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 San Francisco Bay Area, the United States, and the world.

GBF’s mission includes cultivating a social environment that is inclusive and caring.

When the Dalai Lama was told about practitioners hating themselves, he was surprised. Since we are all Buddhas, he replied, how can we hate ourselves? Self-hatred was apparently outside his experience as a Tibetan, but for many Westerners, especially LGBT persons, self-hatred is an all too familiar condition.

The Parable of the Lost Heir in chapter four of the Lotus Sutra tells how a runaway son becomes impoverished and loses confidence in himself but comes to realize, experientially, certainly, and without any doubt, that he is rich beyond his dreams, that is, that he is a not a limited, confused, suffering being condemned to innumerable rebirths, but a Buddha. If we reflect on this parable we may be able to move towards a similar realization for ourselves.

The chapter begins with an account of the context and the occasion for telling the parable by four disciples, led by Mahakashyapa as spokesman. The disciples represent the establishment of early Buddhism, the status quo. They have been around a long time; they have seen it all, “been there, done that, got the tee-shirt,” and have concluded that they are too old to change.

Sitting here all this time, our bodies tired, we have merely been mindful of emptiness, signlessness, and wishlessness, taking no delight in the Bodhisattva-Dharmas, in their samadhis of playfulness, in their purification of Buddha-lands, or in their maturation of living beings.

The Buddha has just predicted that another of their number, Shariputra (another representative of the status quo) will attain, complete and perfect enlightenment, becoming equal to the Buddha.

Suddenly, then, the old disciples gain a new sense of purpose, hope, and self-worth, and they begin to see how they can re-frame their practice of Dharma: not as labor, or work, but as play. They are also taken out of their own selfish concerns and encouraged to assist in the liberation of all living beings, to, as they say in Twelve Step programs, work with others. They say they feel as if they had been given an unexpected gift of “limitless precious gems.” This gift is the realization that, had they not been supported by something beyond themselves, by the higher power of the Dharma and their own Buddha Nature, they could not have practiced at all.

Healing Internalized Self-Hatred: Meditations on the Lotus Sutra

BY ROGER CORLESS
When we have a low sense of self-esteem, we are often in a Catch-22 bind. We hate ourselves, but we are self-absorbed in the self that we hate. One way out of this bind is to reflect on our interconnectedness with all other beings and, indeed, all forces in the universe, without which we would not even be at all. Where are we, and what are we doing? It may seem simple. We are sitting in a chair, reading this article. Where did all this come from? What are the causes and conditions that allowed this to happen? Can we see, as Thich Nhat Hanh often asks, the trees, the clouds, the water, the air, and so forth, in a book we are holding in our hands? How is it that we can read? Who taught us? Who taught them? Where did the English language come from? Reflect in this way and you will begin to experience interdependent arising, the knowledge that this moment is part of the mutually inter-reflecting jeweled Net of Indra. The more we experience this, the less lonely, and the more energized, we feel, and the more we will naturally reach out to love and assist other beings.

LEAVING THE FATHER

We are not told why the son ran away, just that he was young, and he ran. So it was because of, perhaps, what we call the foolishness of youth. According to Buddhism, we are all, until we actualize our Buddhahood, young and foolish. We do not intentionally hurt ourselves and others; we do so because we do not know what else to do. Buddhism calls this beginningless unawareness. By beginningless it does not mean that, no matter how far back we trace it in linear time, we never find its beginning, but that, no matter how deeply in we go to find its origin, we only get deeper in, never clearer. Samsara, cyclic existence, is always changing, fascinating but endless, full of beauty and ugliness but, we eventually realize, nothing but a wearisome energy sink. Samsara promises more than it gives. The only certainty is that we get older, and we may begin to feel that we have lost something, that, in some way, our life is a failure.

