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.

Fall Retreat Brings Strength and Renewal to Sangha

by Hal Hershey

GBF convened its Eighth Annual Retreat on September 10 at Vajrapani Institute, high in the Santa Cruz mountains, amongst 70 acres of long-standing redwoods, madrones, and oaks. Nineteen participants joined together from all over the Bay Area for silent sitting and walking meditations, ritual and play, vegetarian meals and camaraderie. Jim Wilson shared his music and illuminating clairty in three Dharma talks, focusing on the fundamental principles of Buddhism.

Saturday evening’s candlelit ritual before the great Enlightenment Stupa focused on Gratitude, bringing forth heartfelt emotions. The ritual ended with the candles arranged inside the meditation hall, softly illuminating the beautiful gilded images.

Chilly fog-shrouded mornings gave way to crisp hot days as we deepened our practice together and found strength in our Sangha. GBF members
Sunday Schedule Changed

On Sunday, September 26, GBF members considered the suggestion to eliminate the 9:30 sitting and agreed that the schedule should be changed. However, the proposal to start the Sunday sitting at 10:00am instead of 10:30am was not approved. The meditation hall will be open at 10:00am on Sundays and available to members to sit or stretch in silence before the regular sitting at 10:30am. Speakers will be introduced after a quiet five-minute break, and have approximately fifty minutes for a talk, questions, and discussion. After announcements, GBF will convene at noon in the outer room for social time.

David Holmes and Howard King designed the schedule for the retreat, and offered a framework for exploring ritual in our practice. Bill Kirkpatrick handled the essential preregistration work. Don Wierp led Yoga practice, and Lee Robbins gave a workshop in relating the religion of our upbringing to our present Buddhist practice, as well as offering a discussion of his proposed Twelve Step Program based on Buddhist principles. There was also time for exploring the grounds of Vajrapani Institute and adjacent Castle Rock State Park.

Retreatants were given a chance to record their impressions and feelings about the retreat on tape. There is now discussion and support growing for holding our first Winter retreat, over the Presidents' Day weekend in February. Details will be published in the newsletter.

Two members of GBF offered us these reflections:

Coming Home ...

by Gary Harrold, Aptos, California

At Vajrapani, arching, spreading as a tree
goodness has showered over me.
Ease, concentration, and patience drifted like fog
Being alone seems more friendly, like a croaking frog.
It takes awareness—work—to allow generosity to flow
So put in your heart before you go ...
We talked of impermanence as in dying
as well as exaggeration as a form of lying.
The Dharma teaches us to watch clinging, grasping, desire
Yea, beneath my soul it sure seems to start a fire.
Then I ask “That excitement, do it I need?”
Neither my heart, body nor soul does it feed.
Separating myself from excessive media, the norm,
helps shelter equanimity of Dharma from the storm.
So bring on the traffic, long lines and frowns,
Oh, the sweet challenge of calmness abounds.
Sense the face, neck, shoulders, and back
when my thoughts go to desiring and lack.
So, it was in the Three Jewels that we took refuge,
then the delusional world didn't seem so huge.

Doing What I Do

by Suzan Peter Schellin, San Francisco, California

I am a Buddhist monk in the Zen tradition of Suzuki-roshi—partiallysighted, middle-aged, queer—and like you, I suffer. The suffering is why I started treading on the "spiritual path" in the first place.
Every now and then, I decide my spiritual path needs a kick in the ass. Usually it starts out with a fantasy about some guy on the bus. My most recent experience resulted from listening to two young Algerians, discussing obligatory Muslim prayers in French, on the streetcar from Milan, built circa 1923, orange with slippery seats and brass lamps. The guys were attractive and the situation exotic. Perfect! I could escape my stinking, boring life, and was soon running through the sands of Islam with Arab boys in a scene from “Prick Up Your Ears.”

Then I caught myself. I suffer. You suffer. Everybody suffers. I used to think the point of the spiritual chase was basically the same as “getting off” in a tent, or on a blanket in the hotel, with Oud music in the background, with minarets standing like erections in the desert heat. I thought the end of suffering was obvious. You want something. You get it. End of suffering. I was wrong.

For twenty-five hundred years, people have said that Buddha was right. Escape and distraction don’t work. The practice I do—Zazen—has a way of slowing down the process of delusion.

But “insight” doesn’t happen overnight. Gradually I allowed myself to “feel” what I do and not analyze it endlessly. I used to think that the causes of my grief were outside of me so I could play “victim.” But Buddhism is about taking responsibility for oneself. It isn’t about explaining anything. You ask a question and it holds up a mirror. There are three possible outcomes: you get bored and look elsewhere for something more exciting. Or use meditation like a drug to dull the pain. Or allow yourself to feel how awful it is to be bored, to suffer, to be sick, lonely, or whatever mess you happen to be in at the time. In any case, Buddhism is boring.

