Gay Buddhist Fellowship

The Gay Buddhist Fellowship supports Buddhist practice in the Gay men’s community. It is a forum that brings together the diverse Buddhist traditions to address the spiritual concerns of Gay men in the Bay Area, the United States, and the world. GBF’s mission includes cultivating a social environment that is inclusive and caring.

NOTES FROM CAIRO

July 2001

by Kevin Havener

Why on earth would a GBF member - a Buddhist, gay Euro-American male, age 45 - venture to Islamic Egypt to try to live for a year or more? I have asked myself the question many times. The original reasons seemed so simple: my love of archaeology and anthropology, of Middle Eastern men, of Middle Eastern music and culture, and above all a yearning for adventure. But of course, the realities of life in Cairo are more complicated than I imagined they would be; after five months here, I continue to find that the city defies my expectations.

The information I present here is personal and therefore anecdotal. Some of it is superficial, but some of it is based on quality readings (see the end paragraph for book references), as well as extensive conversations with highly educated and not-so-educated Egyptians. Needless to say, the experience of any individual jumping into Cairo - a historical, cosmopolitan, fascinating metacity of 17 million sentient beings - is bound to be vivid and unique.

Currently I am living alone in Ma’adi, a treed, expatriate suburb south of downtown Cairo. I’ve taken a conversational Arabic class in a community center here. The French-designed Metro commuter trains, forming a giant “X”
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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through and under the city, efficiently carry over four million riders per day; it is a quick (but often crowded and hot) 20-minute ride to downtown from my home. After the collapse of initial job offers and much searching for meaningful work, I now have a desktop publishing job with American University Press, a prestigious English language publisher here. I do DTP for a living and my first project is designing an archaeology book - the ideal project!

Cairo the city is an overwhelming place: crowded, chaotic, polluted, horrendously noisy. Yet with its strong overtones of European, Ottoman, Islamic, Roman, Greek, and ancient Egyptian culture, it is also an exhilarating and glorious place. As with other great cities in ancient lands, it is a place of shocking contrasts: a donkey cart loaded with vegetables almost gets sideswiped by a BMW; a completely black-clad woman (in an abaya, all body parts covered except for eye-slit) carries a tray full of Pepsi and fried chicken in a Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant; a Radio Shack store is immediately next door to a mosque broadcasting the call to prayer; a young man in prissy fashion eyewear gets a mobile phone call while he talks with an illiterate galabiya-clad fellah (peasant farmer in traditional gown-like garb).

As for the men of Egypt, I am embarrassed by my bald-faced, superficial fascination with them. For inexplicable reasons, I am magnetically attracted to them physically, finding every third man on the street interesting, if not downright handsome. Black hair, moustaches, goatees, and large unguarded eyes predominate. Ethnicity is varied and skin color ranges from light to dark. As a member of a fine San Francisco social group, Men of All Colors Together (MACT), I am finding that Egypt forces me to confront the question of why I am so physically attracted to non Euro-American men. The close observation of several albino Egyptians - identical in every way to their kin except for skin, hair, and eye pigmentation - has caused a lot of mental turmoil. Why are they shockingly unappealing to me, while their darker counterparts are so alluring? As a pale skinned Euro-American man, am I "exotizing" and sexualizing/fetishizing the cultural "other"? Is it a form of reverse racism? Is it a new way to (ethically and homosexually) self-loathe? Am I caught eternally on the wheel of desire and suffering? And what would Marx or the Dalai Lama have to say about it? (Oh screw it, I'll sort out my dance card later!

Egyptian men's behavior is also very different and fascinating. As the king of the heap in a resolutely patriarchal society, men here are psychologically well adjusted and very physical with each other. Joking, teasing, touching, and close loving associations between men are the norm. For a western gay man this arouses inappropriate erotic fantasies and expectations because the west (especially America) is so uptight and touch-starved. But don't forget about male pride, vanity, and egotism, also present here in good measure. One of the main differences is the powerful (religion-based) pressure for
men and women to marry and maintain close familial bonds. Premarriage, men form their own sub-society - with a mild simulation of male/female roles - because access to women is regulated. As for the women, it is a serious problem if a woman has pre-marital sex; she risks disassociation from her family and social disgrace. Around 30-40% of the women here, by the way, wear headscarves in public, and around 20% wear the black abaya. It is possible that more and more women have been covering up, as Egypt becomes, sadly, more religiously conservative.

