Dharma on the Frontline
Second of two parts: Excerpts from a talk by Venerable Robina Courtin given to the Gay Buddhist Fellowship on July 30, 2000.

It is the sense of “I” which causes us, propels us, from one life to the next; this is the way they talk about when you die, especially in the Tibetan tradition. There are very detailed descriptions of the death process in Buddhist tantra, and of course there are very esoteric practices, very sophisticated methods of actually harnessing the energy of the subtle physiology of the body and the mind—to literally go through death without losing control, in order to live or choose rebirth. This is how they talk.

What Tibetans say happens, roughly speaking, at the time of death, is the gradual throwing off of this gross sense of “Me,” Robina. This gradual throwing off is of the sense of who she is, this Australian female, this, that, all the stuff, all the package that we have and identify with; that is ceasing, ceasing, ceasing. By the time you stop breathing, even by then (which is when you’re ready for the body bag in this culture) you’re not yet dead according to the Buddhist tradition. You’ve got two more days before the subtler consciousness is able to leave the body.

But even before then, Tibetans say the karmic imprint that will cause the future life is beginning to ripen, to harness, so there’s this powerful grasping energy they say manifests at that time. It’s like a huge motor that just propels us into an intermediate set between lives, frantically looking for another “I.” This is ego grasping. This is ignorance, this kind of propulsion to continue to get reborn. It’s what drives us. And its main energy, because it is separate-cut-off-dualistic, it’s nature is to feel lacking; it’s main voice is “I want.”

This is why attachment is our main delusion. Attachment is the main cause of our suffering. Effectively, in this life, the fundamental cause of suffering is this ignorance, this ego grasping. There’s also the “I want,” the attachment energy, and again it too is so primordial. It’s not a question of “I’m attached
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to chocolate cake, I’m attached to this or that”—that’s a gross level of it. It’s something truly that is moving us from second to second. And its voice is dissatisfaction. Its voice is feeling a deep sense of lack, a deep sense of dissatisfaction, a deep sense of something missing, always needing something more. And because it’s so crazy and such a liar, it projects onto all the outside objects, absolutely believing that that handsome body and that gorgeous cake and that delicious sound and that whatever looks delicious will give me the happiness that I am craving. So when we shove it in, to any of the five senses, and then wonder why five minutes, five days, five years later we’re feeling bereft again. This is the energy of attachment.

So even to begin to lessen this attachment, not to mention the ego grasping, is already sublime. And then what’s anger? Well, as one lama said, anger or aversion is the response when attachment is thwarted, when attachment doesn’t get what it wants. I mean, look at this world. Just look at this culture, look at this country. The thwarting of needs is quite obvious: the raging, the smashing, the beating, the blaming is unbelievable, and that’s anger energy. That’s because attachment is thwarted, attachment doesn’t get what it wants. Then you can see all the others—jealousy, pride—all these are coming from this attachment, which comes in turn from the positing of this “I”. This is samsara, this is suffering.

Maybe we’ll have some questions.

GBF: What kind of cooperation do you get from the wardens in the prisons?

RC: In general, they’re all fundamentalists, very suspicious. In general—I’m not trying to be critical now—the nature of that type of environment is to not be supportive. It’s rare to find support. It’s like a jewel when I find support. “It’s the law, you know,” as this fundamentalist chaplain says in Kentucky, “to see guys on death row.” And he almost said, “I don’t want to have you in here.” There’s a look of horror on his face when we talk about stuff, and he’ll stand at the door listening. It truly offends him and I feel sorry for him. But he knows he has to allow it.

Yeah, unless I’m very determined and always polite I can’t get any support. I can never be aggressive, but it takes sometimes years to actually get them to set it up. Some are kind, a few are very supportive, but it’s rare to find someone who truly doesn’t care and is supportive.

GBF: As someone commented, this is the most positive dharma talk I’ve heard at GBF; you just cut right to the chase; very, very powerful, and I want to thank you. We have a sangha brother who is in prison right now. People do visit him, but it’s one of those things where people have to wait about five hours for a half-hour visit. There seems to be an effort to break the prisoner’s spirit. I mean, pointless ways to degrade or to humiliate the prisoner take place.

Do you send a newsletter out to prisoners?

RC: No, Mandala is the magazine of this Tibetan Buddhist group with centers around the world, and on the back of Wisdom Books it say to write to Mandala for a free copy; that’s how come guys in prison write, and that’s how these letters get sent to me. So Mandala is just the magazine we put out, but out of this has grown the prison thing.