Many of us begin our lives with great ambitions and hopes. We are going to be president. At some point in our youth, if we are lucky, everything seems possible and most things probable. But, as Wordsworth said, “Shades of the prison-house begin to close / Upon the growing Boy” and the sparkle goes from our eyes. Reality strikes, as we say, and reality is not on our side. But appearances are deceptive. Just at this point in the parable, the son “accidentally approached his native land.”

THE FATHER SEeks THE SON

“His father, from the first, had set out seeking his son but in vain.” A great deal is packed into this short sentence. Buddhism is often presented, in the west, as a matter of
naked self-will. Sit on your cushion and grit your teeth. Don’t move a muscle, or you’ll never be enlightened! Subdue the passions; become insipid; ignore the beauty of the world; it will only entrap you! This is exactly the interpretation of Buddhism which the Lotus Sutra opposes. It calls it the Way of the Shravakas (the immediate disciples of the historical Buddha), and the purpose of the parable is to enlarge our view of the Dharma, showing us its compassion, joy, and vitality.

If we are completely lost in beginningless unawareness, how could we ever know that there was a way out? The *Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana* proposes that the Dharmadhatu (Dharma Realm, one of the terms for Pure or Buddha Mind) “mysteriously moves” towards ignorant and suffering beings, using the analogy of perfume in clothing. The perfume draws our imagination towards the source of the perfume. Similarly, our minds, the treatise says, are not absolutely pervaded by darkness and unawareness; they are also perfumed with enlightenment, and this perfume entices us to practice, to move towards its source. The treatise stops short of personalizing the Dharmadhatu. The Lotus Sutra is more bold, symbolizing the Buddha as a father who seeks his son for “ten, twenty or even fifty years.”

In the Pali texts, the Buddha says that anyone who sees him sees Dharma. The Mahayana expands on this to say that he showed himself in order to disclose the Buddha Mind in the manner most suitable for teaching humans. The practical result of the teaching is the assurance that we are always, although we may not realize it, assisted by the very Buddha Mind towards which we strive. Our isolation, our necessity to “work out our own salvation” totally unaided, is an illusion produced by our beginningless unawareness. Pure Land Buddhism takes this teaching to term and proclaims that, while remaining foolish and ignorant, we are enfolded in the compassionate concern of the Buddha.

**THE FATHER IN MAJESTY**
The father in the parable has also been wandering, seeking his son, and finally he settles “midway in a city.” The Buddhas come to meet us “in the middle,” that is, between all opposites and all extremes. The middle is really dimensionless; it is right here, right now, so close that we miss it, as we look elsewhere, outside the mind and outside the present moment. The middle is that instant of clarity in our practice when, whether we are formally seated on a meditation cushion or going about some business, the ice desert breaks (as Zen Master Hakuin puts it) and the mind manifests in its native clarity, compassion, and power. The Buddhas are already there (here) and they know it. We are there (here) and don’t know it, or know it only fleetingly.

The father has become immensely rich, but he doesn’t think of himself, but of his son. “If I could only get my son back, I’d make him heir to my wealth. I’d be contented and happy and have no further worries.” That is, the Buddhas think of us, and how they can help us, not of themselves. They don’t deny themselves; they’re not like “martyrs” who say “Oh, don’t worry about me. I’m not important, am I?” The martyr complex is a form of self-centeredness. The Buddhas have lost all thought of self; they have no personal agenda. Achaan Cha, a famous Thai teacher, said that meditation was not to have nothing in one’s mind but to have nothing on one’s mind.

But when the son sees the father, he is not overjoyed but terrified. He sees a grandee on a throne, surrounded by attendants and immense wealth. It is too much for him, and he runs away. He is convinced that he is unworthy to be in the presence of such a person.

