Cancer as a Dharma Teacher

BY ROGER CORLESS

When I saw the blood in my urine, and then got the diagnosis of bladder cancer, I was frightened and confused. I felt myself closing up, alone, scared, and sorry for myself. Why me? I was (I thought) healthy, I lived a good life, I cared for others, I prayed and meditated, and, over twenty years ago, I had successfully started on the road to recovery from alcoholism, a road which, I knew, led ever upwards. I couldn’t have cancer. Cancer happened to other people.

Then I thought again. Other people. I wasn’t, by any means, the first person to get cancer, so I wasn’t alone. I was part of an enormous family, extending though space and time, of humans and animals with cancer or another life threatening disease. I realized that I had been given a gift of connection with those beings. The cancer wasn’t all about me; it was all about us. Many of my friends are HIV positive, and, in the past, many of them died from complications related to AIDS. I sympathized with them, of course, as they were sick and dying, but there was something abstract and theoretical about my sympathy. They were sick; I was not. I was okay. While I was drinking alcoholically I acted very foolishly, but, somehow, I didn’t seroconvert. Now, with the cancer diagnosis, I was no longer okay. I knew what it was like to be told, “This is something that can kill you.”

I thought that I had come up with this notion of illness as a gift of connection with others all by myself, but then I remembered that a Buddhist scripture called The Teaching of Vimalakirti, written perhaps nineteen hundred years ago, makes a similar recommendation. The sutra encourages us to use our sickness to increase our compassion for all beings.

The sutra is very profound, but it is also very accessible. It has jokes. It is the Joker in the pack of staid and sometimes impenetrable Mahayana texts, and so it is popular with Zen teachers. It makes fun of stuffy, self-righteous, sexist monks, and praises lay men and women who have strong practice.

The action of the sutra is set in the northeast of the Indian subcontinent in the time of the Buddha and focuses on a layman called Vimalakirti (Stainless Fame). He is rich, married, and generally enjoys life, yet he is highly respected for his virtuous conduct and his deep and extensive knowledge of the Dharma. When he gets sick, the Buddha asks for volunteers to go and visit him. First he asks his leading monastic disciples, but one by one they decline. Last time they talked with Vimalakirti, they say, they were embarrassed to find that he knew more than they did. As learned monks, they had expected to be the teachers, but they found themselves becoming students. So the Buddha turns to the high Bodhisattvas, but they have the same story. At last, Mañjushri, the Bodhisattva who manifests the Perfection of Wisdom, con-
The main point is that we should accept our sickness as it is, watching how it changes, not getting lost in it but also not trying to escape it. The best way to handle sickness, says Vimalakirti, is the good old Buddhist Middle Way. Accept it, take reasonable steps towards healing, and let it go.

“Just so, householder. If I have come, then I can’t be coming, and if I have gone, I can’t be going.” This immediately puts everything in the context of the high teaching of Mahayana Buddhism, that everything, including movement, is interdependent and lacks inherent existence. Thus, when Mañjushri asks Vimalakirti why he is sick, Vimalakirti replies in terms of interdependence. He is sick, he says, because he is living in samsara (cyclic existence), where sickness is inescapable. Sickness is his connection with all other beings. He is sick with their sickness and will be healthy only when all beings have passed beyond the sickness of life and death. But, further, his sickness is not just a passive reaction to samsara. As a bodhisattva, Vimalakirti has compassion for all beings in the way that a parent has compassion for an only child. If the child gets sick, the mother and father will get sick along with it, and when the child is cured, the parents will be relieved and feel better. So, ultimately, Vimalakirti says, “A bodhisattva’s sickness arises out of Great Compassion.”

Mañjushri then gets more specific and asks if Vimalakirti’s sickness arises from the body, the mind, or one of the four elements (earth, water, fire and air) — i.e., from a particular external cause. Vimalakirti replies that it cannot come from either the body or the mind, since both are constantly changing and no fixed thing called Body or Mind exists, and, although the sickness does not come from any of the four elements, it is not separate from them. We can reinterpret this in today’s medical terms by saying that his sickness does not come from a virus, a bacterium, or a carcinogen, yet it is not separate from them. Western medicine recognizes external causes such as viruses as necessary causates of a disease but not as sufficient causes. That is, everyone who catches the flu has the flu virus, but not everyone who is exposed to the flu virus catches the flu. If this is explained at all (and the physician will often just say that some people are luckier than others) it is assigned to an as yet unknown genetic component. Vimalakirti restates his position by saying that the sicknesses of beings arise from the four elements, and he is sick because beings are sick.