GBF: What about working with women in prison?

RC: We’ve only had one letter from one woman, which is kind of curious. I don’t know why. I only respond to people who write. And then send books to them, and go visit. What else?
GBF: In American Buddhism, you don't hear a whole lot about karma. I'm involved somewhat with victims of sexual abuse, and it is extremely difficult for a victim of sexual abuse to accept it as their karma.

RC: Unbelievably difficult, no doubt.

GBF: Because the work seems to be in working somewhat with the psychological relationship behind the perpetrator, but not in a karmic way. And no matter what my relationship is with that perpetrator, that was my karma. That hasn't been introduced into...

RC: No, I really think it's interesting, it's such a... I mean, about this karma thing. The classic Buddhist teaching, because that's the strong Tibetan tradition in monasteries—20, 30 years of intensive study of all the Buddhist stuff—is to incorporate that into your meditation, in order to eventually internalize and realize and go beyond being victim, in the most profound way. Sorry, saying a few things here.

There's a nice analogy they use in Mahayana: a bird needs two wings. Now one wing is the wisdom wing, and one is the compassion. And the wisdom wing is all the work you do to achieve all your own nirvana, which is all the work of dealing with your mind, understanding karma, letting go of garbage, understanding attachment, developing renunciation, realizing emptiness—all of this is the wisdom wing. And the other wing is everything you do in relation to others to benefit them.

So here I have been mostly talking about the wisdom wing, just touching on little points of the mind and our own suffering. The wisdom wing is where you're emphasizing self, where getting understanding is. But when it comes to benefiting another person, one of the things about helping a victim is knowing what it is they need to hear that helps their mind work with what they've got.

It seems to me you need to be a very developed person, or as one lama said, you have to be a suitable vessel to hear these kinds of teachings of karma; taking responsibility, letting go, stopping blaming, that's a pretty powerful level. And it already implies some sense of a reasonable self. But when you're a true victim in the classic sense of being sexually abused as a kid, you have no basis, there's no-velous, not you are fundamentally garbage, which is what they (and we) tend to think.

Buddhism says there is no Creator, so what's the implication of that, what is the cause of the Universe? What is karma?

Karma means action, action means whatever a sentient being—ants, dogs, human, you name it—does with their body, their speech and their mind, that leaves an imprint in their consciousness. If you really follow this stuff through, there being no outside Creator, it just can't come out of nowhere, it can't just be random. So this is what the teachings on karma actually explain, how literally we are the Creators of our own reality.

According to the teachings on karma, a scorpion has fundamental consciousness, just like Robina and you. Due to past karma that ripened at the time of its past death, its little consciousness was attracted to a mummy scorpion due to negative energy, so it now is manifesting as a scorpion. Literally it has a scorpion mind and a scorpion body. So it is literally the creator of its own past.

The person who gets raped and abused, the person who is in prison unfairly, whatever, you name it: one of the fundamental laws of karma is if you are experiencing it, whatever it is, it has to have come from what you did, otherwise you wouldn't be experiencing it. This is so profound for us—to accept in our daily life that person being mean to us in the shop was due to our past karma. I mean, instinctively it's 'who do they think they are, how dare they?'

On the other hand, I've got many stories of these guys who are classic examples of guys who are truly practicing this path—one of these guys, for 35 years has been tortured—35 years!—his body is a wreck, but he's just this blissful beaming person.
Apart from other things explaining his experience in the prisons and being tortured, as he said, "I was able to use that experience, that suffering, and transform it into pure joy."

Excuse me! Where does that come from? You get the feeling of a person who truly has the view of karma in their mind, not just intellectually but experientially experiencing. This is interesting too: the more you understand karma, which is actually dependent arising, interdependence, the more you understand emptiness. The more we understand that everything is due to our past actions, everything is interdependent, the more it leads us to emptiness. It's a very interesting approach.

Again, what is mind? In Buddhist terms, mind is non-physical energy: you can see it, smell it, touch it. It doesn't come from God or Buddha, it's not created by anybody; it doesn't come from parents. Body comes from parents, no problems, thank you Mother/Father, egg and sperm. In the Buddhist view, when the egg and sperm meet, what causes them to stay together? (We're talking old-fashioned ways of having babies, no telling what the Buddhist texts would say about the new ways of having babies.) What causes them to stay together and not go down the toilet along with the rest is the entry of consciousness at the very subtle level, of the continuity of Robina's consciousness. This is due to many many karmic causes and conditions which caused it to be attracted to that particular egg and sperm.

