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.

Prison Justice

by Terry Stein

I saw the limits of prison justice during my first year of teaching a weekly meditation and journal writing class in the Women's Federal Correctional Institute (FCI) in Dublin, California. I took a small amount of hummus and carrots to share with the women during an eating meditation period. Periodically I conducted day-long sittings with my Zen teacher, during which we ate silent meals. The women obtained food for these meals from the commissary and cafeteria. Our meal had been appropriately authorized by the authorities, and I had showed the food to the entrance guard. Nevertheless, a secretary saw the food after it had been carefully laid out for lunch and, believing that I had brought all of it into the prison, immediately called security. When the armed guards arrived, the women surrounded the food, saying that it belonged to them. I acknowledged what I had brought in, and the hummus was confiscated. Although I had not technically violated any rules and no action was taken against me, the secretary never spoke to me again and for a long time I was eyed with suspicion. While not a serious act of injustice, the "hummus incident" gave me a small taste of how easily events in prison can spin out of control and how quickly blame, guilt, and punishment can be assigned without due cause. My body shaking after the guards left, I felt ashamed, unfairly blamed, powerless, and alienated. My attempts to explain were met with silence. These are the feelings prisoners are at risk for every moment of every day.

I developed these classes in early 1997 as part of my service placement in the Buddhist Alliance for Social Engagement, or BASE, program, a six-month service and spiritual internship sponsored by the Buddhist Peace Fellowship. Before I agreed to teach these classes, I had to examine my own feelings about participating directly in what some ironically label as the "criminal injustice system." Two questions arose for me: Could I personally tolerate being inside prison with all of its injustices and cruelty? And, would I be implicitly allying with this system if I helped prisoners deal with their suffering? I learned the answer to the first
GBF Committees
We always want and need interested participants, so please, JOIN IN! Call the contact person on the committee, or talk to him (or anyone on that committee) at a GBF sitting or event. This is a great practice opportunity!

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Justin Hecht
David Holmes
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Lee Robbins
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Greg King, Art Director
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Snake Woolington, Contact
415.552.6378

Hamilton House
Clint Seiter, Contact
415.386.3088

Website
Joe Kukulka
Contact
webmaster@gaybuddhist.org

Sunday Sitting Facilitators
Justin Hecht, Contact
415.673.0283

question when, after attending a series of volunteer orientation classes, I decided that I could not teach in an Oakland jail because of the negative attitudes expressed by the jail personnel and the sterile environment. While I realized that the prisoners in the Oakland jail might need these classes even more, I decided to begin teaching in a San Francisco jail and the women's prison and camp in Dublin.

As I continuously looked at my ability to tolerate being “inside,” I learned to shift the focus of the lens with which I examined justice. Instead of seeking some absolute justice, I began to attend to what justice could be found there and to my own reactions to instances of injustice as they arose for me and for others. This lens seemed not unlike my sitting practice: Do I argue with what arises in my mind? Do I wonder if what I am thinking or feeling is just or fair? Do I resist the pain with which my body and mind confront me? Probably most of us would acknowledge that we do fight with ourselves, to resist what is painful and unpleasant, to end our suffering. Then, at some point, if we continue to sit, we learn how to be with this pain differently. Depending on our practice, we learn to observe or perhaps even to transform these experiences, to no longer deny the shadow, the darkness, the suffering, to be with ourselves with greater compassion.

My relatively innocuous exposure to injustice pales next to the more serious instances of injustice described by the women in prison. One woman was placed in isolation because she repeatedly became the victim of violence from others; prison authorities told me that this was the only way to protect her from further harm. Other women described instances of denial of adequate medical care and accusations by fellow prisoners of “satanic worship” because they attended meditation class. Then there are the prisoners who say they have been unjustly accused (most, in my experience, do not say this) and imprisoned, that they are innocent. How should a meditation teacher respond to hearing about these perceptions or acts of injustice?

Perhaps the best we can do is to sit with the pain of those who are suffering. Justice at this edge of our experience must become an internal event, and we must resist the temptation to take sides or to take action. I do not mean here that we should teach acceptance or resignation, but rather that we should know the playing field and trust our practice. When resisted suffering may become much more intense. Similarly, justice may recede even further when we demand it yet have no hope of achieving it.

The answer to the second question about my presence as a teacher in prison was clear to me from the start and was repeatedly reinforced by all of the women who attended these classes. No, I was not supporting the prison system as a result of entering it to help alleviate the suffering that occurs within it. Such a conclusion
would be comparable to saying that if I help victims of economic injustice, I am supporting capitalism.