At first we may think that Vimalakirti is both contradicting and repeating himself. His statement needs a little unpacking. He is saying that his sickness does not solely arise from a specific cause. The root cause is the interdependence of the body, the mind, external factors, and samsara as a whole. Earlier in the sutra he said that his sickness comes from unawareness. Unawareness, or ignorance, is identified by the Buddha as the fundamental cause of all suffering. Later in the sutra Vimalakirti makes it clear that he is using the term unawareness as shorthand for the tan-
orthodox and alternative medicine, becoming obsessed with diet and exercise—we end up just as afraid as if we took our sickness too seriously. The best way to handle sickness, says Vimalakirti, is the good old Buddhist Middle Way. Accept it, take reasonable steps towards healing, and let it go.

The next piece of advice in this section relates to our past actions. Tell the sick person, says Vimalakirti, “to own up to their former transgressions but not to enter into the past, which has gone.” When we look back on our life, we see how many times we acted selfishly and unskillfully, harming others. If we accept the Buddha’s teaching that this life is only the most recent of a series of many billions of lives, we realize that we have had plenty of time to act unskillfully, and so it is no surprise that we are reaping the unfortunate consequences of our actions even if, at the moment, we are pretty virtuous. What goes around, comes around, we say, summarizing the Buddha’s teaching on karma. Owning up to our past mistakes is not a way of putting ourselves down; it’s merely being realistic. However, what is past is past, and we need to move on and do better in the future. In Twelve Step recovery programs it is said that the recovering person, having made a “searching and fearless” list of former wrongdoings and shared it with another person, “will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it.” The person admits to the mistakes but does not stick on them. In such programs, one who “enters into the past,” as Vimalakirti puts it, is said to be living in the problem rather than the solution.

Most importantly of all, Vimalakirti advises the sick person to use his or her sickness as a means of developing compassion for the sickness of others. In the Buddhist universe, “others” includes animals, hungry ghosts, and hell beings as well as humans. If we are in pain, we can relate to other beings in pain more easily than when we are free of pain.

When we use our sickness to increase our compassion, we may, incidentally, cure ourselves. Lama Zopa Rinpoche says that the power of compassion is the ultimate healing power. Lama Zopa tells us that our own healing is not the main issue. We may be cured of one disease and get another. Our practice, he tells us, should focus on changing our attitude so that we cut off the inner causes of disease. Although he does not refer to the Vimalakirti Sutra, Lama Zopa’s teaching resonates with it and expands upon it by locating the cause of disease in the interdependence of external factors, such as a virus, and the internal factors of our mind and attitude. Sickness is caused, in the final analysis, by the three afflictive emotions of attachment (greed, lust), aversion (anger, hate), and confusion (unawareness, befuddlement). The Chinese call these the three poisons. When these poisons interact with an external factor, disease results, its strength depending on the strength of both the external and internal factors. By working to transform our minds from the self-cherishing concentration on the three poisons to an other-cherishing attitude of compassion, we weaken the hold of the disease. Our fear and anger will lessen, and we will be able to use our sickness as a stimulus to our practice. We may even be cured, but if we concentrate on that, we have gone back to self-cherishing and any healing we have will be superficial.

Reflecting on this in my own life, I wondered which of the three poisons was dominant and so had supported the manifestation of my cancer. In the past I had identified myself as a person dominated by attachment. I am obsessively neat, I hate disorder, I am devastated by the loss of even a trivial possession, and, yes, even at my age, I am highly sexed. But as I read Lama Zopa’s book I began to realize that beneath the attachment was aversion. Even since I was a child I have been smart—“too smart for your own good,” I was told. I found that I could easily outmaneuver people intellectually. I was physically puny, and I got beaten up a lot, but if it came to a verbal fight, watch out! I taught myself to read before I went to any school, and I developed a large vocabulary. I could kill you with my rapier while you bumbled around with your saber. At six years old, I told my mother I was learning to be a professor and, behold, a professor I became. Now, an academic uses the aspect of the mind that Buddhism calls buddhi. In itself it is neutral, but if it is left to itself it links up with the poison of aversion. In order to find the truth about something, we need to choose between some information that we accept and some that we reject. We need to be judgmental. Cut and thrust is the essence of academic research. Henry Kissinger famously remarked that “biting in academics was worse than in politics.”

