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.

On Chanting as a Buddhist Meditation Practice

by Jim Wilson

It has been my observation that Americans seem to be attracted to those styles of Buddhist meditation that take the form of silence and stillness. These include Vipassana, Zen, Dzog Chen, and other forms of meditative cultivation that center on sitting quietly and in stillness. One then turns the mind inward to enter into the specific practice. Sometimes I think that the attraction to these particular types of Buddhist meditation is due to the extremely busy and active lives that we lead. Silent and still meditations offer an antidote to the active distraction of so much of our lives.

The dominant form of Buddhist meditation in East Asia and Tibet, however, is some form of chanting (I am not familiar enough with the Theravada countries to know if chanting meditation is used there.) This kind of meditation is much more widespread, and engaged in by far more people, than the forms of silent meditation. For example, the largest school of Buddhism in China, Korea, Vietnam and Japan is Pure Land Buddhism. The central practice of this form of Buddhism is chanting. In Japan, some of the largest traditions are those schools based on the teachings of Nichiren. Once again, the central practice of this tradition is chanting.

By chanting I mean the repetition of a short phrase, usually the name of a Bodhisattva or a mantra, most often done collectively, and having the form of a simple melody, or sometimes sung on a single tone. The simplicity of the melody allows for group participation; no one has to have a developed sense of musicianship in order to participate. The most widespread examples of chanting are:

"Namu Kwan Shih Yin Pu Sah" — Kwan Yin is a Bodhisattva representing infinite compassion. Kwan Yin is by far the most widespread and popular Buddhist deity. The ritual chanting of the name of this Bodhisattva is the common form of both worship and
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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meditation that people participate in. My initial contact with Buddhism was a chanting retreat during which the participants chanted the name of Kwan Yin (in Korean, "Kwaseum Bosal") for about 12 hours a day.

"Namn Amida Butsu" — This is a Pure Land invocation to the Buddha Amitabha, the Buddha of infinite Light and Life. Practitioners of Pure Land Buddhism chant the name of Amitabha in order to attain rebirth in the Pure Land which Amitabha has emanated from his vast store of merit gained over countless lifetimes of altruistic practice.

"Om Mani Padme Hum" — The most widespread mantra chanted in Tibetan forms of Buddhism. It is considered a mantra of Avalokiteshvara. Kwan Yin is the Chinese pronunciation of Avalokiteshvara, so there is a connection between this practice and the first listed. The mantra is also an invocation to Buddha nature.

Chanting as a meditative practice has great efficacy. First, chanting unites body, breath, and mind into a single activity. This proves a very effective means for developing concentration, onepointedness of mind. Other forms of concentration meditation are more difficult because the mind tends to wander easily from the object of concentration. In chanting, however, because body, breath, and mind are all united on a single activity, the development of concentration happens rapidly and with less effort.

Chanting unites aspects of the mind which normally do not function together. The musical and discursive functions of the mind do not normally work together. However, when we chant we simultaneously engage the discursive function of the mind by chanting words and the musical, rhythmic functions of the mind through giving voice to a simple musical phrase or melody. The result is an energizing of the mind and often a feeling of a slightly altered state of consciousness. My teacher used to observe that at chanting retreats, at the end of the evening, people had a great deal of energy and would stay up for many hours. During meditation/zazen retreats, at the end of the day, people often felt very tired and most would go straight to sleep.

Chanting meditation gives the mind an object of focus and attention that is benign. When one is chanting the name of a Buddha or Bodhisatva, the mind becomes more aware of the virtues associated with that Buddha or Bodhisatva. These virtues include compassion and wisdom. Thus this kind of chanting meditation slowly increases one's awareness of the central Buddhist virtues and inclines one to develop those virtues. In the case of Nichiren practice, the chanting of the name of the Lotus Sutra inclines one to cultivate one's understanding of that sutra. The central teaching of that sutra is that all beings have Buddha Nature. Thus, this form of chanting helps the practitioner to awaken to the worthiness of all
Dear Dharma Daddy:

What Is the Role of Deities in Buddhism?