It's most extraordinary how they describe—in the Mahayana texts that are studied in Tibetan Buddhism—rebirth.

This lovely book, very small, describes the entire death process and is a commentary by one Tibetan lama. The Dalai Lama has written the forward to it. It is called *Death, Intermediate State and Rebirth*—very small but very tasty little book. Anyway, the process as the Dalai Lama describes in the forward, is that at the time of death, by the time you've stopped breathing, karma is very ripened. It is a seed that has come to the surface, but already there is no volition; the mind is on autopilot, so the mind goes into intermediate state, which is just like a dream.

The energy moving here is the past powerful force of karma that's causing this consciousness to frantically look around for a new rebirth. When my karma comes together with my mother and father and there they were in sexual union, you have a clairvoyant vision of them in sexual union.

I'm speculating now but it seems obvious, that the cause of being a heterosexual, is that you are fiercely attracted sexually to the parent of the opposite sex. Because I am a girl, I was fiercely attracted to my father. So I would have rushed towards my father to have sex with him, but then get completely furious because I was just the tiny nothing consciousness. And that anger, because you're furious that you can't get what you want, causes you to die from bardo and zap into the egg and sperm. That's the beginning of life.

I mean, Wow. We're in for trouble already, aren't we? Attraction and aversion are the source of even birth. This is how they describe it in the esoteric texts in Buddhism. Quite fascinating especially because it seems that it has to be the other way around if you end up being a gay boy.

Anyway, from the second we're born, we're having experiences—so there are three other ways that karma ripens. Most interesting, and this covers the entire world, this covers our life, is the second which is called the "karma ripens as the action similar to the cause."

You check you mind, your personality, your characteristics, your habits, your good ones, your bad ones, the old habit to lie, to kill, to be gener-
ous: whatever it is in our mind that we call our personality. The personality is nothing other than the habits we have accumulated that have now ripened into this package; a few of the karmic seeds have ripened into this package called Robina. Her habit to be angry, her habit to lie, habit to be generous, whatever it is, the propensities, the things that she likes, doesn't like; all of this, they're all the action similar to the cause.

In terms of killing, the throwing karma ripens at the time of death. The consciousness then zaps into the scorpion womb, or whatever, and that's the cause of a suffering life.

Now, these other ones like the actions similar to the cause, and the other ones I'm going to talk about, are like the residual result of killing. So if you can see from the time a little kid pops out of the womb, they're already into killing the snails, and killing the ants, and they go fishing, and then they kill all their life. They don't see the suffering. That's the action similar to the cause, due to the past habit of killing, which hasn't been purified, when they born. The mother isn't a killer, no one taught them to kill, it's just in them. That's due to karma.

How come people multimurder, how come people go off and mutilate, and how come people go off and become Mother Teresa? It's the "action similar to the cause." They are being produced by their past habits. So Tibetans talk about the force of karma which helps in a powerful way to understand why we continue to do what we do, and why it's so painful to change the garbage.

Why do some guys multimurder, why are they powerfully compelled to kill 40 people? There's no explanation for this in our Western world. We all try to look at the parents and see how come they're like this, but sometimes you can't find the cause. The Columbine boys had very nice parents and no one can understand how come they came out of that.

Well, it's karma, due to powerful imprints from past killing which haven't been purified; and it is due to the many karmic causes and conditions of meeting all these various people they are compelled to kill. So that's the action similar to the cause.

Then there's the second way karma ripens. It is called the "experiences similar to the cause." In terms of killing, for example, the experience similar to the cause is being killed. Dying young, getting sick. I mean, look at the world. Look at the world. There's hardly a human who doesn't kill some kind of being; there's hardly a human who doesn't kill something.

It's seen as good, mostly, in this culture. Even as a Catholic, excuse me, I was taught that God made these creatures for us to do what we liked with. We can kill them, eat them, whatever we liked. That's kind of interesting. So the "action similar to the cause" is that you continue to kill. The "experience similar to the cause" is that you get killed or you die young or you get sick. That's the residual result of killing.

The third way karma ripens is called "environmental karma." We either think this environment came out of black holes, or that God make it—or I don't know why it happened, nobody knows. "No one knows," we say, just because we haven't discovered it. Clever Westerners, aren't we?

