

# Gay Buddhist Fellowship

JUNE / JULY 2004

## Steve Peskind

*A Mind, A Heart, A Love*

The following remembrance of Steve Peskind, who died May 6, 2004, was written by his partner of 28 years, Bob Hamilton.

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.

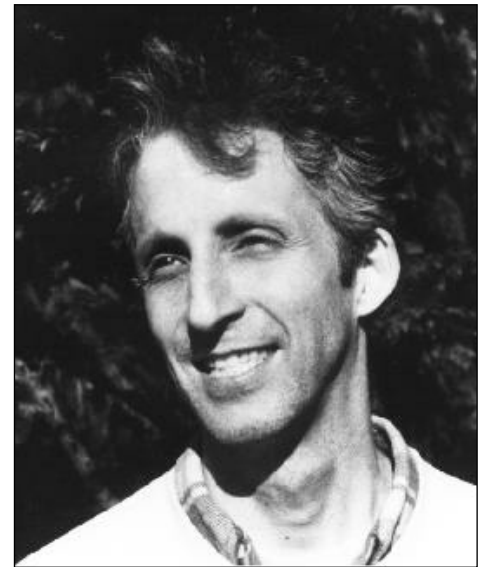
To describe even a friend of 28 years is a daunting task. I plan to give a sense of who was this Steve Peskind. Upon reflecting on his face and the way his life unfolded, one could say he tried to live the truth of his life with humor and caring. That caring was not just for himself, but for others.

As a man discovering his gayness at Stanford University while in a fraternity, he became depressed. In the early 1970's, there was nowhere to turn. Yet even when he considered ending his seemingly lonely life, he backed away from the edge. He chose life. He recognized that life is precious.

Soon after that choice, he enrolled in two classes that changed the direction of his life. The first was on Zen Buddhism. The second one was on the death and dying process as outlined by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. Buddhism would dovetail with his ever-increasing reading of the process of dying in the midst of living.

Before graduating he escaped to Hamatsu, Japan, to teach English at a nursery school. There he inadvertently learned a different brand of Japanese from the Yakuza (gangsters) who frequented the same ice cream parlor that he enjoyed. Applying his newfound wealth of words, he was almost fired for inspiring four- and five-year-olds to speak in a Japanese version of the language spoken by the Corleone family. But he kept his job. It was also the owner of the nursery school who introduced him to gardening. Mr. Higashi loved the American Southwest. Steve fell in love with cactus and succulents. This was a love of a lifetime.

Kyoto, Japan, was his home the second year. He freelanced teaching English, nourished his few cacti in a walk-up, and tried to sit zazen. Inspired by *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* by Shunryu Suzuki, he visited Eihei-ji to sit. He fiercely attacked sitting to the point where he would faint. When the Zen monks helped him to just sit, he began to sit by himself with patience. →



Steve Peskind

Japan was not a place for a man, Caucasian and gay, to find love. He returned to California, specifically to Berkeley, where the Pacific Center was his refuge to discover what it meant to live with his sexuality and to have community. He was not alone.

In 1976 while at Macy's, he spotted a man carrying Yuko Mishima's *Spring Snow*. He maneuvered a mutual friend for an introduction. And so, on Union Square, February 19, 1976, I met Steve. We were not alone.

This is not a story of me, but of Steve. Suffice to say I got him to dance at the End Up. He always had a

## **Buddhism would dovetail with Steve's ever-increasing reading of the process of dying in the midst of living.**

refuge in my heart, and a constant in his life as a brother. I am grateful.

In 1980, while practicing more at the Zen Center, he was inspired by Issan Dorsey Roshi. Issan showed him that being gay was not a hindrance to the practice of Buddhism. It could allow a more thorough awareness of our composite nature, to see all our facets. A diamond in the making, he would eventually also sit at Hartford Street.