Dear Dharma Daddy:

I recently saw Himalaya (Eric Vallèi), a film in which all the characters are Tibetan Buddhists. I was surprised that they frequently mentioned "the gods" and prayed to them, as well as praying to "the Buddhas of the three eras." (Who are they?) Also, a Burmese student of mine, who spent some time as a Buddhist monk, told me that Gautama Buddha is the "main god" in Buddhism. What is the meaning of "god" or "God" in Buddhism? What is the role of prayer in Buddhism? To whom do Buddhists pray? Who do they believe hears their prayers?

-Michael Langdon, Oakland

Dear Michael:

Simply put, there are gods in Buddhism, but they are not like the God of the Bible or the Qur'an. They are more like powerful, technologically advanced beings on other planets who may occasionally visit earth in their UFOs.

The Buddhist universe is very extensive, containing a very large number — some sutras say an infinite number — of worlds and realms of rebirth, inhabited by many different kinds of beings, some anthropomorphic, many not, some with physical bodies, some without — some existing only as colored shapes or mental entities.

Many, though by no means all, of these beings are mentioned in the sutras with names in Pali and Sanskrit, and these names have been translated into the languages of the cultures into which Buddhism has spread. The English word god is used as a translation of deva. The word deva (literally, a being of light) is directly related to the English word divinity, but we should beware of thinking that it has the same meaning as the English word. Devas are very long lived, but they are mortal, and they are very powerful, but they are not omnipotent. Since samsara (cyclic existence) is beginningless, all beings, including us, have been born as devas (and devis, the female form) many times. But here we are as humans again, so being born as a deva is not such a big deal. There are also beings called asuras, who are about as powerful as the devas, but whereas devas are peaceful and calm, asuras are restless and competitive. Asuras are sometimes called, in English, wrathful gods or titans. And, yes, we've all been reborn as asuras many times as well.

If we come from a Christian, Jewish, or Muslim background, it is probably more helpful to think of all these beings as if they were part of a science fiction story than to try to relate them to our ideas of God. Then we can enjoy the
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)
- pot luck 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.

richness and diversity of them, as if we were watching Star Trek or Star Wars, and be open to what it is they do and where they live. Some devas communicate by perfumes, others by musical notes (as in Close Encounters of the Third Kind), some reproduce merely by glancing at each other, all are stunningly beautiful, most can fly, none of them need to blink, they do not sweat, and they do not cast a shadow. And so forth. A complete description of every kind of deity and other beings in every kind of realm would take up many issues of this newsletter.

For a simplified overview see The Vision of Buddhism by Roger Corless (St Paul MN: Paragon House, 1989) pages 138-144 and 155-163. Note that there is no form of Buddhism, even the very earliest, which does not assume the existence of these beings. As far as we can tell, the Buddha himself believed in their existence, recounted past lives when he had been reborn as a deva, and, in this life, gave teachings specifically directed at devas. We cannot regard the belief in deities as a corruption of early Buddhism or a late superstition.

Tibetans use the term blo to translate deva and, confusingly, they use this term also for Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. This is probably why the word god in the subtitles to the movie Himalaya was perplexing. There is a distinction, which may be lost on uneducated lay Buddhists, between intra-samsaric and extra-samsaric deities. Deities of a certain place, which the Tibetans call sangma (similar to the Roman genii loci), and deities who are invoked to control the weather, bring riches, or ensure healthy babies, are powerful and long-lived deities who are still, however, trapped in samsara. They can help with problems in this life, or this world (loka, hence they are called lankika, literally worldly), but they cannot help one to escape from samsara. This is the job of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, who are called lokuttara, literally transworldly.

These extra-samsaric deities are prayed to in sahdanas (liturgies in which the deity is visualized as being present) and they are commonly besought to remain in samsara until all beings are liberated. They have vowed to do this anyway, but it is thought to be a good idea to remind them of their vow. Since they are still in samsara (although not trapped in it, as are the intra-samsaric deities), they can hear and answer prayers.

"The Buddhas of the three eras," more usually translated as the three times, is a conventional phrase referring to the Buddhas of the past, the present, and the future — in short, all of them.

Intra-samsaric deities are found in all forms of Buddhism. Deities, like humans, are sometimes Buddhist and sometimes not. The non-Buddhist deities, like Mara and his armies, are troublesome demons, trying to deflect us from the path to liberation. Those who have converted to Buddhism are called Protectors of the Dharma (Dhammapala), amongst whom the Four Divine Kings, or rulers of the four quarters, are pre-eminent. The Golden Light Sutra states that these kings will guard the country
of a Buddhist ruler. In 741 C.E.,
the Japanese emperor was so
impressed by this teaching that he
distributed copies of the sūtra to
the provinces and built Shitennoji
(Temples of the Four Divine
Kings — a famous one survives in
Osaka, Japan's "second city")
wherein the sūtra was to be recited
regularly, thus enlisting the Four
Divine Kings into the national
defense system.