But according to Buddhism, the environmental karmic result of killing is pollution—a really devastated environment, with lousy food and medicine. Think about it. It's not illogical.

Actually, while it seems they talk in the esoteric teachings, Tibetans talk very sensibly about the relationship between the external and the internal energy. Tibetan medicine is based on earth, air, fire and water, the four

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 Selter at 415.386.3088. GBF volunteers prepare a dinner, funded by GBF, for homeless families.

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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.

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, 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), 7-9pm. For more information, call Jon at 415.621.7314.

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Call Justin Hecht for information: 415.673.0283.

Similarly, the external environment reflects the collective karma of a group of people being in a certain situation due to their past karma. When there's a volcano, an earthquake, whatever, it is due to karma.

From the Buddhist view, everything is completely interdependent, and the consciousness, the mind of sentient beings—that is where you find the Creator. These are the teachings of karma, this is all in Buddhist teachings. It's all there in the texts, in India, from day one. In Tibetan monasteries, they study this stuff very extensively. Personally, I find this stuff huge and fascinating, not just intellectually, but as something I can bring into my life.

When you do purification every night, by regretting killing, by regretting sincerely killing, you purify it from happening to you by determining never to kill again; you purify continuing to kill. So don't be surprised if you wake up next life and you burst into tears when you see a snail killed. You see my point, it's not an accident. There's a certain logic, in a way. It's interesting.

GBF: Thank you, thank you, thank you.

RC: Okay, anyway, whatever, shall we finish? Can I do a little prayer to finish off with?

GBF: Thank you. Yes.

RC: We call this a dedication prayer. What it is really saying is that for one hour we've been together.

For one hour, every one of us, for as many moments as there've been, there have been karmic seeds planted on our mind. Every single thought does count, every thought is a karma. It doesn't go astray, it has to bring a result, like every seed you plant. So we rejoice in this one hour, each of us, listening, thinking, contemplating, including me, even though I'm speaking. Whatever has gone in, whatever makes sense, whatever aspirations have come from all this rich energy that we have just created, may we nurture these seeds strongly with our virtue from this next second on, and may they ripen as quickly as possible in the fruit of our own marvelous potential, and our ability to benefit beings. ▼
GBF Calendar
October 2000 • San Francisco/Bay Area Events

Sunday, October 1, 10:30am: San Francisco Buddhist Center, 37 Bartlett St, between 21st & 22nd, one block west of Mission St.

October 1 Jim Wilson
Monthly Speaker

October 8 Eugene Cash’

October 15 Discussion by Sangha members

October 22 Darlene Cohen2

October 29 Ven. Losang Choden (Amy Miller)3

1Eugene Cash has practiced meditation since 1981. He leads weekly sitting groups in San Francisco and meditation retreats nationwide. His teaching is influenced by many streams of the Vipassana tradition as well as the Zen school of Buddhism. He is also a senior teacher at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts.


3Ven. Losang Choden (Amy Miller) is the director of Vajrapani Institute in Boulder Creek. She has been a student of Tibetan Buddhism for the last 13 years and teaches in the Santa Cruz area. She is also the manager of the Lawudo Retreat Fund which supports retreats and study for Sherpa and Tibetan nuns, monks, and lay people in the Everest Region of Nepal. Amy was recently ordained by Ven. Choden Rinpoche at Vajrapani Institute.

Tuesday, October 10, 7:30pm: Steering Committee Meeting (open to all GBF participants), location to be announced.

Saturday, October 28, 7pm: GBF Potluck Dinner at the home of Snake Woolington, SF. Information: 415.552.6378.

Local Dharma
October 2000
San Francisco/Bay Area Events

Tuesdays, Thursdays, & Fridays, 10:30am: HIV 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 the second Sunday of each month. Eugene Cash, teacher. Insight Meditation Community of SF, at the Unitarian Church, 1187 Franklin at Geary, SF. Information: call Roxanne, 415.661.3036.

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

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

Friday, October 13, 7:30pm: “Radical Optimism and the Waying of Engaged Buddhism,” lecture by Joan Halifax, anthropologist, author, and head teacher of Upaya, a Buddhist center in Santa Fe, New Mexico. As a founding teacher of the Zen Peace-
"Meditation is not a means to an end. It is both the means and the end."
—Krishnamurti

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**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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