We may feel a similar sense of unease and distance when looking at the paintings of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. The description of the father in majesty is that of the visualization of a Buddha or Bodhisattva. We might slightly re-write the passage as follows:

In front of me, I see a Bodhisattva seated on a Lion-seat. His feet are resting on a jeweled footstool, and he is reverently surrounded by Brahmans, Kshatriyas, and commoners. Necklaces of real pearls, their value in the millions, adorn his body. Attendants and servants, holding white fly-whisks, wait on him right and left. Above him is a jeweled canopy hung with flowers and pennants. Fragrant water is sprinkled on the ground, and expensive flowers are scattered about. Precious objects are placed in rows, which are passed out and taken in on leaving and entering.

**According to Buddhism, we are all, until we actualize our Buddhahood, young and foolish. We do not intentionally hurt ourselves and others; we do so because we do not know what else to do.**
Since we, the practitioner, are, we think, nothing like this, we may have no sense of connection, and we may even be afraid. After all, we are viewing a powerful authority figure. What is your reaction to authority figures? Do you, on seeing them, automatically think that they intend you harm? Do you expect them to criticize you? When the phone rings, do you think, “Oh, no! Trouble!”? If we have a low sense of self-esteem, we will assume that we will be criticized, for that, we think, is all that we deserve. Even if we do not expect to be criticized, we may find ourselves tongue-tied and nervous in the presence of somebody famous. Mahayana Buddhism tells us, however, that we are all Buddhas. Our wisdom and compassion are infinite. If we can realize this, we can face authority figures with equanimity. We and they are, ultimately, equal.

Since the son’s mindset is fearful, he completely misunderstands the intentions of the servants whom the father, recognizing the stranger as his long lost son, sends to invite him into his presence. They have good news, but he assumes it is bad news.

The poor son in alarm shouted in resentment, “I have committed no offense. Why have I been seized?” The servants, with even greater haste, grabbed him and dragged him back. The poor son thought to himself, “I am blameless and yet have been imprisoned. This surely means that I will die,” and, even more frightened, he fainted and fell to the ground.

The father, therefore, lets the son go, at which the son is “delighted, having gained what he had never had before” and “rose from the ground and went to a poor village to seek clothing and food.” Here are the first stirrings of a new sense of self-worth. Being relieved that he was not to be punished, the son views the majestic king in a slightly more favorable light. He had expected the worst, and it had not happened. Maybe he can learn that not all powerful figures are malevolent. It’s not much, but it’s a start.

**Teaching by Expedient Means**

If someone tells you that you are a fine person, and someone else tells you that you are worthless, whom do you find easier to believe? Until we heal our internalized self-hatred, we will probably suspect the first person of being out to get something from us and regard the second person as truthful.

The father in the parable descends to the level of the son and tells him that he will give him a job worthy of his talents—hit-shifting, as we might literally translate the characters. The job is that of cleaning out the toilets, in a time well before the flush toilet. It is euphemistically called “removing nightsoil,” and it was dirty and smelly work. If we say, “I feel like a piece of shit,” then shit-shifting seems like appropriate work.

Note that the son “first took his salary.” Apparently he did not trust his new employers and wanted his pay in advance. Perhaps he had been cheated before and wasn’t going to take any ... well, you get the point.

The dramatic tension of the story increases as we are told how the father disguises himself as Chief Shit-Shifter, somewhat above the other workers, but not so far above them as to overawe them.

[The father] removed his necklace of beads, his soft upper garments, and his adornments and put on a coarse, worn out, and filthy robe, smeared himself with dirt and holding a dung shovel, looking frightful, he addressed his workers, saying, “All of you, work hard! Do not be lax.”

