Gay Buddhist Fellowship

DECEMBER 2004 / JANUARY 2005

Metta: Treating All Living Beings As Friends

BY ROGER CORLESS

Dharma Daddy is back, by popular request. After months of silence, he has received three questions all at once, two via e-mail and one by paper mail.

What is metta?

“Z” writes from Menard, Illinois, requesting “in depth information on metta.” He says he has checked several Buddhist books and Buddhist dictionaries without finding the information he wants.

Dear Z:

I understand your problem. There is very little on this in the western Buddhist literature. Metta literally means friendliness. It comes from a word meaning friend, and is an important part of Buddhist ethics. Ethics is fundamental to Buddhist practice; it pervades all of Buddhism. How can a fish speak about water? It’s all around; there is nothing but water. Similarly, the Buddhist who is earnestly practicing swims in metta and its relatives, which are called the Pure Abidings (brahma vihara)—compassion (karuna), sympathetic joy (muditā), and equanimity (upekkha). The Pure Abidings are positive forms of the first precept, not to harm living beings. The negative precept is taught first because we come to Buddhism with long established habits of harming. We are very good at harming others. We think that if we attack or kill someone who crosses us we will find happiness. But, in fact, we bring on more suffering, not only for others but also for ourselves.

So, we begin by training ourselves to stop harming. We do this first with friends, then persons to whom we are neutral, then, most difficult of all, our enemies. And let’s not forget animals and even insects. This is not an absolute command. As long as we are alive we will harm some beings. Even if we are strictly vegetarian, insects and microbes are harmed. But we do the best we can, and if we need to kill, say, a mosquito, we do so consciously and with regret.
When we practice metta, we try to treat all living beings as friends…We start with ourselves: May I be happy, may I be peaceful, may I be well. Then we extend this to all beings, once again in the order of friends, persons to whom we are neutral, and enemies, and not forgetting to include animals. Then, we try to practice metta in real life, as we meet people. It is also helpful to practice metta on inanimate objects, such as a door. The door doesn’t have feelings, so it doesn’t care if we close it softly or slam it, but it makes a difference to us. Every time we slam a door closed we are reinforcing our habit of harming and unfriendliness.

As we find that non-harming is becoming more of a habit than harming, we can shift to being actively helpful by practicing the four Pure Abidings. When we practice metta, we try to treat all living beings as friends. We wish the best for them, but we do not have to like them. We start with ourselves: May I be happy, may I be peaceful, may I be well. Then we extend this to all beings, once again in the order of friends, persons to whom we are neutral, and enemies, and not forgetting to include animals. Just as I wish to be happy, peaceful, and well, may all beings be happy, peaceful, and well. We do this during our regular meditation sessions, visualizing being kind to ourselves, our friends, our enemies, persons to whom we are neutral, and animals. Then, we try to practice metta in real life, as we meet people. It is also helpful to practice metta on inanimate objects, such as a door. The door doesn’t have feelings, so it doesn’t care if we close it softly or slam it, but it makes a difference to us. Every time we slam a door closed we are reinforcing our habit of harming and unfriendliness.

The other three Pure Abidings are similar and are practiced in the same way. Compassion (karuna) is feeling another’s suffering as our own. Sympathetic joy (mudita) is the complement of compassion — feeling another’s happiness as our own. Equanimity (upekkha) is the manner in which we practice the other three Pure Abidings. Literally it means “looking on,” i.e., just looking, not judging. We spread thoughts of friendliness and so forth to all beings, whether we find them attractive or not.

What are the six realms of existence?
John writing from a Yahoo address, asks: “Could you please explain the six realms of existence and how they work?”

Dear John:
The world as we usually experience it goes round and round. We wake up, go to work, come home, sleep, wake up and go to work again. As Edna St Vincent Millay said, it’s not one damned thing after another, it’s the same damned thing after another. On a cosmic scale, Buddhism calls this samsara, literally “constantly moving.” The Tibetans translate samsara with a word meaning cyclic existence, and the Chinese use a compound meaning many births and deaths. The many births and deaths which we all experience until we attain final liberation are generally summarized under six categories called the six realms of existence, of which our human realm is one. The six realms have many subdivisions, and it is taught that the Buddha only spoke of six because these were the realms to which we as humans could relate. There are so many realms of rebirth that they are effectively infinite. In traditional Buddhist cos-
mology, the other realms are said to exist above us and below us, as well as on our level. Since all realms are within samsara, all have suffering, but the upper realms have the least suffering and the lower realms have the most suffering. Since the upper and lower realms vaguely correspond to traditional Christian cosmology, they are sometimes (rather unhelpfully, in my opinion) called heavens and hells. Above us are the realms of the restless deities (asura) and the peaceful deities (deva). The realm of animals is on our level. Hungry ghosts (preta), humanoids with huge, insatiable bellies and pinhole-sized mouths, also exist on our level, but most of the time they are invisible to us. The “unfortunate realms” (naraka), which most closely resemble the Christian hells as imagined by Dante in the Inferno, are in levels below the human realm. None of these realms is eternal, but time is different in each of them, so an existence in any of them may last the equivalent of many millennia in the human realm.

