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.

The Four Immeasurables
Part One of a Dharma Talk by Jim Wilson, Recorded June 13, 1999

I'd like to talk today about a set of Buddhist practices which are often referred to as the Four Immeasurables. I'd like to give an overview of them. They form a core practice, or a set of core practices, in many Buddhist traditions. They're also called the Four Bramaviharas, which means the abode of the Gods. That is, that these sets of practices will open the mind and heart into a very expansive state. The implication is that they will have the capacity to transform you in an almost cosmic way. But it takes some persistence—doesn't happen overnight.

The four traditional immeasurables are Compassion, Love, Joy, and Equanimity. They are rooted in a sutra called the Metta Sutra. It's a very short sutra. In that sutra, the Buddha explains that if you wish to enter the peace of nirvana, the way to do so is to treat all living beings like a mother treats her only child. And this is true whether you're a male or a female. That practice is the golden road to enlightenment.

What the Buddha is talking about in that sutra is opening oneself up to the relationship to all of existence; establishing oneself in relationship to all of existence. The central insight of the Buddha was the interdependence of all
things. Everything exists interdependently; nothing exists separately. But we
have the habit of mind that views things as if they do exist on their own, sepa-
rate. So how do you open yourself up to the reality of the interdependence
of all things?
There’s a group of Buddhist practices which focus on analysis as the key
to comprehending the interdependence. This form of thinking is to examine
things very closely, and try and find something about any existing thing
which exists separately. You can do that with any object. A good object is
yourself [laughs]. If you examine carefully any object and you try and find
what about that object exists separately, you can’t find anything there that
exists separately. Not that it doesn’t exist, but you can’t find anything about it
which exists separately. That approach is the basis of Buddhist analysis and
the many different systems of analysis which Buddhism has developed.

There’s an interesting thing that happens here, and that is that because such
analysis is an intellectual process, it establishes the discursive consciousness
as the base for realizing interconnectedness. But the discursive consciousness
separates things out—that’s its job. The discriminative consciousness cate-
gorizes things, separates things out from each other. The word “discrimination”
means “to pull out, to separate out.”

Something really interesting happens when the intellectual consciousness
latches on to the idea of interdependence. It separates people into those who
understand that reality and those who don’t [laughs]. Because the discursive
or discriminatory consciousness can’t help it, that’s what it does. That’s what
it does with any kind of material that it’s given.

Isn’t that interesting? You could actually meet many people like this; you
know, like “Everything’s interdependent, and those assholes don’t understand
that!” [laughs]. That’s how the discriminative consciousness works.

The practices of the Four Immeasurables, however, are practices aimed at
heart wisdom, the wisdom of the heart. That’s why you have to take a step
beyond intellectual understanding, into a meditative kind of practice, because
it is the heart wisdom which truly understands the interconnectedness of all
things. That is where the wisdom of compassion, love, equanimity, and the
comprehension of interconnectedness really arises.

The problem is that we don’t recognize when that wisdom is present. So the
first thing is to be able to recognize its presence, so that you know when it’s
there and when it’s not there. These practices are done in a progressive way, so
that we can become more familiar with their presence, and as our familiarity
grows, then we can expand that wisdom, and that understanding of the heart.

What I’m saying is that this kind of wisdom, the wisdom of the heart, can be
cultivated. Just like the wisdom of discrimination can be cultivated and
expanded upon and built upon, the wisdom of the heart can also be culti-
vated and developed. For most of us in this culture, heart wisdom is highly
atrophied, because you don’t get any rewards for it [laughs]. It’s nascent there,
and you always start developing this wisdom from a place that spontaneously
appears.
Let's begin with Compassion. Incidentally, there's obviously a lot of overlap between these four perspectives, particularly Compassion and Love. But just for purposes of discussion and practice, we can distinguish a certain emphasis.

In this group of practices, Compassion has to do with sympathy, empathy, and caring for others. The Bodhisattva Kwan Yin is a manifestation of Compassion. She is one who responds to distress, responds to the cries of the world out of sympathy. That's her image, her meaning.