*By this device he draws near to his son...*

The father is using skillful means, or, as the Chinese translation has it, “appropriate method.” This is a fundamental principle of Buddhism, and the Lotus Sutra has a lot to say about it. In some respects, skillful means is a lie, at least a white lie. The father, for example, is deceiving his son by pretending to be a stranger, or a lowly worker. If the father tells the truth, the son will not believe it and may start fainting again. Skillful means is the sort of lie we tell children. There may not really be a Santa Claus, but the fiction that there is a Santa Claus is an appropriate way to teach children about love and the joy of giving. Children will mature into adults automatically, given the time, but suffering beings remain suffering beings unless they meet with conditions favorable to their maturation. The Dharma is intended to transform, or mature, suffering beings into Buddhas. However, many of us do not really want to mature—it is too much work. We want to be told about ultimate truth while remaining as we are. We want information, not transformation. The sneaky, and glorious, thing about the Dharma is that it appears to supply us with the information we want while actually infecting us with the transformation we need. The Buddha Dharma is...
transformation manifesting as information. That is skillful means.

When the Buddha appears as a human, we are not forced to regard him as a Buddha, that is, as a being who is perfectly liberated in body, speech, and mind. We can regard him as a philosopher. This is the way the Buddha is often viewed by non-Buddhists. While there is nothing in Buddhism to say that this is wrong, there is much that says it is preliminary. Unless we acknowledge the Buddha as Buddha, we cannot believe that Buddhahood is possible, and we cannot see ourselves as Buddhas. On the other hand, we are not discouraged by the apparent unattainability of Buddhahood. Relating to the Buddha as a philosopher allows us some contact with the Dharma and exposes us to the healing infection of its transformative power.

After the son has performed his lowly duties for a while, the father prudently gives him a bonus, saying (with skillful means, i.e., lying so as to tell the truth) that it is a reward for hard work.

I will increase your wages. Whatever you need, be it pots, utensils, rice, flour, salt or vinegar or other such things, don’t trouble yourself about it. I also have an old, worn-out servant you can have if you need him.

Then he says something very significant: “I am like your father.” The son has acquitted himself well enough that he can now be praised — “Whenever you are working, you are never deceitful, remiss, angry, hateful, or grumbling. I have never seen you commit such evils as I have the other workers” — and the son does not think himself unworthy of the majestic figure’s high assessment of him that “from now on you shall be just like my own son.” He now feels gratitude rather than fear, but he still referred to himself as a lowly worker from outside” and “for twenty years … was constantly kept at work sweeping away dung.” Subsequently, the father and son “trusted one another,” but the son “still stayed in the same place as before.”

In the early stages of our practice, we labor at subduing the passions and acquiring the virtues. When we have some success at this, we are not embarrassed to be called a son or daughter of the Buddha, but we regard the term as a metaphor — we are adopted, not true, sons and daughters; we are still “outside.” With continued practice, our trust in the Dharma increases, but we still perceive a difference between ourselves and the Buddhas.

SPONTANEOUS REALIZATION

The story comes to a rapid conclusion. When “the father knew that his son had grown more relaxed, that he had accomplished the great resolve and despised his former state of mind” and “that his own end was near,” the father calls a great assembly and announces “that this is my son, begotten by me…This is really my son. I am really his father. All of my wealth now belongs to my son,” to which the son joyfully responds, “Originally, I had no thought to seek anything, and now this treasury has come to me of itself.”

At the traditional, doctrinal, level of interpretation, this episode represents the Shravaka, or Hinayanist, converting to the grander perspective of the Mahayana. At the personal level, it is the discovery of our own self-worth. We are not only immensely worthy, immensely worthwhile, beyond all that we had imagined, we have always been that way, but we have not recognized our worthiness.

We have arrived, as T. S. Eliot says in the last stanzas of the Four Quartets, “where we started,” yet we “know the place for the first time.” The journey to where we have always been was hard. It was not enough to be told, or to read about, our worthiness. Our sense of unworthiness was too deeply embedded to be affected by statements of mere fact. We needed to develop a sense of self-worth by engaging in minor, boring, despised tasks. Having become expert in removing excrement, a champion shit-shifter, we could aspire to something greater. But we could never imagine the immense riches that were really within us until we had worked long enough at progressively more exalted, but still servile, jobs. Finally, we were ready to see the truth about ourselves, and about others, and the “treasury” (literally, a storehouse of jewels) came to us “of itself.”