Extra-samsaric deities are only
found in Mahayana Buddhism.
Theravāda Buddhism does not
recognize the Bodhisattvas which
are such an important part of
the Mahayana pantheon, and it teaches
that the Buddhhas have passed into
nibbana (nirvana) so that, as the
teacher Nagasena says in The
Questions of King Milinda, the
Buddha "cannot be pointed out as
being here or there, but can [only]
be pointed out in the corpus of
his Teaching (Dhamma) and the
body of his Community (Sangha)."
That is, the Buddha survives in his
legacy, but he himself has left
samsara. (Mahayana Buddhists
object that, if so, the Buddha is
not perfectly compassionate, and,
therefore, not a full Buddha.
Theravādins reply that a Buddha
who is still in samsara has not
obtained final nibbana, and,
therefore, is not a full Buddha.
The debate continues.)

The Burmese student who said
that Gautama Buddha (i.e., the
historical Buddha or the Buddha
for our space-time continuum) is
the "main god" of Buddhism was,
in a sense, quite right. One of the
titles of the Buddha in the Pali
scriptures (the version which is
read in Myanmar or Burma) is

devatīdeva, "deva beyond devas,"
that is, the deva who transcends all
devas. If we translate deva as god
then "the main god" is an
acceptable, if perhaps rather
misleading, translation of
devatīdeva.

Have a question about
Buddhism? Send it to Dharma
Daddy, c/o GBF, 2215-R Market
St., PMB 456, San Francisco CA
94114, or by e-mail to
<tashi5@juno.com>.

Pen Pals for Prisoners

Anyone interested in
responding to any Buddhist
prisoners should contact Don
Wiepert at (510) 540-0307 or email
him at GDWicp@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
GDWicp@aol.com. Don will arrange
to collect them and get them to
prisoners.

Scholar of
Buddhism
Moves to
California

José Cabezon, a well known scholar
of Tibetan Buddhism and an out
gay man, writes that after teaching
for the past twelve years at Iliff
School of Theology in Denver, he
will occupy the new chair in
Tibetan Buddhism at the University
of California-Santa Barbara
beginning in the fall quarter 2001
(early October). He has friends in
the Bay area, including Roger
Corless (a.k.a. Dharma Daddy),
whom he plans to visit on occasion,
and we hope to have him as a
speaker at a Sunday sitting some
time in the not too distant future.
We are preparing for our 10th annual Fall retreat. We'll return again to the Vajrapani 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.

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
GBF Calendar
San Francisco/Bay Area Events

Sittings, followed by a talk or discussion, are held every Sunday between 10:30 AM and 12 NOON at the San Francisco Buddhist Center, 37 Bartlett Street (near 21st St between Mission and Valencia). MUNI: 14 Mission or 49 Van Ness-Mission, alight at 21st St, walk ½ block. BART: 24th and Mission, walk 3½ blocks. Parking: on street (meters free on Sundays) or in adjacent New Mission Bartlett Garage (75¢ first hour, then $1 per hour, $5 max.) The Center is handicapped accessible.

The September GBF speakers are as follows:

September 2: Jim Wilson
September 9: GBF Retreat
September 16: Mark Johnson
September 23: Diana Elrod
September 30: Bill Weber

*Mark Johnson is an authority on the I Ching.

*Diana Elrod will speak about the Nichiren tradition.

*Bill Weber is a senior vipassana student who is currently training in the Community Dharma Leaders program at Spirit Rock Meditation Center. Bill is also a film editor and director. Bill’s talk will focus on the dharma and personal truths. The four noble truths can become active in our lives when we examine our relationship and response to our personal truths. As gay men living in a culture that, in general, doesn’t value some of our core personal truths, this can be a helpful and insightful reflection.

**Fall Potluck**

**Next Steering Committee Meeting**
Thursday, September 13, 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.

**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.

**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 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 Seeher 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. 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 Website**
www.gaybuddhist.org
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