The process in this is to first of all, have sympathy, and empathy, and caring for yourself. You start with yourself. It's very funny—I actually found that many people find this step extremely difficult [laughs]. It seems for a lot of people it's easier to have compassion for others than it is for themselves. I've run into this over and over again in teaching people these practices. But, traditionally you start with yourself.

The practice is a verbal practice. It's what I call a contemplation. You would say to yourself:

"May I be free from suffering."

"May I be free from distress."

"May I be free from anger."

Those kinds of phrases.

Traditionally there's several categories of people. You start with yourself, then you would move on to what are called the benefactors, people who have helped you. This is actually usually the easiest one, and for a lot of people I've taught this, I've recommended that they start with that one rather than with themselves, because it's amazing what a low opinion we all have of ourselves. [Laughs.]

"May those who have helped me be free from suffering."

"May those who have helped me be free from anger."

"May those who have helped me be free from harm."

That kind of contemplation.

How do you focus? How do you do this kind of contemplation? Depending on the tradition, there's all sorts of ways to bring your attention to this kind of practice. Lighting a candle, and lighting some incense, bowing:

"May all those who have helped me be free from suffering, may all those who have benefitted my life be free from suffering, anger."

Ringing a bell, this kind of ceremony, very simple ceremony, helps to focus one's attention. Repeating the phrases a certain amount of time, like for ten minutes, or five minutes, or thirty minutes. There are some people, monks I've met, for whom this is their exclusive practice. As we're sitting inside at meditation, they would be doing Metta, this kind of Metta meditation.

After benefactors, friends. The next category would be friends.

"May all my friends be free from suffering."

"May all my friends dwell in peace."
GBF Homeless Project Changes Monthly Date
If you are available to volunteer your time to the Hamilton Family Center on the second Saturday of any month, please contact Clint Seiter at 415.386.3088. GBF volunteers prepare a dinner, funded by GBF, for homeless families.

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. Last year we received over $800 through members’ generosity. 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 & 18th) between Valencia and Mission. Tell the worker you are donating to GBF. Our ID number is 40. Information 415.861.4910.

“May all my friends dwell in harmony.”
“May their lives be free from contentment.”

After friends, then you expand it to neutral persons. A good one to pick is a bank teller [laughs], someone at a checkout counter—it’s good to have someone specific in mind, but not someone that you particularly know. I happen to shop at Lucky’s, so there are certain checkout people I encounter fairly often. “May the Lucky’s checkout person be free from...” [laughs]

It’s very interesting to watch one’s mind, as you move from benefactors and friends to a neutral person. You may experience a different sense of the quality of one’s heart. With friends and benefactors, we have a spontaneous sense of connectedness to them, a spontaneous sense that we would like to help them, and that we would like their lives to be well and happy. It’s very interesting, this movement from people that we spontaneously feel friendly toward, to people that we are neutral towards. Watch that mind—it’s very interesting.

Usually this does not present a big obstacle in the contemplation, but it might take a longer time, or more persistence, to bring that quality of “wishing someone well” to neutral people.

Then there’s the difficult person. After the neutral person you have what is called the difficult person. Many people, I’ve discovered, choose someone who is politically hostile to their point of view, and that’s always a good one. [Laughs] It’s really good to choose someone that you have a spontaneous feeling of repulsion for, at this point in the process. Someone that you deeply dislike. It doesn’t necessarily have to be someone living; it could be a historical figure that you have great antipathy for.

One of the difficulties at this point in awakening this heart of compassion is that people often feel that wishing a difficult person well means approving of what they’re doing. It’s important to make a distinction between wishing someone well and approving of what they’re doing. This kind of contemplation can make that difference clear.

In the Metta Sutra, the Buddha says you should treat all beings as if they were your only child. You don’t always approve of what your child is doing; in fact, you may have to run interference sometimes with children. So there is a distinction between feeling compassion for someone and necessarily approving of what they’re doing. It is possible, but it takes some practice, to feel compassion and love for extremely destructive and very difficult people.

One of the ways to overcome this kind of difficulty is to shift the contemplation a little bit and say, “Just as I want to be happy, just as I want my life to be free from suffering, so this person also wants to be happy, and also wants to live a life free from suffering.” To expand the contemplation a little bit, so that you realize that the direction of your life, a primary motivation is to have some serenity and peace in your life, and that is also true of what people we disapprove of are doing.

