-awareness increases, embracing rather than denying the advance of age. If I am not mindful and present in applying our practice to our choices in sexual behavior, I risk becoming compulsively attached to the pleasure. If I cling to the orgasmic intensity of the honeymoon phase of sexual relationships, I risk not discovering the pleasures of longer term sexual partnerships.

If we are mindful that cultures too are impermanent, we won’t carve in stone our collective sexual stance at any given point in time. For years, I have been silenced by my fear of breaking some monolithic moral code that prohibited a spiritual inquiry into Gay sex. Today the Gay and Lesbian community increasingly searches for spiritual identification—for example, our most recent residential retreat at Spirit Rock Meditation Center was filled to capacity. If the first phase of Gay liberation was political, the second phase of Gay liberation has now begun: a spiritual agenda emerges.▼

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510.547.4575

Paul Shepard will host an informational meeting to discuss forming a new Spirituality and Sexuality group, following the first GBF Sunday meeting in October (October 3) at noon, at 37 Bartlett St, SF. If it is impossible for you to meet that day, please phone 510.547.4575 for further information.

On Our Longing for Love (continued from page 2)

sight of our own felt longings and are caught in the mental elaborations around them. We see only inside our own heads, like a prisoner who sees only the walls of his cell and takes them for a four-cornered world.

Sometimes our longing is so strong, and the partner of our dreams is so long in coming, that we sexualize our need and look for surrogates. We want any port in a storm. We settle for sex as if it were love. Fortunately, scant love with copious touch feels inadequate soon enough. Our dissatisfaction with it is a built-in gift that directs our psyche back to the path of wholeness. We then may see the dead-end of manufactured affection in any of its guises. The healthier we become, the more we want only the combination of love and holding, not the ruptured versions that come from strangers who offer one-night stands or sex for money. The more self-respect we have for our own sexuality, the fewer chances we take to stunt or blunt it. When we save sex for love’s purposes, and for as long as love takes to get to us, it serves us and others as a skillful means to more love.▼

Where there is no love, put love and that is how you will find it.
—St. John of the Cross

Ask Dharma Daddy

Why do Buddhists bow?
Because they are very respectful to Daddy! But, also, there are good doctrinal reasons. Although the Buddhas, high Bodhisattvas (such as Guanyin, the Bodhisattva of Compassion) and respected teachers (such as the Dalai Lama) are not radically different from us, as God is said to be by Christians, Jews and Muslims, they are nevertheless different. They show us who we are in our basic nature. Bodhisattvas and respected teachers have gone a long way to realizing their basic nature, and Buddhas have realized their basic nature fully. The Tibetan word for "Buddha", pronounced "Sang-gyat", is a compound meaning "one who has awaken (as from sleep or drunkenness)" and "one who has come to full bloom (as a flower from a bud)". We have the potential to be like the Buddhas, and by seeing them or learning about them we get an idea of how far we are along the road towards realizing our own full potential, and we honor and respect them as ideals towards which we strive. In the Asian cultures where Buddhism originated and developed, bowing, sometimes by a slight inclination of the body and sometimes by a full prostration, was and is the normal way of showing respect for a superior. Although bowing is not a general custom in the USA, if we follow the traditional practice we will probably find that it helps us focus on our ultimate goal of becoming Buddhas, so as to free all beings from suffering. Now, be a good boy and bow nicely! ▼
Epiphyte
I am like
an epiphyte
living on
nothing
but
air.
Breathing in,
I know I am breathing in.
Breathing out,
I know I am breathing out.
Za-zen is an attainable means
to an attainable end.
Perennial practice
Continual quest.
Gertrude Stein made
the most amazing statement,
"Knowledge is what you know."
Breathing in, I know I am breathing in.
Breathing out, I know I am breathing out.
—Ron Bluestein

How to Reach Us
GBF Sangha
Send correspondence and address changes to: GBF, 2336 Market Street, PMB 9, San Francisco, CA 94114. Send e-mail to <gbfsf@hotmail.com>. 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 Street, PMB 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.