Each realm has its advantages and disadvantages for the practice of Dharma and therefore liberation from suffering. In the most pleasant realms, beings get lazy (“I’ll definitely start practicing in the next century or two”), and then they are overwhelmed with regret and terror when they die and are reborn in a less pleasant realm. In the

We don’t need to believe in rebirth to get some value out of the teaching on the six realms. We may have the body of a human but the mind of a being in another realm, and this other mind may be born and die many times in a single day. When we shift from peaceful joy to frustration, anger, and jealousy, we have moved from the deva to the asura realm. If we are concerned only with eating, sex, and shelter, we have the mind of an animal. Those of us who become trapped in addictions are like pretas, always needing more and never being satisfied. The horrors that come with certain mental disorders are like those of the hell realms.
unpleasant realms the suffering may be so intense that it is very difficult to practice compassion and, reacting in fear and anger, we increase, rather than decrease, our negative karma. The human realm is the most fortunate realm since the suffering is never so intense that we cannot practice at all, and our lives are short enough that it is fairly easy to grasp the truth of impermanence.

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The teaching on the six realms is not meant to scare us so much as to wake us up. How long will I live? If I am feeling OK now, and I have the time to practice, shouldn’t I seize the moment? Tomorrow I may be sick or otherwise unable to practice. The teaching also helps us to practice the Pure Abidings. I may have a fortunate rebirth, but it wasn’t always this way. Once I was an animal, a preta, a hell being, a deity, and I may be so again. By helping those beings I am helping myself.

Who is Tara?

Another denizen of Yahoo cyberspace, going by the name of The Lotus Flower, asks “Was Tara a historical person or is she only found in the sutras—and what texts can I study to learn more about her?”

Dear Lotus:

Yes, no, and it depends what you mean by “history.” According to the traditional Tibetan histories, Tara was a princess in the Indian Subcontinent with the name Jnanachandra (“Wisdom Moon”). Her practice was very strong. Each day for 10,100,000 years she made offerings to the Buddha Dundubhishvara, who was living at that time, and to his attendants. The offerings filled an area approximately twenty miles around, horizontally, above, and below, leaving no spaces between the offerings. (Ah, those were the days! They really did things right back then.) She gained so much merit by all this that the monks told her she could change herself into a man. Traditionally, only a male human being can become a Buddha. The princess, however, was a woman of her own mind, and very progressive for her day (which was a long time ago—the histories say she lived at the beginning of this world cycle), and she refused, saying:

In this life there is no such distinction as “male” and “female,” neither of “self identity,” a “person” nor any perception (of such), and therefore attachment to ideas of “male” and “female” is quite worthless. Weak minded worldlings are always deluded by this.

And so she vowed,

There are many who wish to gain enlightenment in a man’s form, and there are but few who wish to work for the welfare of sentient beings in a female form. Therefore may I, in a female body, work for the welfare of beings right until samsara has been emptied. (The

So, instead of using her merit to have a painless sex change, she dedicated it to liberating beings from suffering, especially from fear. She became known as Tara, the Savioress (literally, She Who Carries Across, i.e., from samsara to nirvana), and people began to invoke her for protection from fears of all kinds. Her strident laughter, it is said, terrifies demons. She is the female manifestation of compassion. Many practitioners find her more accessible than Avalokiteshvara (known in Tibet as Chenrezig, pronounced Jen-RAY-zee), out of whom she came—from his heart or from his tears. Chenrezig is always male in Tibet. In China, Avalokiteshvara, known as Guanyin, often appears as female and fulfills many of the functions of Tara.

So, all this is historical? Yeah, right! But wait. Fast forward to the 7th century CE, and we find that Tara is said to have been incarnated as one of the two wives of the first king of Tibet. That’s historical, yes? But then again, what is history? It is a reality which arises on the basis of a consciousness which assumes an objective Newtonian-Cartesian world. Under other conditions, other space-time realities arise. It’s different in each of the six realms of existence, and it seems to be different for Tibetans, many of whom can accept Newtonian time as well as what we might call sutra time as parallel universes. Let’s not be too hasty to dismiss other realities as myth.