Now, they may be doing it ineffectively, they may be doing it ignorantly. The Buddha often talked about this in the context of “taking refuge.” People take refuge in fame, because they believe that fame is permanent, but it’s not. So it’s
inappropriate. People take refuge in power, because they believe it will protect
them, but it will not. People take refuge in money, or youth, or a whole list of
things. They do so because at some level they believe this will bring them hap-
piness, but that is incorrect. It will not. If you put it in that perspective, then
it's easier to understand why they are doing what they're doing.

"May all the difficult people in my life be free from suffering."
"May all the difficult people in my life experience happiness."
"May their lives be free from sorrow."
After that you extend it to all people:
"May all people be free from suffering."
"May all people be free from sorrow."
In some traditions, they say, "May all people in front of me ... May all peo-
to my right ... May all people to my left, behind me, above me, below
me, in all realms, of all existences, be free from suffering, be free from sorrow,
be free from anger and delusion."
That's the structure of this kind of contemplation, to begin with oneself, a
big obstacle [laughs], move on to people who have helped you in your life—
benefactors, friends, neutral people, difficult people, all people, and all sentient
existence.

If you have a deep understanding of interconnectedness, this kind of practice
affects all of existence; it's not just for yourself. It has an effect on people
throughout time and space. But to bring it down to a more concrete level,
cultivating that heart of compassion has a remarkable effect in one's daily life.

Sometimes the effects are difficult to see, because it's a matter of what hasn't
happened rather than what has happened. It's a matter of you're out shopping,
and the person who's waiting on you, maybe they're very tired, and they might
be sourly. And because you've been practicing this kind of Metta contempla-
tion, spontaneously arises your wish that they be free from suffering, that their
anger comes to an end. You don't respond with your own anger; what you
respond with in your heart is your wish that their own suffering ceases.

What hasn't happened is a confrontation. A little confrontation, you know
the kind I'm talking about. The effects of these kinds of practices are often
manifest in absences rather than presences.

People who do this kind of practice, people who have a good heart, are nice
to be around. We like being around them. It's very interesting—why is that?
It's because we don't feel threatened, we don't feel under attack, we don't feel
like we're going to have to defend ourselves, we don't feel like we're walking
on eggshells because we might say the wrong thing. All of that gets to be put
aside. It's very relaxing to be around people who have that kind of presence.
So there are very real "this world" effects to this kind of practice, to develop-
ing this kind of heart.▼

To be continued in the March 2000 issue.
Dear Dharma Daddy

Would an analysis of the Pali terms used in the Five Grave Precepts help us to understand the Buddha’s original central concern in promulgating each of them? They seem designed to function as a kind of koan, expanding in meaning as our practice deepens. A knowledge of the precise derivation of each term would help us not to drift too far from the Buddha’s intent (insofar as we can know it). For example, does the third precept refer to sensuality more than sexuality, and is the fifth precept concerned about intoxication more concerned with addiction and compulsion than drunkenness?

“Justin Ebriate”,
Woodside, California

Dear Justin:

Good boy, you are doing your homework! The Buddha did not speak English and the Dharma has not been in the English-speaking world long enough to develop a generally agreed list of equivalents. Therefore, philological analysis is not just something professors do to confuse you or make you fail the exam, it is a form of meditation which increases our insight.

For the full text of the Precepts in Pali, and a discussion of their significance, see Dharma Daddy’s article “The Positive Meaning of the Negative Precepts,” in the October, 1998 issue of this newsletter. Here, I will address the issue of a deeper meaning to the first, third, and fifth precepts.

Each precept contains a phrase which literally means “I bind upon myself the segment of the training of turning away from...”. This is not a vow to a deity who might punish us if we misbehave and it is not an agreement to do something absolutely perfectly. We make a decision, for our own happiness and the happiness of all beings, to turn away from some activity as much as we can at the moment. We train ourselves to do this, and as we become more skillful we observe the precept more completely.

