Me and My Lama

A Dharma Talk given by Tony Richardson, May 21, 2000.

My plan is to read a little from my article in *Queer Dharma*, sort it out a little and talk about it, so if there's no real complaint about that, let's go ahead and do it.

I must of course acknowledge Winston [Leyland], who is the editor of the book—the second in the series—and at whose invitation I was forced to try to set this stuff down into a logical and cohesive writing (which is not my forte). I'm not even logical when I'm home by myself, let alone when I'm trying to write, and it's quite a difficult process. To make it even more difficult, Winston set me a task (or we together set a task) of summarizing Tibetan Buddhism into ten pages and then writing about my experience of my teacher.

Obviously I was insufficient at both tasks, as one would be. Now when I reread it, I recognize that there are so many short cuts in it and so much comparatively spurious information. But I also see that the intent to try to get a form out of what has, in about fifteen years, come from my time with my teachers; that getting of that form has also been useful; and I hope it's been useful for other people.

I met a guy named Gyalsay-Rinpoche. He was my 4-door-down neighbor who sometimes wore gowns and cloaks and other times was just in shorts doing the lawn. I didn't know about all the other stuff until I was bonded or connected to him. I struggled for a number of years and still struggle with trying to understand how 12 centuries of Buddhist-concentrated thinking can be distilled into a relationship with a gifted and enlightened master. From my sort of average Australian, reasonably-well-educated person's point of view I can say it was and still is quite an adventure. I am very different because of the experience, and because of the experiences I have had with other teachers. Rinpoche is probably embodied now, but he left the body that I knew in 1992, so I haven't seen him in a while, though his presence has remained pretty strong.

Our relationship was a strange sort of relationship because it wasn't the formal relationship that often happens with Tibetan teachers. I remember one day in the kitchen, like a fool I went up to him and said, "Are we doing Dzogchen now, we-are-we-are-we-are, is that what we're doing?" "No, we're doing starting, that's called..."
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starting, is what we’re doing.” So I was very naïve and so maybe what I’ll start with is a bit about how I view the whole Buddhist Vajrayana cosmology, if you like, then I’ll move a little bit further into the personal aspects of the relationship with him.

By the time we get to the “starting” story in the article I have talked about how precious the reincarnated masters are and about how the process sort of honed their skills. Next I attempt to talk about how I see the whole mish-mash of everything.

In the beginning there was the combined sentence of us all. And all of us, one of us, a number of us, there really wasn’t any us, you can’t really talk about it, somehow. There was a formation of a thought that immediately created samsara, which is everything we apparently experience. Then inevitably the sentence itself divided into hunks and the hunks divided into bodies.

Once you start making form, the rest is the natural course of what is going to happen. If the last hunk of samsara were to awaken, samsara would go away. But the Tibetans don’t expect that to ever happen. They don’t seem to feel that thinking this is all going to help anyone or be helpful in any way.

Rinpoche talks as though this is a field in which we are currently working and this is how it is now. But helping and progress are possible. Everyone is going to progress anyway, progress beyond samsara. What Tibetan Buddhists do is speed the process along and while trying to make it less uncomfortable.

Once you’ve taken a body, you’re stuck with limitations. In Vajrayana Buddhism, we strive to accept that we are all this way. How to deal with your attachments, expectations, the lack of compassion—that’s the main focus of Tibetan Buddhism. There are things you can do to help yourself, given that being embodied means that you will have preferences and desires, that your body requires things to be one way rather than another. Some people like noise, some people don’t like noise, some people like cold, some people like hot. That doesn’t feel like a choice, but it is a preference of the organism.

Some people, when their preferences aren’t met, have many difficulties and obsessions, and obstacles arise and take up a lot of their energies. They don’t allow the obstacles to be available, at least to consciousness, to the process of awakening. They experience too much involvement in their own feelings—that their house is wrong, or the temperature is wrong, the noise is intrusive. You can name thousands and thousands of such preferences.

You never put the same hand in the same stream.

We function as though these preferences limit how kind we can be to ourselves and each other. Our own kindness is generated by the sense of self-preservation that comes with the body. So being bad to each other is a direct result of fear. We don’t want to accept that, but accepting that is part of waking up.

The ultimate cure for all of this is enlightenment. Until we attain that, intermediate aids make up a large part of the Buddhist knowledge base, but they are all secondary to the goal of actually waking up. Tibetan Buddhism talks about techniques one can use to include these difficulties and not just say, “get over it, really don’t activate it, don’t give any energy to it, don’t spend any time with it.” Tibetans are more pragmatic than that.