A young man approached Steve at Macy's after work to go out for a drink. Steve did not know that this young man had been abandoned by his lover. Steve wanted to go home. The next day we found out that the young man committed suicide. I never saw Steve cry more, except when he received his own cancer diagnosis. He was hard on himself for not reaching out.

We were living in the Castro at this time. Steve became aware of how gay men and lesbians would sometimes abandon their lovers just when their lovers would become ill or disabled. He felt that, as a community, we should respond to our brothers and sisters. In consultation with Jim Geary of the Shanti Project of Berkeley, he created the Coming Home Hospice. This was before AIDS was even described as GRID (Gay Related Immunodeficiency Disease). The first people to be served by the Coming Home Hospice were a gentleman who had brain cancer and two men with a disease not yet defined by SF General Hospital. His volunteer counselors were not allowed yet to take on clients, so Steve chose to get them to the Shanti Project, a support service for the dying and their loved ones in Berkeley. After GRID was defined, Mayor Feinstein appropriated money for services for individuals with the new disease. A Shanti Project under Charlie Garfield and Jim Geary moved to San Francisco to become the model of AIDS services, and Steve served there as office manager and trainer of volunteers.

In 1983 he moved to Orange County, where he was a

health educator for AIDS services in Santa Ana. In 1985 he founded and was the director for AIDS Service Foundation of Orange County in Costa Mesa. In 1987, he founded and was the director for Laguna Shanti in Laguna Beach, California. In all these endeavors, the relief of suffering and that no one dies alone were his guiding principles.

At this time, he began to follow Tibetan Buddhism. Specifically Kalu Rimpoche became his principle teacher and inspiration. He became a monk without a monastery. His AIDS work was his field of merit and practice. He diligently took on the empowerments and lessons. Living outside the walls, immersed by this culture of distractions, and working tirelessly in the hospice field, he wore himself out.

In the early 1990's, Steve faced a couple of health challenges that he was able to use to deepen his own understanding of what it is to be human, and to be human, he always said, was to grow a heart. In 1990 he returned to me from Orange County with a panic disorder, I believe from being overwhelmed from the unexpressed grief from the loss of so many men and from his own grief over the powerlessness of that situation. The panic manifested as a swallowing disorder. When friends would want him to go out to eat, he could not do so. Yet he chose to live. Then, in 1992, when walking near our home, he was hit by a bicycle. The result was a skull fracture. It took him six months to return to a semblance of normal life while even on seizure precautions. With each step of re-attaining cognitive abilities, he found that his core being was contentment and happiness. The last layer of consciousness to return to him was his armor of protection, fear, and uncertainty. Life was precious to him.

During the 1990's he devoted more time to Buddhism. He was on the first board of GBF. None of us would be alone. He practiced more avidly Tibetan Buddhism in primarily the Kagyu and Nyingma lineages. He started, with the help of friends, the Buddhist AIDS Project with the idea of providing Buddhist resources for those with AIDS. He still pursued it as the project changed to an on-line service with AIDS updates and listings of upcoming Buddhist events. Whenever people would write or call for counseling, he would never turn them away. Being one who liked to network, he would refer them to a group in their area. Even in April 2004, the month before his death, he would counsel any that would write. No one should be alone.

This is a thumbnail sketch of the man I loved. It does not include his love of Brazilian music, the movie *Black Orpheus*, Aretha Franklin, Georgia O'Keefe, Lily Tomlin, or Jonathan Winters. However, I am having a Memorial Celebration June 13, 2004, 2pm-5pm, at the Janet Pomeroy Center (formerly Recreational Center for the Handicapped), 207 Skyline Blvd, San Francisco, CA, near the Zoo. You are invited to share your memories. ■

# Steve Peskind in His Own Words

The following is an excerpt from Steve Peskind's December 21, 2003, dharma talk at GBF.