At the end of the final meditation and journal writing class I taught at FCI, I thanked the women for the opportunity to practice with them for the last three years. As they each spoke to me, Sage, who had first asked me if I could teach this class almost three and a half years ago, said tearfully: "It is we who thank you for coming here and for opening a door for us. This door will never close, even after you are no longer here.” I knew then with certainty that my efforts had helped to support the women on their journeys through prison. When Sage told me that I had opened a door that could not be closed, she was referring to the liberation that can arise from spirituality and meditation. She was telling me that, in the midst of the suffering and injustice that occur in prison, she had learned that there was something to do internally about the personal experience of injustice, moment by moment, day by day.▼

Terry Stein, a Board member of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, has been meditating for almost 30 years and attending GBF for the last three years. On February 25th, he spoke to GBF about the work he has been doing with prisoners for the past three years. This article was originally written for an issue of the BASE newsletter devoted to the topic of justice.

Letters from Prison:

Dharma in Prison

Joe, a gay Buddhist imprisoned in North Carolina, wrote the following letter to Don Wiepert, a GBF member who works with prisoners.

November 18, 2000

Dear Don,

Thank you for responding to my letter. I too remember that we had written in the past. I'm not sure why we stopped. Maybe one of my waves of depression hit and I forgot about writing you when it was over. Those waves hit at least once a year and may last for a month. Meditation helps to shorten them and impedes their frequency greatly.

I do not have a pen pal from GBF. I do write a guy at Tassajara, but because of their strict schedule there, I only hear from him once every two or three months. I would like someone from GBF to correspond with on a more regular basis, though. There are quite a few Prison Dharma programs out there that send books and Dharma materials, but almost none will connect a prisoner with a pen pal. It seems to me that most people's involvement goes only so far.

Of course, GBF is the only gay fellowship that I know of, and like all of you, I find it important to have someone who is like-minded to write to. Those who aren't gay really seem to have a hard time understanding some of the things we go through, and though they try to help, they approach things from their straight, often prejudiced minds.

I know that a lot of people have a stereotypical view of prisoners and what they are like. Unfortunately, those prejudices are often right! But if you get any volunteers to start writing to prisoners, just tell them to use compassion and wisdom when writing them. They should not give a home address or send any money, if asked, to someone unless they have been corresponding for a few years. That is the most basic advice that I can offer.

Sadly, there are a lot of lonely gay men out there who will turn anywhere for love and companionship. There are a lot of guys in here who prey on guys like that, and most of them are straight. Those hustlers will not "waste" a lot of time writing to someone who will not send them any money, and if they don't "score" after a few months, they will stop writing.

Of course, with your background working in prison, you probably know all of this already.

I would be honored for you to use some of my letter for contacting volunteers to become pen pals, or anywhere else you may think it would be useful.

At this facility, we are really blessed with our little sangha. We have a core group of about four inmates who come to every meeting every week and will have as many as six others come to our meditations.
Volunteers Needed

Those who attend the GBF Sunday morning meditation and dharma talk may not be aware of all the small (and, in some cases, not so small) tasks that must be performed to keep the sangha alive and thriving. GBF survives solely through the volunteer efforts of its members. At this moment, there are a number of important tasks for which GBF needs committed volunteers. These tasks include:

- recording team (to record the Sunday morning dharma talks)
- potluck coordinator
- mailing party coordinator and tea
- newsletter lay-out team
- GBF mailbox checker

None of these tasks should involve any huge commitment in time, but they are all very important to help keep GBF an active and nurturing community. As the old adage goes, "you get what you give." If you are looking for a way in which you can connect on a deeper level with the GBF sangha, volunteering for one of these tasks is an excellent opportunity. Please consider it.

If interested, please contact Clint Seiter at (415) 386-3088 or by email at cseiter@concentric.net.

Our group meets once a week with two or three volunteers from the street coming to each sitting. Our group is very informal and casual, and we have some very profound Dharma discussions. Rarely is any topic planned out, and very often we go with what we are feeling amongst the group. We've had some really great discussions on mindfulness, letting go of attachments, and nonjudgment.

We have a Zen priest who comes and gives a more formal service once a month, and a woman who is ordained in Thich Nhat Hanh's order who often comes to our regular meetings. Last year we had a day of mindfulness retreat in which two of our members (me being one of them) took the five mindfulness trainings. That retreat was presided over by some people from a sangha in Hawaii.

Robina, the chaplain told her and the people she came with that they had to leave a half-hour after we started – and we were supposed to have two and a half hours – because he had to go to a meeting. This was after they had driven three hours from Raleigh to get to the prison. Robina is a sweet and kind person, but she does have a mean side to her, and we got to see it that day!

So I hope that I have given you some helpful information and that you can use it to find some pen pal volunteers. If you have any other questions, or you would like to know more about life on this side of the fence, please let me know. Until you've lived here, you can't know what it's really like.

Be good, write when you can, and stay mindful!

Yours,

Joe

Drawing: Paul Dalwigk
A message from Howard DePorte

January 14, 2001

Dear GBF Sangha,

Greetings in love, hope and perseverance. May you be visited by kindness, good will and bountiful blessings.