Tibetans understand that really the issue is to do something. Without taking any interest in your own jealousies or needs and wants, just to practice kindness. If you include things like emotional states, attachment states, energetic states, the body needs, it makes it easier for you at first. But if you formulate an enlightened intention, coupled with the intention of being helpful to others, it slowly becomes harder again because there’s no hiding place. Then the real work begins.
So now I wanted to talk a little bit about my actual relationship with my teacher.

One of the important things to keep in mind is connected with the notion of attachment, that everything is always changing. That's the nature of it all, from the Buddhist point of view. You never put the same hand in the same stream. It's always new water, new sensation, a new hand. Everything is impermanent. We're on the wheel, we're in the process of being reborn, we're in the process of dying, nothing is going to stay stable. Our belief that there is stability is purely a trick of the mind. It's a delusion.

It's an attachment in that we want to have either control, or understanding, or whatever we decide, that will stop us from being frightened and allow us to keep the world still so that we feel more comfortable. But that's not the nature of the actual world. So we keep reminding ourselves that nothing ever happens twice. And what you think is happening isn't happening because you only see a small piece of the puzzle. You are the blind person who touches the elephant at one end and thinks it's the whole elephant.

A second important thing is that when you think you know what's going on, you really don't. You only know a piece of what's going on, and that piece may be infinitesimal, one pixel in the whole big picture. No matter how right you've got it, you haven't gotten it right, and that's an important and pretty disturbing piece of information. Another important information is that the universe is changing all the time, and there are many possibilities you haven't even considered, that just about everything is possible at any one moment.

The third thing, which is useful to know, is that Buddha does not strain. He does not push. He doesn't create anything. He doesn't make any effort. He is, however, uncomfortable because there is discomfort, but that's not made into a problem.

So add these three up in terms of your path. Continually recognize that everything is changing, and what you think is happening isn't happening, and everything is possible and then, just relax. Of course if you could do that and hold these pieces together, you would move very quickly. That's what Tibetan Buddhism is trying to help us to do.

Now I would like to give you some idea of my relationship with Rinpoche and how he helped me with this. I can only talk about what he has done for me, this particular bodymind.

The stories are personal and don't necessarily generalize. That's always the case. Your interactions are always very specific. Generalizations about them tend to be wrong.

I will go so far as to say there's no single individual purpose for Buddhists. There are a lot of books about living a life that doesn't get you into too much trouble, learning to notice what is and isn't good for you, all kinds of strictly relative goals, but as far as I can tell, there are only a very few people for whom the serious consideration is to awaken right now.

So add these three up in terms of your path. Continually recognize that everything is changing, and what you think is happening isn't happening, and everything is possible and then, just relax.

My relationship with Rinpoche was specific to my path, and at the same time gives some of the flavor of being in relationship with a guru. It's different from other relationships. He opened me to the idea of possibility itself. He took the time to let me self-accept that the world, and my self, and this lifetime weren't as limited as I supposed.

These days if someone or something catches my attention because it's out of the ordinary, I look at it as a possible guru intervention, while at the same time I look for an explanation such as 'I fucked up' or 'someone was mean to me.'

I do this because the world has proven over and over again to be different than what I decide it is. That means I can't only trust my own perceptions and conclusions. I need to include the knowledge that I've been wrong before and that new information may be on its way to undo even my current beliefs. If I don't do this, I'll miss all the new information. I'll make myself feel upset—betrayed, judgment will be my most common mistaken reaction.

Remember that for Buddha upset or discomfort does not equal a mistake. The practitioner is on the edge of becoming subversive. Being subversive is not an unusual position for gay men and lesbian women, particularly now for the gay culture; although we are resistant to the idea, being homosexual has until recently been inherently subversive. That gives us gay men and lesbians stamina for the dharma and the body of Buddhist knowledge.

Any comments?

GBF: Did you ever discuss with your guru or teacher the subversive aspects of being gay?

TR: I did. And in fact, not just with Rinpoche, but with other masters as well.

We need to preface this with the idea that gurus are not about making one comfortable, so it's unlikely that a guru's response is going to be one that says it's all okay, even if it is all okay. With my own teacher, he knew nothing much of it and did several unusual things. One, to me he insisted that I be what I was. But to other members of the sangha he would say things like, "I don't understand this gay thing, doesn't make sense to me, I don't get it."

When he came over, and we were living on Castro Street, one of the things that preceded him was that everyone...
around the guru was trying to look after him—everyone talked a lot about “poor guru this” and “poor guru that,” and he’s coming to a gay area” and “he’s all confused and flustered” and “he hopes that it is all right,” and “he hopes he wouldn’t be uncomfortable.”

He didn’t ever show any of that to me, but that was the maelstrom around me. He seemed to me to be extraordinarily comfortable and very at ease with gay men. He did say to me directly, as other teachers have, that he was very pleased with the quality of students that he met here. He led me to believe although he didn’t say it out right—because he wouldn’t—that there was something about gay men, at least the ones he met, that made them somewhat better students or somewhat more available students.