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The remedy for this is to ally buddhi with compassion rather than aversion. When this is done effectively, buddhi becomes bodhi (enlightenment).

So, I have my program. First, accept my cancer as a fact, do not deny it or run away from it, and use it as a way of feeling my connection with other beings, especially those with cancer or another life threatening disease. Then, undergo surgery, chemotherapy, and so forth externally, and, then, last but not least, work internally on transforming my deep-seated anger into compassion.

If you wish to develop your own program of healing, begin by identifying which of the three poisons is dominant in you. You will probably be able to identify all
three, but one will be more important than the others. Attachment types are aesthetes, collectors, seekers of sensual pleasure. If you approach the world with anger and suspicion, often on the defensive and wanting to get ahead, you are probably an aversion type. People dominated by confusion are chronically indecisive, always in a fog about stuff. To each type there is an antidote. In general, compassion heals aversion; attachment is lessened by becoming aware of impermanence; and confusion disappears when we pay attention to a simple thing like our breathing. A competent meditation teacher can help you identify your chief obstacle to happiness and suggest ways of dealing with it.

In addition to these practices, Lama Zopa recommends forming a connection, in meditation, with Medicine Buddha, the personal manifestation of the healing qualities of the Buddha Nature. If your practice is in the Tibetan or Chinese tradition, you will already know something about this, and you may be in contact with a teacher who can guide you. If your usual practice is some form of Insight (Vipassana) Meditation, the idea of visualizing a deity figure and worshiping it may be strange or even repulsive. To some people, meditating on an image, physical or visualized, of a Buddha, reminds them of Christianity, or idolatry, or both, and because of certain negative experiences in the past, they get a bad feeling about it. But, however it may sometimes seem, no form of Buddhism is idolatry, and no Buddha is God, so no form of Buddhism is pseudo-Christianity sneaking in by the back door. One way to understand the many Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and other figures worshiped in Mahayana Buddhism is to look inside ourselves. In there, according to Carl Jung, we find archetype types who are real beings although we never meet them in the outside world. According to Mahayana, we all have the Buddha Nature inside us and when we worship a Buddha outside us we are worshiping (reverencing or honoring, if you prefer) the Buddha inside us. Ultimately, of course, these Buddhas are neither inside nor outside: they are placeless, dimensionless, and non-referential. So, if it helps, as you try the meditations on Medicine Buddha suggested by Lama Zopa, you can think of yourself as projecting an image of the healing aspect of your pure mind, and nurturing it by getting to know it. If you want to get serious about the practice, it’s a good idea to take some vacation time for a Medicine Buddha retreat.

When I approach Medicine Buddha, I do not pray only for my own health; I visualize all the other beings, human and non-human, who have cancer or another life threatening disease, and I say, in addition to other recommended prayers and mantras, “May all of us be well, may we be happy, may we be peaceful: and if we are to die, may we die calmly and joyfully, with compassion for all living beings.” As I go to sleep, I try to let go of all my friends, property, and ideas, and, of course, my body with its diseases, and open myself up to whatever might happen when I die. I’m not an authorized Dharma teacher; I’m just a (retired) professor, so if you have a formal death yoga that worked in the past, the future, or fantasyland. My cancer is my Dharma teacher, bringing me into the present moment. According to Carl Jung, the present moment is like a very fine purse” that “in the time of necessity … is opened, and then shut again—all in seeming fashion.”

Now I speak to my bladder, addressing him respectfully as Mr. Bladder, and I hope he is doing okay. I am beginning to accept my body as it is, to live more in the present. The Zen Master Katagiri Roshi said that the present moment is the only place the body can be, whereas the mind can wander in the past, the future, or fantasyland. My cancer is my Dharma teacher, bringing me into the present moment.