Another thing that I want to comment on is this idea of taking pain on as not my pain but the Pain. Stephen Levine speaks to this. He tells a remarkable story of woman dying in a hospital who did not have a good life and was not what we would call spiritual person, but she opened her heart to all other beings. She practiced opening her heart to all other women with breast cancer and practiced receiving their pain, truly practicing for all women with this disease, and she was transformed. She became much bigger and much more at peace as she did that. If you're interested in learning how to do this, there is a technique in Tibetan Buddhism called taking and sending, or receiving and giving; it's called the Lojong practice. *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* by Sogyal Rinpoche and Andrew Harvey and Patrick Gaffney has a very good chapter on compassion and these practices, about how to set your attitude towards going towards this shared pain in our lives, of interbeing, rather than contracting or pushing away. . . .

It's like Lucy saying to Charlie Brown, "Good grief, Charlie Brown!" in the sense that she's exclaiming an objection, basically, but I wish everybody good grief in a different sense: grief every day. There are all the little losses – parking spaces, things that just don't go right, and sometimes big losses – but if we befriend the little griefs and the little deaths along the way, again, when it comes to time to let go big time, it helps. I know this, but I know it on a different level. Can I open up more to letting go of everything? I'm working on this one, because I get really stubborn and angry sometimes. When the

hospice workers were in our living room talking to me about hospice and what I could expect as the disease progresses, I was listening and going, 'oh, oh.' And then the thought came up, "OH! That's me they're talking about!" I wasn't sitting there helping somebody else, so to speak, to do this, as I have in the past. This is me who was going to be on the deathbed, and me having all these possible complications and me needing, me wanting, really wanting – talk about wanting happiness or having – at

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that moment happiness or having would be having the right pain medication. I'm not at that point in my practice where I can honestly say I'm not afraid of anything, that's for sure. I've got many tumors in my brain, and I wonder about that. There's a lot to wonder about: liver, brain, lungs. And I try to do body awareness meditations, just practicing trying to let go of my attachment to my own body, my own cherished organs, and that's not easy, but I do know that being present – awareness – is such an incredible gift. Worrying about it doesn't help. When the time actually comes, one can be present and can pay attention to what is happening and find a lot more space perhaps than we ever imagined. ■

## The Disciple Who Had a Crush on the Buddha

**Dear Dharma Daddy:**

**I have heard that there was a monk who was strongly attracted to the Buddha and fell in love with him. Is this true, and what happened to him?**

— Anonymous

Dear Anonymous:

Yes, it's true. The disciple Vakkali thought that the Buddha was cuter than a gym bunny and followed him around everywhere, ogling him. The Buddha allowed him to become a monk, and he attained final liberation (arhatship).

The tale is told in half a dozen places in the Pali scriptures, with many variations, but the basic story line has Vakkali coming, by one means or another, into the Buddha's presence and instantly being infatuated by his physical appearance, especially his "copper-gold skin." The Buddha was tanned, toned, and terrific! In some versions, Vakkali becomes a monk in order to be close to the Buddha. In other versions, he remains a layman and becomes a monk after he gets over his initial infatuation. In either case, it is said that he couldn't keep his eyes off the Buddha, and he neglected his duties so that he could be near him and gaze at him. After a time, the Buddha turned to Vakkali and asked him, "What do you see in this decaying flesh? One who sees me sees the Dhamma and one who sees the Dhamma sees me!" and told him to go away. Vakkali was so crushed that he decided to throw himself off a cliff. When the Buddha realized what was happening, he instantly appeared before him and said, "The eyes see Dhamma." This short teaching was all Vakkali needed to propel him to final liberation.

This story may seem trivial but it contains many important teachings. First of all, we learn that the Buddha's form was as gracious and attractive as his mind. The Buddha's teachings are not, like those of a professor, limited to what he says; he teaches in all his actions of body and mind as well as speech. Some people became disciples when they saw how he walked. The Buddha literally walked the talk. If we are looking for a teacher, it is a good idea to watch how he conducts himself in ordinary tasks. Friends of mine who have taken on the duty of attending high lamas have reported feelings of calm exhilaration as they watch the lamas eat.