The first precept is basic: we turn away from “harming beings with breath”. Breath (pana in Pali, prana in Sanskrit) stands for life-force and indicates a sentient being, a being with some form of consciousness. At the beginning of our practice we try not to harm any being who is something like us—animals, insects, and, of course, other humans. As we come to realize that, in the great scheme of things, everything is interconnected, we begin to feel our intimate relationship, in a sense our identity, with all other beings, and with inanimate objects. Thich Nhat Hanh has a striking poem about a girl raped by pirates in which he tells us that, ultimately, he is the girl and he is also each one of the pirates. This helps him to have compassion for all concerned. When we actually experience the truth of interdependent arising, rather than just understand it intellectually, we hear, with Chan Master Dongshan, the Dharma preached by grasses and stones and, as Zen Master Dogen says, we are enlightened by all things. Then, we live lightly on the earth, and we observe the precept spontaneously.

The phrase kamesu micchacaras in the third precept literally means “dishonest activity in regard to sensuality”, but kama is always understood to allude primarily to sex. For monks and nuns, who are vowed to celibacy, it means not having any sex at all. (For more on this, see the following question.) For the rest of us, it means conducting our sex lives in a responsible manner, bearing in mind the first precept. It is important, at the start of our practice, not to mystify this precept with metaphysical and philosophical rationalizations. Sexual passion can cloud our judge-
Dear Dharma Daddy:

What is the monastic Buddhist policy toward masturbation? A build-up of hormones tends to make my dreams sexual, instead of spiritual—which I’d rather have. So masturbation on an infrequent basis seems preferable to eventual release in a wet dream. On the other hand (pun intended), masturbation requires fantasy/clinging/desire, which is also negative. I’d be interested in how the monastic system views the dilemma. I’m not sure, physically, if you can opt to do neither.

K.R., Ione, California

Dear K.R.:

The Vinaya (monastic rule) is very clear on this point: intentional emission of the semen is a serious (parajika) offense involving “defeat,” i.e., expulsion from the order (Sangha).

Once there was a monk who masturbated whenever he felt depressed.

The other monks wondered if this was an offence against the third precept, and so they asked the Buddha. Yes, he said, it is. A monk must not masturbate. Later, another monk (apparently not the same one, of whom we hear no more) announced that he was having wet dreams, and they asked the Buddha if that was an offence against the third precept.

No, he said, it isn’t, because he didn’t ejaculate on purpose. So, the rule above was established. (Nothing is said about female masturbation.)

The point here is the place of intention in the operation of karma. Every act, good or bad, has its consequence, but strongly willed acts performed with clear forethought produce stronger effects, or larger fruits, than weakly willed or accidentally performed actions. Our legal system has a similar distinction, between, for example, murder and manslaughter, and a court may reduce the sentence of someone who has been shown to be, at the time of the act in question, insane or in some other way not fully responsible for their actions.

The Buddha did not see the issue as a dilemma, but as a choice. Remember also that if (as I suspect) you are not a monk you are not vowed to celibacy. For my thoughts on the third precept as it applies to a layman, see the previous question. If you are having a lot of sexual dreams, and if they trouble you, you may wish to discuss this with a professional counselor.

Send your questions on Buddhist doctrines and practices to Roger Corless, a.k.a. Dharma Daddy, 1757 Algaroba Street, Apt. 301, 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 not a therapist or Dharma teacher, just a Professor of Buddhist Studies.

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**GBF Spring Retreat – Registration Form**

GBF sponsors its first Spring Retreat on March 3–5, at the Pema Osel Ling Dharma Center, in the Santa Cruz Mountains. The retreat, to focus on the Buddha Way as the Practice of Deep Intimacy, will commence with dinner on Friday, and continue until after lunch on Sunday. The cost of $140 includes meals, dormitory lodging, and dana, and allows us to offer partial scholarships to several GBF brothers. Private rooms will be available for an additional charge, yet to be determined. For further information, call Howard King at 415.649.1697.