**Suggested Reading:** The Vimalakirti Sutra has been translated from the Chinese version by Burton Watson as The Vimalakirti Sutra (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) and from the Tibetan version by Robert Thurman as The Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti (University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976). It is helpful to read both in tandem. The discussion on sickness is in Chapter 5. In this essay, I use my own translation from the Chinese. Ultimate Healing: The Power of Compassion by Lama Zopa Rinpoche (Somerville MA: Wisdom Publications, 2001), based upon talks given at retreats for persons with life threatening diseases (mostly cancer and AIDS), is a mine of wisdom and practical advice and includes suggestions for healing meditation practices. For more information on Lama Zopa, and his late teacher Lama Yeshe, write to The Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archives, PO Box 356, Weston, MA 02493, or visit [www.LamaYeshe.com](http://www.LamaYeshe.com).
Harmony of Difference and Equality
A Meditation Retreat at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People

With Furyu Nancy Schroeder and Myo Denis Lahey
June 10-12, 2005

Tassajara is located in a remote part of the Ventana wilderness and for centuries has been visited as a place of refreshment and healing. In 1967 a monastic community was established at Tassajara by Shunryu Suzuki Roshi and the San Francisco Zen Center. During the winter months it is closed to the public so that the residents may engage in intensive Zen training. During the summer guests are welcome to come and enjoy the beauty unique to this secluded valley.

The Retreat: As members of a sexual minority, we come to practice with unique gifts and challenges. How does our difference shape our practice? Does practice help us touch that part of human experience which transcends difference? With this theme to guide our exploration, we will sit, talk, eat and walk together, while also taking time to enjoy Tassajara on our own. Retreat fee is $120 and does not include Room and Board.

Furyu Nancy Schroeder has studied at Zen Center since 1976, was ordained as a Buddhist priest in 1986 and is a dharma heir of Tenshin Reb Anderson. She is a Dharma Teacher at Green Gulch Farm.

Myo Denis Lahey was ordained in 1986, and is a dharma heir of Tenshin Reb Anderson. He is the teacher-in-residence at the Hartford Street Zen Center. His article “Queer at Heart: Dharma Practice and the ‘Gay Self’” is published in the anthology Queer Dharma (Gay Sunshine Press, 1998).

If you would like to register for this retreat please call Tassajara Reservations at 415-865-1899 after March 21. For more information and to see our brochure online, please visit our website, www.sfzc.org.
José Cabezón in Berkeley

José Ignacio Cabezón, a professor of Tibetan Buddhism and Cultural Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, will lecture twice at UC Berkeley in April. On April 7th, at 7:30 p.m., he will give a talk called "Man, Women, Both, Neither: Buddhist Discourses on Normative and Queer Gensexuality," at the Pacific School of Religion Museum in the Holbrook Building at UC Berkeley. The following afternoon, April 8, he will discuss the Sera Project, a multimedia documentation of Tibetan monastic life, at 5:00 p.m. in room 370 of Dwinelle Hall.

April Potluck

Join us for a potluck on April 10 at Lee Robbins’s house, 4433 17th Street, San Francisco. Please bring a dish to share. We’ll meet at 6:30 and have dinner at 7:00.

Directions: If you’re heading east on 17th Street (going toward the Castro), Lee’s house, a little brown cottage with a wooden trellis, is two and a half blocks past Clayton on the right. If you’re coming from the Castro, his house is four and a half blocks from the corner of Market and Castro on the left.

Parking: If you can’t find parking on 17th Street, try Temple, located next to the little market diagonally across the street from Lee’s house.

Annual GBF Hike to Chimney Rock

It’s that time of the year again for GBF’s annual wildflower hike. Come join us on a short but quite spectacular hike and picnic at Chimney Rock in Pt. Reyes Park on Saturday, April 30. Chimney Rock is famous among nature lovers for its incredible springtime displays of wildflowers. Drake’s Bay on one side and the Pacific Ocean on the other provide dramatic backgrounds. There should also be ample opportunities to view whales and elephant seals, and we might even visit the Pt. Reyes lighthouse. The hike is short (about a mile each way), but the drive up, while beautiful, isn’t; be prepared for an all day excursion. This will be a potluck picnic so please bring a dish to share with others. We will be carpooling from the GBF Center (37 Bartlett St.) at 9:00 a.m. Bring warm clothing (it gets windy up there), a blanket, and sun block. Rain cancels. For more information, call Clint Seiter at (415) 386-3088.