The compound translated “of itself” is the term which is used in Taoism to mean “spontaneously.” By not doing, all is done. The pure Buddha Mind self-manifests, and we know it to be our true self. It is now possible to enjoy the “samadhis (high mental states) of playfulness” mentioned in the introduction to the parable. We still practice, still sit in meditation, conduct ourselves ethically, and study the Dharma, but we do so for fun, not out of a grim sense of duty with some faint hope of a reward such as the destruction of the passions. We can relax and allow the Buddha Mind to act through us.

Achaan Cha, a famous Thai teacher, said that meditation was not to have nothing in one’s mind but to have nothing on one’s mind.

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**Mahabuddha Temple, Nepal**  
Photo by Kevin Havener

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**Prisoners Urgently Need Buddhist Books**

The most frequent request from gay Buddhist prisoners, other than pen pals, is for books. In many prisons, they are circulated among small 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 GDWiepert@aol.com. Don will arrange to collect them and get them to prisoners.

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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. 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.
Sunday Sittings

10:30 am to 12 noon
Every Sunday followed by a talk or discussion, 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 1/2 block.
BART: 24th and Mission, walk 3 1/2 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.

December / January GBF Sunday Speakers

December 7 Roger Corless
Roger Corless is Professor of Religion, Emeritus, at Duke University. Having retired to the Bay area, he contributes to the GBF Newsletter under the nom de plume Dharma Daddy. He is the author of several books, including Vision of Buddhism: The Space Under the Tree.

December 14 Mark Johnson
Mark started his Taoist studies in 1970 at the Taoist Sanctuary in LA. In 1974, after a year in Taiwan studying acupuncture, Tai Ji, Qigong, and Feng Shui, he brought the famous Taoist Master Ni Hua Ching to America and continued to study with him for eight more years. Since 1982 he has started several Taoist centers around the USA.

December 21 Steve Peskind
Steve Peskind, co-founder of the Coming Home Hospice, the San Francisco Shanti Project, and the Buddhist AIDS Project, has practiced meditation since 1973.

December 28 Open Discussion

January 4 Bill Weber
Bill Weber is a senior Vipassana student who is currently training in the Community Dharma Leaders program at Spirit Rock Meditation Center. Also a film editor and director, Bill co-directed the award-winning documentary The Cockettes.

January 11 Carol Newhouse
Carol Osmer Newhouse has studied Insight Meditation for more than twenty years and has been teaching for ten. Her root teacher is Ruth Denison who was empowered by the great meditation master U Ba Khin of Burma. She has also studied with Dr. Rina Sircar at CIIS and Dr. Thynn Thynn in Daily Life Practice. She is the founding teacher of the Lesbian Buddhist Sangha in Berkeley.

January 18 Christian de la Huerta
Christian de la Huerta is the author of the best-selling and critically acclaimed Coming Out Spiritually. Chosen by Publishers Weekly as one of the ten best religion books of 1999, the book was also nominated for a Lambda Award. Christian’s writing has appeared in The Advocate, Hero, Genre, and other publications. He is founder and president of Q-Spirit, a strategic organization catalyzing the necessary conditions for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people to fully reclaim our spiritual roles of service, leadership and community enrichment in the world. Graduating with honors from Tulane University, de la Huerta holds a degree in Psychology. He has been a seminar leader and group facilitator for the past twelve years.

December 28 Open Discussion

Miss a Dharma Talk?
You can listen to it on the Internet. Audio files of Dharma talks are available on the GBF website.

How to Reach Us
For 24-hour information on GBF activities or to leave a message:
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World Wide Web Site
www.gaybuddhist.org

GBF Sangha
Mail correspondence:
GBF
PMB 456
2215-R Market Street
San Francisco, California 94114

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Steering Committee Meeting
The next Steering Committee Meeting will be January 4, 2004.
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