He seemed to be a little surprised with our availability to the practice and our ability to deal with him as a person and deal with the issues intelligently and confront them. Apparently many of his students, especially in Tibet but even in India and in Malaysia and a little bit in Australia, would get this sort of false-though-not-false reverence for him. This led to rumors about what would offend the guru—“you mustn’t have your feet near him,” or “you mustn’t be taller than him.”

There’d be all this stuff and he would play with that, of course, he would create those rumors to some extent.

(Laughter.)

But the gay men he met didn’t bother, well basically didn’t bother with that kind of stuff, and he really liked that. I think he really liked that. I mean, I don’t really...I think he really liked it. The feedback to me was that he really liked it. But every time I thought I’d get comfortable with something, he would somehow organize it for me not to settle it.

I’ve taught this story before: we had some lesbians in the car and we were driving and it was the first time they’d met Rinpoche. He’d been here for a couple of months, maybe three months. Of course, they naively tapped him on the shoulder and said, “What do the Tibetans think of lesbianism?” And he said, “Well, you know, we don’t know very much about that, all I can say is that there’s been some gay activity in the monastery amongst the men but there is absolutely no lesbianism in Tibet.”

Now, you know, what do you say?

I recently met with one of the Great Masters. He’s a very good friend of John Giorno’s, and has many many gay friends. We went out for lunch and the discussion was about Buddhism accepting, coming out, saying it was okay to be gay. It was a heated sort of discussion, and he was very involved in the discussion, but at the same time saying, “You know, you really can’t expect his Holiness to change this very classical teaching.”

So I have come to say in my own head, “I see that in your actions are very pro gay, you’re very close to the men that are in your life, you’re very accepting of me as gay, you’re accepting of my partners, my lifestyle, that’s all very true, but I see somehow you’re not involved in it, and that allows you not to make pontifications or whatever.” At the very moment I made that thought pattern, he said, “But it hurts me enormously that my friends are being hurt by this.” Just blew me back out of the water.

Okay, so he’s pro gay, I drive him up to a country setting, and we’re spending a lot of time together, we’re talking about lots of things, being gay, all that sort of stuff, and he’s engaged and with it all. Then he goes to a student up north that he spends some time with, and she reports to me that he said, “you know I don’t really understand about this gay stuff, it seems unnatural to me.” Now, I know that bomb was planted, I understand that that bomb was planted, I mean, everytime I thought I understood what we were doing, it would be exploded, which is what these guys do with everything.

So I think this whole thing is far from written and anything I say about it is probably wrong. But it does seem to me that at the individual level, I have to say that my own personal experience has been immensely supportive.
In fact, when I wrote in *Queer Dharma I*, I became more gay in my experience with Rinpoche because of his insistence that I not compress or withhold from him was very strong.

I found him very attractive, I was in love in him, I found him very attractive, and he would do things like pick me out of a crowd of people to measure his inner leg for a pair of pants, or put on those tight bicycle shorts and rub his ass in front of me, you know, he'd do that sort of stuff, and chuckle and laugh while he was doing it. It was pretty clear, I'm in love with him, he's probably a straight man—whatever they are I'm not too sure—but maybe he's a straight man, I'm in love with a straight man, but the possibility of agony is endless.

Who has not had this agony? Who does not know this agony? And who doesn't know what you can manufacture in your own thinking about what they're doing to you. So I'm old enough now, I'm not doing that shit anymore, I'm not playing that game, I'm not doing it. That wasn't okay.

The attraction was there and necessary. It got transformed in my relationship with him. I am more solidly, more clearly gay that I have been at any time of my life because of my interaction with him, and I really don't that much care about what they think, because that experience is here now and I know he was part of making that experience. Now there's the whole other stuff, the political stuff, the things like that, which I really I don't understand, but I don't understand why some of them drink, I don't understand lots of stuff about them.

**GBF:** You were saying that gay men have what looks like a propensity for this practice, so you think that the relationship to the teacher involves their ability to be in love with a man, that the teacher takes advantage of any naturally arising gay energetic system?

**TR:** I don't think that's the case. I do think that it's a great advantage for us. It's a great enigmatic pusher of what goes on. But to tell you the truth, straight people fall in love with these gurus too.

What is different about us is that we are used to examining the assumptions of the culture we live in. We've had that internal battle all our lives. We've got a little bit of an advantage in a way, and I think that's our job, to some extent, in our culture—to reflect the culture back to itself in a different way than its assumptions about itself. I don't want to talk about straight people as though they're gay, though they really are. ▼

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**GBF Homeless Project**

If you are available to volunteer your time to the Hamilton Family Center on the second Saturday of any month, please contact Clint Seiter. GBF volunteers prepare a dinner, funded by GBF, for homeless families.