GBF Movie Night

Come celebrate finishing your taxes by spending a night at the movies with fellow GBFers.

At the All Sangha GBF meeting on March 20, there seemed to be a general consensus that GBF members would like more opportunities to hang out and get to know each other better. One idea that came up was having a “movie night” when GBF members would meet, view a movie together, and maybe have coffee or a snack somewhere afterwards.

We’re just playing with this idea right now. About a week before the movie night, a (most likely non-mainstream) movie will be suggested, along with a time and place to meet, and the information will be announced via the GBF Yahoo Group (http://groups.yahoo.com/group/gaybuddhistfellowship/). Or anyone interested can call Clint Seiter at (415) 386-3088 for the details.

If there’s enough response, there will be more movie nights in the future. So give it a try. Get to know your sangha members a little better with a night at the movies.
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.

April / May GBF Sunday Speakers

April 3 Open discussion

April 10 Ven. Robina Courtin
Ven. Robina Courtin was ordained as a Tibetan Buddhist nun at Kopan Monastery in 1978. She has worked full time since then for Lama Thubten Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche’s Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition, first as editorial director of Wisdom Publications and then as editor of the FPMT magazine, Mandal. She is now director of Liberation Prison Project, which supports the Buddhist practice of thousands of prisoners in the USA and Australia. (For more information on the Liberation Prison Project, see www.liberationprisonproject.org.)

April 17 Mark Marion
Mark Marion is a psychotherapist with a practice that specializes in depression, anxiety and couples counseling. His Buddhist practice is in the Vipassana tradition. He contributed to both volumes of Queer Dharma: Voices of Gay Buddhists and wrote a chapter for the book Gay and Lesbian Mental Health: A Sourcebook for Practitioners.

April 24 Furyu Nancy Schroeder
Furyu Nancy Schroeder has been with the San Francisco Zen Center since 1976, was ordained a Buddhist priest in 1986, and is a dharma heir of Tenzin Deb Anderson. She is currently tanto, or head of practice, at Green Gulch Farm. She will help facilitate a retreat at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center for LGBT people on June 10-12, 2005.

May 1 Scott Hunt
Scott Hunt has written extensively on issues of social justice and human rights. His latest book, The Future of Peace, was declared one of the best spiritual books of 2002 by Spirituality & Health Magazine. After 22 years of study, Scott was instructed to teach Tantric Buddhism in the Nyingma Lineage of Tibetan Buddhism by His Holiness Mindrolling Trichen Rinpoche. For more about Scott’s work, see www.peopleofpeace.net and scottahunt.com.

May 8 Bill Weber
Bill Weber is a senior Vipassana practitioner and a recent graduate from Spirit Rock’s Community Dharma Leader program. He teaches beginning meditation classes and daylongs. He has studied for the past ten years with Gil Fronsdal and Eugene Cash, among others, and has extensive retreat practice. He is also a documentary filmmaker and video editor whose recent work includes co-directing and editing The Cockettes and editing the HBO documentary Last Letters Home.

May 15 Howard DePorte
Howard DePorte, a former Lutheran minister and active GBF member, will speak on the impact of the dharma and his Buddhist practice during a time of crisis in his life.

May 22 Jim Wilson
Jim Wilson, the former abbot of the Chogyas Zen Center in New York, has studied in the Chogyas, Fuke, and Soto traditions of Zen. In addition to speaking at GBF on the first Sunday of each month, he leads a weekly sutra salon in Sebastopol.

May 29 Open discussion

Next Steering Committee Meeting
The next Steering Committee meeting will be May 1, 2005

The Fall Retreat Dates Set
GBF will have its annual fall retreat during the weekend of September 16-18. We will return to the beautiful Vajrapani Institute in Boulder Creek. The retreat will start Friday evening and will conclude after lunch on Sunday. Watch out for registration information in a future issue of the newsletter.

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:
415 / 974-9878

World Wide Web Site
www.gaybuddhist.org

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For address changes or to subscribe or unsubscribe to the Newsletter send email to:
mailinglist@gaybuddhist.org

GBF Newsletter
Send submissions to:
editor@gaybuddhist.org

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

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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