Sex with men is available, however - make no mistake. Indeed, gay men ARE everywhere, whether they know it or not! But here (as in Latin cultures), pride may make a man demand his "services" for a fee. And/or, he may insist on his equal or greater interest in women, holding his emotions in reserve for inevitable marriage. Of course, the occasional straight man may also secretly consent to some "relief." For a San Francisco gay male, this situation can seem like a vestigial 1950s time warp. Yet, as anthropologists have pointed out, in Islamic societies "many things are done, few are discussed." I have been propositioned by bold 20-something

In the surreal "Japanese Garden," Helwan, Cairo

men within a very few seconds of initial flirtation, and cruised by very nervous men (who are perhaps more serious contenders for a relationship). The advent of a free

Internet here in Egypt has meant that, for better or worse, western concepts are infiltrating to young, middle-class males. Whereas a 45-year-old Cairene will undoubtedly be married, overworked, and dissipated, a 20-something unmarried man may be looking around for some adventure.

While homosexuality is not illegal in Egypt, there are strong religious proscriptions against such behavior. For foreigners, though, many "exceptions" can and do apply - as long as their sexual proclivities are not trumpeted from a hilltop. In other words, if a young Muslim man has sex with a foreign, non-Muslim man, it is easy for him to categorize and/or dismiss the experience later in his mind (much like the "oh I guess I had too much to drink" excuse in the USA). As far as sex acts go, the foreigner usually assumes the "inferior" or female role. An Egyptian man may be concerned only about his own orgasm, not only because he is "on top" psychologically, but because if he assists in his partner's orgasm he may feel shame or confusion (possible feelings of actual homosexuality).

In general, however, Egyptians are a very hospitable, polite, and humor-loving people. They endure stultifying bureaucracy and political corruption in a highly stratified society that makes America look like a paradise. People age quickly here - the responsibilities of adulthood are handed to young teenagers, yet unemployment is very high. As long as visitors here respect the culture, its people, and its customs (such as the "dress code"), they will experience few problems. Americans, in particular, are assumed to be very wealthy, sexual, and violent - primarily due to the hideous influence of Hollywood movies. This can seem difficult to counteract, but Egyptians, who possess good values (and little American-style cynicism), tend to judge people based on their actual behavior.

As far as the search for signs of Buddhism and meditation groups is concerned, one should not leave one's sense of humor behind. Ever since the ancient Greek traveler Herodotus started the "black magic" misconceptions about Egypt, the New Age movement (exemplified by 1970's "pyramid power" and the "I Ching") has stayed with us. One should certainly expect to find new age "gurus" and "healers" here. Catering to well-heeled Egyptians and foreigners in upper class neighborhoods, guru-based yoga and meditation classes are available for large fees.

On a more serious note, however, Islam does not recognize Buddhism, Hinduism, or Taoism as religions at all. It only recognizes the "revealed" (monotheistic, prophet-based) religions of Judaism and Christianity as legitimate. Islam positions itself as the pinnacle of this trinity, Mohammed having received the latest, greatest transmission from God. For a fundamentalist Muslim, then, all other religions are inferior and all non-Muslims are destined for
"hell." The Koran is a document that cannot be questioned or challenged on any level. Ancient misconceptions, such as Buddhists being "idol worshippers," hang on tenaciously. (My main weapon in religious discussions here is to counter, "But Muslims are worshipping a box with a rock inside." This provokes quite a reaction! But the intellectual ability to transfer the idea of the Kaaba stone as a symbol to the idea of the Buddha statue as a symbol is often sadly lacking.)

As Egypt slips farther and farther into the poisonous waters of religious fundamentalism (fundamentalism in any creed being a serious problem for all people everywhere), the public school system, which does not encourage creative or critical thinking, aids and abets the situation. Teachers are paid so little and classes are so large that rote memorization of facts is the main method of instruction. Apparently little is taught about non-Islamic countries, much less about the pre-Islamic history of Egypt itself. Science also receives short shrift, and last month I was shocked to hear a highly educated immunology researcher hedging on the basic concepts of evolution. (The extent to which Islamic fundamentalism may be a reaction against western hegemony, capitalist greed, and "globalism" is a deep and fascinating subject, but beyond the scope of this writing.)