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**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 and 18th) between Valencia and Mission. Tell the worker you are donating to GBF. Our ID number is 40. Information: 415.861.4910.

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GBF needs volunteers to listen to recordings of Dharma Talks and transcribe them for publication in the newsletter.

This is a great way to really listen to a talk! Contact David Holmes.

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**GBF Website**

www.gaybuddhist.org
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 Wednesday evening starting at 7pm, and GBFers are always welcome. The group now has gay and nongay practitioners. For more information, contact Bob Hass.

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), 7-9pm. For more information, call Jon

GBF needs you to contribute your services to the Sangha as a Host for Sunday morning sittings. Sign up to help provide a hospitable setting for our members to come together. Call Justin Hecht for information:

GBF Calendar
August 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.
August 6        Jim Wilson
	Monthly Speaker
August 13       Michael McManus
August 20       Discussion by
	Sangha members
August 27       Carol Newhouse

1Michael P. McManus, former bodyguard/interpreter for General Colin Powell, was a Buddhist monk for four years with HH the Dalai Lama. He brings sixteen years of Buddhist practice and study. He is currently at Stanford, pursuing a PhD in Buddhist Psychology.

2Carol Newhouse is the founder and teacher of the Lesbian Buddhist Sangha in Berkeley.

Saturdays, 9am: Introduction to Meditation. Tse Chen Ling Center for Tibetan Buddhist Studies, 4 Joost Ave, SF. Information: 415.339.8002.

Saturday, August 12, 9am–4pm:
Insight Meditation Community of SF
day-long meditation retreat—sitting and walking meditation, interviews, and Dharma talk. Eugene Cash, teacher. Unitarian Church, 1187 Franklin at Geary, SF. Information and registration: Jessica, 415.673.3032.

Saturday, August 19, 9:30am–5pm:
A Celebration of Queer Dharma.

Buddhism at Millennium's Edge,
series sponsored by SF Zen Center.
Information (on any of the events below): 415.863.3133.

Friday, August 18, 7:30pm:

Sunday, August 20, all day: "The Craft of Wisdom," workshop led by Richard Baker. Fee: $75. Green Gulch Farm, Highway 1, Marin County.

Local Dharma
August 2000 • Bay Area Events

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

Sundays, 7–9pm: Vipassana meditation with talk and discussion. Beginning orientation at 6pm, on the second Sunday of each month. Eugene Cash, teacher. Insight Meditation Community of SF, Unitarian Church, 1187 Franklin at Geary, SF. Information: call Roxanne at 415.661.3036.

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Sunday, August 20, all day: "The Craft of Wisdom," workshop led by Richard Baker. Fee: $75. Green Gulch Farm, Highway 1, Marin County.

Saturday, August 26, 9:30am–5pm:
Monastic Daylong, with Ajahn Amaro.
Traditional elements of the monastic style of Buddhist practice—chanting, the offering of alms-food—as well as the more familiar exploration of such themes as universal kindness, concentration, insight, and wise reflection will be presented. Suitable for both new and experienced meditators. Bring lunch and some food to offer to the monks. Spirit Rock Meditation Center, Woodacre, Ca. Information: 415.488.0164.
Registration Form

Eighth Annual GBF Summer Retreat
September 8 – 10

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Special Dietary or Health Considerations

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There are many small jobs which need to be done at the retreat. Which ones can you do?
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Fee: $140. Scholarships are available. We want you there! Don't let lack of money prevent you from coming!

Since a deposit to Vajrpani is due by July 30, we will offer a $10 discount for early full payments received before that date.

Enclosed is $ ______________________
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Please mail form and check payable to GBF to:
Summer Retreat Registration
Gay Buddhist Fellowship
2215-R Market Street, PMB 456
San Francisco, CA 94114

Dharma Daddy
wasn't asked any questions this month, and in any case he has been totally preoccupied with relocating to the San Francisco Bay area. He has settled in a light, airy house, suitable for meditating, thinking, and writing, and large enough to hold his library, in Benicia, about 35 miles from San Francisco, at the corner of Daffodil Drive and Periwinkle Court, off Rose Drive and near Snapdragon Place and Primrose Lane. Surely there must be fairies hereabouts? He will be teaching at Xavier University, Cincinnati, in the Fall, and can be reached via e-mail at <roger.corless@duke.edu>. Have a fabulous summer!
Too lazy to be ambitious,
I let the world take care of itself.
Ten days' worth of rice in my bag;
a bundle of twigs by the fireplace.
Why chatter about delusion and enlightenment?
Listening to the night rain on my roof,
I sit comfortably, with both legs stretched out.
—Ryokan

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.

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