January 18, 2001 will mark the beginning of my second year of incarceration. I'm overjoyed to hear that many new faces and stories have joined GBF in the past year. I trust you will taste the same spirit of graciousness and ubiquitous love I did when I first participated. It has followed me through the arduous twists of this past year. I look forward to the oneness we share as we walk through this new year.

Many of you do not know my story. It is not that important. What is important is my pledge to be with you in spirit and soul even though we are separated in body. I will sit with you and continue to correspond with those interested.

So many from GBF have adorned me with tangible gifts of love. There have been books, regular phone calls, letters, photos and visits. I know there have been daily appeals and prayers. I truly believe the realm of bodhisattva energy that overshadows and undergirds me was stirred by your yearnings. I am blessed and thankful.

I have about fourteen more months to serve before my release.

Oftentimes I tremble in the face of such a formidable path. But I am learning about time: how in this very moment the whole universe unfolds, past, present and future. And I confess I'm a stubborn student, more often than not resisting the lessons of No-Time, Not-Two, the Ultimate Now. And I suffer from it.

Your spirit of care and encouragement resurrects my practice and elementary discipline. I seem to always have to return to the breathing. When I do, the tender image of all of you sitting together on Sunday mornings comes to mind and heart. The day unfolds and I'm able to endure.

Know that I am as safe as I could be under the circumstances, thank God. Soon I'll be working here and I will experience first hand what so many inmates tell me: "Time will fly." I'm out on the yard writing you under brilliant blue skies, the winter sun beginning its westward descent and pristine white clouds outlining my view in the east. Yes, it's spectacular. So is GBF. May visions of the wonder that surrounds all of us unfold . . . and may we see, hear, feel, and touch. May we be awake!

Love much and much love,

Howard

Howard De Porte
P-89278/B&c-217U
P.O. Box 40909
Ione, CA 95640

Prisoner Pen Pal Workshop

Don Wiepert, a GBF member who spoke to us on February 25th about his experiences working with prisoners, would like to hold a workshop for people who are interested in corresponding with prisoners. If you would like to participate, call him at (510) 540-0307 or email him at GDWiep@aol.com.

Prisoners Urgently Need Buddhist Books

The most frequent request from gay Buddhist prisoners, other than for pen pals, is for books. In many prisons, they are circulated among small sitting groups and are used in daily and group practice. All books are welcome, particularly those suitable for beginners. If you have any available, please call Don Wiepert at (510) 540-0307, or email him at GDWiep@aol.com. Don will arrange to collect them and get them to prisoners.
Facing East

The morning sun's first light
A shining glimpse of the Universe
the forces that protect us

A butterfly lands
on the tips of my fingers
pressed palms

A vision
of the past, the present and the
future
And it all comes down
to this one moment
This one breath
in and out

Through the murky waters
the lotus blooms

And in my grief
I smile
Assured
of life's eternity

Jeffrey W. Nelson

Shadow Chasing

Why are you
chasing your shadow
in the setting sun?

Slow down.

As the speed of time,
deep blue light,
hastening in its
inverse proportional
dimensions,

A quadrant fluctuation
growing darker
than indigo itself,

The quickening
of its pace
parallels with
lust, and
congruent whispers
in the dark.

And the shadow
disappears, easily
as warm breath
on a cold winter's eve.

Jeffrey W. Nelson

Jeffrey W. Nelson is a 44 year old
Buddhist prisoner.
Regular Sittings are held every Sunday morning at 10:30 a.m. at the San Francisco Buddhist Center, 37 Bartlett Street, San Francisco, CA.

The April GBF speakers are as follows:

April 1: Jim Wilson
April 8: Eugene Cash\(^1\)
April 15: Scott Hunt
April 22: Sean Hargens
April 29: Open discussion

\(^1\) Eugene 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 teacher in training in the Ridhwan School with A.H. Almaas. As a psychotherapist he has worked extensively with those who are ill, the dying, and the bereaved.

**Apartment/Roommate Needed.**
Moving to San Francisco May 1st from New York. Looking for apartment or share in Haight or Cole Valley area. GWM, 48, long-time practitioner. (212) 475-7610. Don Iocca.

**East Bay Sitting.**
1st & 3rd Thursday of each month, 7:30-9:00. Half-hour sitting followed by tea and discussion. For more information, call 510-649-1697.

**Next Steering Committee Meeting.**
March 8, 2001, 7:30 p.m., at the home of Lee Robbins, 4433 17th Street, San Francisco. For more information, call 415-552-9800.

**GBF Homeless Project**
If you are able 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.

**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.

**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. So far this year we have 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.

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: 415.673.0283.

**GBF Website**
www.gaybuddhist.org

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

—GBF Dedication of Merit

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 hard copy. We do
reserve the right to edit for clarity
or brevity.