I have investigated meditation groups here and will continue to do so. So far, besides the guru-based groups, I have found the Center for Indian Culture, where yoga and meditation classes are offered for a fee. Also, I attended a very interesting group of American University Cairo professors and workers (one-half of the members Egyptian and one-half European) - Sufis in the Naqshbandi Tariqa tradition. Islam and its mystical offshoot, Sufism, has never developed widespread monastic or meditation traditions. Yet, as many people in America know, Persian whirling dervish founder Rumi (Jalaluddin Balkhi, 1207-1273) wrote fascinating poetry that (at least in contemporary translation) can seem to hew close to Buddhist concepts, and his followers may perform meditation-like rituals. Consider this Rumi poem:

Not Christian or Jew or Muslim, not Hindu, Buddhist, Sufi, or Zen. Not any religion, or cultural system. I am not from the East or the West, not out of the ocean or up from the ground, not natural or ethereal, not composed of elements at all. I do not exist, am not an entity in this world or the next. I did not descend from Adam and Eve or any origin story. My place is scoreless, a trace of the traceless. Neither body nor soul.

I belong to the beloved, have seen the two worlds as one and that one call to and know first, last, outer, inner, only that breath breathing human being.

And another:

There is a way between voice and presence where information flows.
In disciplined silence it opens.
With wandering talk it closes.

Yet these poems espouse esoteric concepts for the average Egyptian, who (unless privately educated or educated abroad) has received a much more basic, practical, mainstream Koran-based indoctrination. In any case, the Sufi group I visited engaged in too much Islamic chanting and not enough meditation for me.

As has been noted by many famous travelers, visiting foreign lands is a very effective way to confront one's cultural expectations, assumptions, and internal problems. When one encounters a situation or behavior that seems strange or
inexplicable, one has a choice about one's reaction: revulsion, inquisitiveness, non-judgement. This is excellent daily practice for a Buddhist! Something that is a constant in a megacity like Cairo is rapid change. Businesses open and close quickly, and people come and go quickly. One must stay in the present moment to keep up. It is entirely possible that in this chaotic place, I may find a man to share love with, and a cell of Buddhist meditators. In the meantime, I continue to work with my expectations, my desires and sufferings, and to find a place of calm abiding within.


Kevin Havner is a GBF member living in Cairo, Egypt. You can email him at keinhav@yahoo.com.

Pen Pals for Prisoners

Anyone interested in corresponding with gay Buddhist prisoners should contact Don Wiepert 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.
GBF

FALL RETREAT

Fri. eve. Sept. 7-
Sun. Sept. 9, 2001

We are preparing for our 10th annual Fall retreat. We'll return again to the Vajrapni Institute in the beautiful Santa Cruz mountains amidst redwoods and clear streams. We use a retreat model that mixes silent sitting and walking meditation sessions with Dharma talks by Jim Wilson and one or two other process activities. Excellent vegetarian meals prepared by the Vajrapani staff, Dharma discussions, Sangha walks in the forest, an evening Sangha ceremony around the Vajrapani stupa and free time will complete the weekend. Past retreats have been much appreciated and well attended by both regular Sunday sitting participants and other men from both the Bay region and more distant homes.

The retreat is designed and intended for both beginners and long time practitioners.

(cut or tear off above)

REGISTRATION: Cost including food and lodging: $150; Discounted cost for early payment (by Aug. 15): $140. Four private cabins are available at $70 extra - first come, first served for cabins and retreat. Map, directions, arrangements for shared rides and what to bring will be sent upon registration. Please print clearly (especially e-mail address)

NAME: ___________________________ PHONE: ________________

Street address: _______________ City: _________________ Zip: ____________

E-mail address (print clearly) ____________________________

Need ride? __________ Can provide ride?:

For further information call: 415-552-9800; make out checks to: Gay Buddhist Fellowship
Mail retreat forms and check to: Lee Robbins; GBF '01 Retreat Coordinator
4433 - 17th St.;
San Francisco, CA. 94114
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 August GBF speakers are as follows:
August 5: Jim Wilson
August 12: Scott Vogelberg
August 19: Justin Hecht
August 26: Carol Newhouse

Fall Potluck

GBF Calendar
San Francisco/Bay Area Events

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 Volunteer Hosts
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

GBF Homeless Project
If you are able to volunteer your time to the Hamilton Family Center on the 3rd Saturday of any month, please contact Clint Seiter at 415.386.3088. GBF volunteers prepare a dinner, funded by GBF, for homeless families.

Next Steering Committee Meeting
Thursday, August 16, 2001, 7:30 p.m., at the home of Lee Robbins, 4433 17th Street, San Francisco. For more information, call 415-552-9800.

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.
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