The bad news is that there’s no way out. Transcendence happens . . . through acceptance of boredom and the suffering. It doesn’t end in a tent with the Algerian, rolling over afterwards to smoke a Lucky Strike. It ends by really suffering when you suffer, by really having your own experience and not escaping it or diverting somewhere else. For me, it’s being sight-impaired, diseased and aging—looking directly at death. It sucks! Then, in the moment you’ve decided everything’s lost, a reprieve appears.

The Buddha says, “Take the Middle Way.” And you ask, “What’s that?”

It’s the space between extremes. One extreme is that everything’s gonna last forever, and the other extreme is that things are fragile and gonna turn to smoke and vanish completely.

The Middle Way is between all and nothing. It’s the steady, unbroken silence behind the racket your mind is making. In Nepal, they call it “the eye that never sleeps.” It’s ordinary and immediate; it’s around every day. It defies description.

Priests and artists fight over who owns it. The irony is that nobody does, because it’s not a thing. There’s nothing to do. Nothing happens. One day, you just stop what you do and sit down. And there you are. ♦

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An Afternoon of Queer Dharma

The second in a series of Bay Area Queer Dharma events is scheduled for Saturday, November 20, from 1-5pm. Gay men, Lesbians, Bisexuals, and Transgendered people from all Buddhist traditions are invited to gather for an afternoon of practice and telling our stories. The event will be held at the Berkeley Fellowship of Unitarian Universalists, 1924 Cedar Street (at Bonita), Berkeley, California. Suggested donation is $15.00; no one turned away because of lack of funds.

For more information, contact Tova Green, Buddhist Peace Fellowship, 510.655.6169. Queer Dharma is sponsored by the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, Gay Buddhist Fellowship, Gay Men’s Buddhist Sangha, Lesbian Buddhist Sangha, and Moon Springs Sangha.

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The Enlightenment Stupa at Vajrapani Institute is a focal point for ritual and contemplation.
Ask Dharma Daddy

Dear Dharma Daddy: What are those malas for? And why 108 beads?

Mala is a Sanskrit word meaning “wreath” and may be translated as “rosary” (Latin: rosarium, rose-wreath or rose-garden). There are three major forms: the Latin (Roman Catholic), with 150 beads; the Middle Eastern (Eastern Orthodox Christianity and Islam), with 99 beads; and the Indian (Hinduism, Buddhism, and some other traditions), with 108 beads. Rosaries were developed for keeping count of the repetitions of a short prayer or mantra and have come to be used as talismans or even as jewelry. The number 108 is a sacred number in Indian Subcontinent traditions, but why it is sacred is not known. That’s the main poop. For more details, read on. It so happens that Dharma Daddy is one of the very few people who has done some research on this topic.

Rosaries seem to have begun as piles or bags of stones or beads which were then strung together for convenience. (Or maybe early queens were drooping them too often?) The number of beads varies but it is always, in the full form, around 100. The Christian rosary seems to have begun as a lay person’s substitute for the monastic duty of chanting the 150 Psalms. It had 150 beads and one said 150 repetitions of the Lord’s Prayer (the “Our Father”). The Dominican rosary, which is the commonest in the Roman Catholic Church today, and which was supposedly given to St. Dominic by St. Mary in a vision of a string of roses, is used to say 150 repetitions of the Hail Mary interspersed with occasional repetitions of the Lord’s Prayer and some other prayers. For practical purposes, the Dominican rosary is divided into three portions called chaplets, and in order to say a full rosary one must go around the chaplet three times. The rosaries used by Eastern Orthodox Christians and by Muslims both have 99 beads. Orthodox Christians use it to repeat Kyrie Eleison (“Lord, have mercy”) or the name of Jesus in a formula known as the Jesus Prayer. They say it 99 times as a multiple of 3 for the Triune God.

Muslims use it for dhikr, the repetition of the Name of God (Allah), Who is said to have 99 revealed names and a hundredth which He keeps to Himself. It is not known why the Orthodox Christian and Muslim rosaries are the same length. A secular version of the 99 bead rosary is twiddled all over the Middle East as “worry beads”.

(continued on page 7)
GBF Calendar

November 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.

November 7 Jim Wilson
Monthly Speaker

November 14 Carol Newhouse
Guest Speaker

November 21 Kobai Scott Whitney
Guest Speaker

November 28 Discussion
'Carol Newhouse is Guiding Teacher of the Lesbian Buddhist Sangha, a writer, and psychotherapist. She is currently pursuing a PhD in Buddhist Studies at the California Institute of Integral Studies.