Name ________________________________

Address ________________________________

City __________________ State __________ Zip __________

Phone ________________________________

Special Dietary or Health Considerations ________________________________

Transportation

( ) I can provide transportation

( ) I need transportation

Volunteer Help

( ) I can help out with the retreat (i.e., welcoming, timekeeping, bell-ringing)

Please mail this form and your check to:

GBF
2215-R Market Street, PMB 456
San Francisco, CA 94114

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GBF Calendar
February 2000 San Francisco/Bay Area Events

Sunday Morning Sittings, 10:30am:
San Francisco Buddhist Center,
37 Bartlett St, between 21st & 22nd,
one block west of Mission St.
February 6 Jim Wilson
Monthly Speaker
February 13 Discussion by
Sangha members
February 20 Steve Peskind*
February 27 Discussion by
Sangha members

*Steve Peskind has been a Buddhist
student and practitioner since 1973,
and an HIV/AIDS counselor and
educator since 1981. He studies and
practices in the Japanese Soto Zen
and Tibetan Kagyu and Nyingma
traditions. He is a co-founder of
Coming Home Hospice and the San
Francisco Shanti Project. Steve is
now a counselor for people living
with Traumatic Brain Injury in the
San Francisco Bay Area, a free-lance
writer, and Volunteer/Coordinator
of the Buddhist AIDS Project.

Tuesday, February 1, 7:30pm:
Steering Committee Meeting (open to
all GBF participants), at the home of Hal Hershey, Albany,
510.527.7472.

Saturday, February 12, 3–6:30pm:
Preparation and serving of dinner
for homeless families, Hamilton
Family Center, SF.
Information: call Clint Seiter at
415.386.3088.

Sunday, February 20, 1pm:
Newsletter Mailing Party, Snake's
home, SF, 415.552.6378.

Saturday, February 26, 7pm: GBF
Potluck Dinner at the home of Hal
Hershey, 545 Pierce Street, #2208,
Albany, 510.527.7472.

Friday, March 3–Sunday, March 5:
First Annual GBF Spring Retreat,
focusing on the Practice of Deep
Intimacy, at Pema Osel Ling
Dharma Center in the Santa Cruz
Mountains. Fee: $140. See registra-
tion form in this issue.
Information 510.649.1697.

Local Dharma

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

Sundays, 3–5pm: "Buddhism for
Gay Men," Gay Men's Buddhist
Sangha. A 20-minute meditation
followed by a presentation of the
core teachings of the Buddha,
designed specifically for the Gay
community. New Leaf Center,
1874 Market St, SF.
Information 415.207.8113.

Thursdays, 12:30–1:30pm: Mind-
fulness 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.

Sunday, February 13, 3–7pm:
Nyingma Institute Open House.
Kum Nye Relaxation, movement,
meditation, and Dharma talks.
1815 Highland Place, Berkeley.
Information 510.843.6812.

Saturday, February 19,
1:30–5:30pm: Queer Dharma
event: Queer men and women from
all Buddhist traditions are invited to
an afternoon of sitting and discus-
sion. Preregistration is appreciated.
Requested donation $15. San Fran-
cisco Zen Center, 300 Page St, SF.
Information: Tova Green,
510.655.6169, or the Zen Center,
415.863.3136.

Saturday, February 19, 10am:
Dharma talk by Michael Wenger,
from San Francisco Zen Center.
Hartford Street Zen Center, SF.
Information 415.863.2507.

Sundays, February 20 & 27,
7–9pm: Book Study Group: The
Information 415.207.8113.

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 nonGay 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 Fran-
sisco 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; dona-
tions gratefully accepted. Quaker
Meeting House, 65 9th Street
(between Mission & Market),
7–9pm. For more information, call
Jon at 415.621.7314.
In all ten directions of the universe,
there is only one truth.
When we see clearly, the great teachings are the same.
What can ever be lost? What can be attained?
If we attain something, it was there from the beginning of time.
If we lose something, it is hiding somewhere near us.
Look: this ball in my pocket:
can you see how priceless it is?

—Ryokan, from The Enlightened Heart, An Anthology of Sacred Poetry, edited by Stephen Mitchell (Harper Perennial)

How to Reach Us
GBF Sangha
Send correspondence and address changes to: GBF, 2215-R Market Street, PMB 456, San Francisco, California 94114. Send e-mail to <gbfsf@hotmail.com>. For 24-hour information on GBF activities or to leave a message: 415.974.9878.

GBF Newsletter
Send submissions to: Editor, GBF Newsletter, 2215-R Market Street, PMB 456, 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.