As for books, you can find more than you’ll probably ever need in The Cult of Tara by Stephan Beyer (University of California Press, 1973), but books are not the best source. Tara really exists, and if you do her sadhana (liturgy) and say her mantra, she will show herself, and you can ask her whatever you like. Your local Tibetan Buddhist center will be able to help you with this.

Send questions for Dharma Daddy to tashi5@juno.com or by US mail to GBF Newsletter, PMB 456, 2215-R Market St, San Francisco CA 94114.
On October 2nd of this year, GBF had its first booth at the Castro Street Fair. It was a great success: quite a few people stopped by to say hi, ask us about our organization, and take our literature. Hopefully, a GBF presence at the Castro Street Fair will become an annual tradition.

Meeting To Discuss Future of Prisoner Outreach Program

After the Sunday sitting on December 5, there will be a meeting to discuss the future of GBF’s Prisoner Outreach Program. Don Weipert has been running this program on his own for the past several years, but because of other commitments in his life, he can no longer do all of the work himself. At the meeting, we will explore ways that other members of the Sangha can share some of the tasks. A number of people have already signed up for the meeting, but everyone is welcome to attend.

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.
Calendar

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 5     Donald Rothberg
Donald Rothberg has practiced Insight Meditation since 1976 and has written and taught widely on socially engaged Buddhism and transpersonal studies. He is on the faculty of the Saybrook Graduate School, where he has developed a program in Socially Engaged Spirituality. He has been an organizer, educator, and board member for the Buddhist Peace Fellowship (BPF), particularly working as a mentor for its Buddhist Alliance for Social Engagement (BASE), since its inception in 1995. He is also a meditation teacher, working with two small groups in the East Bay, and is helping to develop a new dharma center in the East Bay.

December 12    Ji Sing
Ji-Sing Norman Eng is the former facilitator of Q-Sangha at the Metropolitan Community Church of San Francisco. His main spiritual teacher is Thich Nhat Hanh ("Thay"), and he was ordained by Thay into the "Order of Interbeing" (Unified Buddhist Church) in 2003 with the Dharma name of "True Wonderful Happiness."

December 19    Meditation Day
In response to men’s request for meditation instruction, the newly organized GBF Program Committee is initiating a series of three consecutive monthly meditation workshops starting on the third Sunday of December, 2004, and continuing January and February of 2005. Our hope is to present a diversity of methods for entering the meditative state, drawing on a variety of Buddhist traditions as well as different sangha members’ experience of the “meditation teacher within.” On December 19, David Holmes will share the foundations of breath meditation and shikantaza from the Zen tradition, and Jim Stewart will relate his experiences with techniques from the qi gong tradition.

December 26    Open Discussion
January 2       Larry Yang
Larry Yang is a Spirit Rock Community Dharma Leader and leads meditation retreats tailored for men, people of color, the LGBTQ communities, and people in recovery from addiction. He co-leads a meditation group for the LGBTQ community in San Francisco and is a psychotherapist and a consultant in cultural competency.

January 9      Diana Elrod
Diana Elrod, an active member of Soka Gakkai International (SGI), is a PhD candidate in Buddhist Studies at the California College of Integral Studies. She will speak about the Nichiren tradition.

January 16     Meditation Day
January 23     Open Discussion

January 30     Jay Kumar
Jay Kumar is an accomplished scholar and instructor of Ancient Languages and Cultures, having studied Sanskrit for 10 years as well as being proficient in several ancient and modern languages. He received his B.A at Northwestern University and his M.A. at Columbia University, and he will soon complete his Ph.D. at UCLA in Sanskrit and the Healing Traditions of Ancient India. He currently conducts both private and group instruction in Sanskrit, Latin, Ancient Greek, French, and Italian in the Bay Area. He also offers private consultations and Workshops in the Integrative Vedic Sciences of Ayurveda, Yoga Philosophy, and Jyotish Astrology.

Steering Committee Meeting
The next Steering Committee Meeting will be December 12, 2004

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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For address changes or to subscribe or unsubscribe to the Newsletter send email to:
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GBF Yahoo Discussion Group
There is now a GBF discussion group for the general membership (and others) on Yahoo. Join the discussion at:
www.groups.yahoo.com/group/gaybuddhistfellowship
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