'Kobai Scott Whitney was a friend of Issan Dorsey, and part of the first group of Gay Buddhists who met in the late 1970s. That group later evolved into such entities as GBF and Issan-ji Zendo. Whitney has practiced with Aitken Roshi's group since the early 1980s. He lives at Koko An Zendo in Honolulu and works as a writer and magazine editor.

Tuesday, November 2, 7:30pm:
Steering Committee Meeting (open to all GBF participants), Marty Cole's home, 237 Masonic (at Turk), SF, 415.824.2959.

Saturday, November 20,
3–6:30pm: Preparation and serving of dinner for homeless families, Hamilton Family Center, SF.
Information: see notice above, and/or call Clint Seiter at 415.386.3088.

Sunday, November 21, 1pm:

Thursday, November 25, 4pm:
Thanksgiving Potluck Party at the home of Howard King, 2208A Ward Street, Berkeley (near the Ashby Bart station). For information and to RSVP to Howard, call 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 GBF volunteers, funded by GBF.

Your Thrift Store
Donations Earn Money
For GBF
GBF members can donate their quality cast-offs to the Community Thrift Store (CTS) and GBF 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
Local Dharma

November 1999 San Francisco/Bay Area Events


If you would like to recommend a Dharma event for this column, please e-mail information to: <halburt@aol.com>.

Local Dharma Centers
A list of local Dharma centers is available on our website and as a handout at our Sunday sitings. 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 Wednesday 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.

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.

Wednesday, November 3–
Sunday, November 7:
The Indian Subcontinent rosary has 108 beads. This number is explained in many different, often mutually inconsistent, ways. The ancient Indians were excellent mathematicians and 108 may be the product of a precise mathematical operation (e.g. \(1 \times 2^3 \times 3^3 = 108\)) which was thought to have special numerological significance. Whatever the reason, 108 has been a sacred number in the Indian Subcontinent for a very long time. The Buddhist rosary, therefore, has 108 beads, and 108 is sometimes used in buildings (108 pillars in some temples) and daily life (Tibetan women may plait their hair in 108 knots).

The Buddhist rosary is a prominent feature of Mahayana but it is absent, or at least very rare, in Theravada. Tibetan rosaries are made of different material depending on the deity (bla) for whom they are used. A crystal rosary is preferred for Chenrezig (the Bodhisattva of Compassion), lapis lazuli for Medicine Buddha, and so forth, but a rosary of bodhi wood may always be used except for some very special practices. In China and Japan the rosary takes on different forms in different lineages. The most distinctive form is that used by Nichiren Buddhists (SGI, Soka Gakkai International) which has a central circle and appendages representing the head, arms and legs of Shakyamuni Buddha. SGI Buddhists twist the rosary around and between their joined palms and rub the beads together, but they do not keep a count of the number of repetitions. Jodo Shinshu Buddhists (best known on the US mainland as BCA, Buddhist Churches of America) repeat the Name of Amida Buddha but also do not keep a count of the number. They use a small rosary with an indeterminate number of beads which they wrap around (not between) their joined palms. Tibetans may keep the rosary, when not in use, wrapped round the left wrist. In East Asia, small rosaries, with a few beads strung on elastic, are worn on the left wrist as a reminder that one is a follower of the Dharma.

In essence, the Buddhist mala is used for “remembering” or developing mindfulness, whence its name nenju (mindfulness beads) in Japanese.

Send your questions on Buddhist doctrines and practices to Roger Corless, a.k.a. Dharma Daddy, 1757 Algaroba Street, Honolulu, HI 96826, or by e-mail to <roger.corless@duke.edu> or to the editor, <halburt@aol.com>. Please do not send personal questions; Roger is neither a therapist nor an ordained Dharma teacher. He is a professor of Buddhist Studies with some years of experience with Buddhist practice.

The Core of Masculinity

The core of masculinity does not derive from being male, nor friendliness from those who console.

Your old grandmother says, "Maybe you shouldn't go to school. You look a little pale."

Run when you hear that. A father's stern slaps are better.

Your bodily soul wants comforting.

The severe father wants spiritual clarity.

He scolds but eventually leads you into the open.

Pray for a tough instructor to hear and act and stay within you.

We have been busy accumulating solace.

Make us afraid of how we were.

I honor those who try to rid themselves of any lying, who empty the self and have only clear being there.

—Rumi, from The Essential Rumi, translated by Coleman Barks
Spiritual energy is healing energy; when any group gathers with a dedication to something greater than one's finite, individual self, the accumulated energy is almost palpable. When Jesus said, "Where two or more are gathered in my name, there shall I be also," he was affirming the miraculous spiritual power, the delightful synergy, of Sangha. When we dedicate ourselves to a cause larger or longer-lasting than our mortal selves, we edge in the direction of immortality.

—Lama Surya Das, from Awakening the Buddha Within.

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.