Secondly, we learn that it is a mistake to stop at the form of the Buddha, looking and listening no further. This is what the Buddha meant when he called attention to the fact that his body was, like other bodies, decaying. In another place the Buddha called the body "a skin bag of bones oozing excrement from the nine openings." He didn't mean to deny that he was drop dead gorgeous; he was using skillful means to shake Vakkali free from his illusion

that a handsome body is *intrinsically* handsome. The observation that the body is a fetid mass is a medicine, an antidote (*patipakkha*, literally "opposite wing"), intended to diminish lust. But, as with any medicine, we must not overdose. If we do, lust zips right by love and turns into disgust, and then we regard the body as *intrinsically* repulsive and we need the antidote of compassion (*karuna*) or friendliness (*metta*).

There are many teachers, unfortunately, who overemphasize the disgusting aspects of the body. If they are monks, they may justify their vow of celibacy by despising the body and dishonoring sex. To take one example among many, Ajahn Buddhadasa, one of the most revered teachers in Thailand, regards sexual desire *in itself* as a defilement (Pali: *kilesa*). He admits that sex is necessary for reproduction, but he calls it "an activity that is distasteful, dirty, and tiring," and any kind of sex that is just for fun he regards as "cheating," claiming that it will result, now or in a future life, in mental disorders and physical deformities.

On other topics, I have found Ajahn Buddhadasa's teachings bold, innovative, profound, and helpful, but here, on the topic of sex, I very respectfully disagree with him. I base my objection on the story of Vakkali. When Vakkali attained liberation at the Buddha's words "The eye sees Dhamma," he broke through to the non-duality of the Buddha's sexy body and his sexy (powerful) teaching. As a gay man, I relate very strongly to Vakkali's experience. He was able to acknowledge and enjoy his sexual feelings (even though, while he was a monk, he didn't have any actual sex) at the same time that he acknowledged and enjoyed his love of the Dhamma. The Dhamma is attractive. It is called *ehipassiko*, literally "come and see-ish." When we hear it, we want more. It is "lovely at the beginning (when we first hear it), lovely in the middle, and lovely at the end." We never tire of hearing it.

The Buddha is sexy; the Buddha is fun. The Dhamma is sexy; the Dhamma is fun. Together with the Sangha, we take refuge in them equally. And, if we are not under a vow of celibacy, we can thoroughly enjoy sex as an integral part of our spiritual practice. To the question which, according to the late Steve Peskind, led to the founding of GBF, "Can we be gay and spiritual?" the story of Vakkali answers with a resounding "Yes!"

**Dear Dharma Daddy:**

**A Burmese student wrote me a letter in which he said "Buddha bless you." I thought that was unusual, but is it common?**

—Michael, Oakland, California

Dear Michael:

It's not uncommon, but it isn't exactly orthodox, since if the student was Burmese I would expect him to be a Theravadin Buddhist.

Theravadins teach that when Buddha Sakyamuni came to the end of his life he "completely passed away" into final nirvana (*parinibbana*). This does not mean, as some Western textbooks on Buddhism claim, that he was extinguished into absolute nothingness, but it also does not mean that he went to some other realm where he continued to live eternally. To us, it might seem that these are the only two choices. Religious people often claim that, after death, we live forever in heaven, while atheists say that we go out like a candle and that's that. As often happens, the Buddha tells us we are being simplistic.

Like many great teachers, the Buddha was plagued by amateur philosophers wanting him to do their thinking for him. A famous list of questions, which occurs many times in the Suttas, is called the Undecided Topics (*avyakattha-vatthuni*) because the Buddha refused to answer them one way or another. The list include the age-old puzzles about whether the world is eternal or not, the connection between the mind and the body, and—the topic of interest here—the status of an enlightened person after death. His questioners were sophisticated; they knew that some things don't have "yes" or "no" answers; they were aware that sometimes the answer is "both" or "neither." Surely, they thought, we can corner him. But they couldn't. To each logical possibility he either remained silent or, on other occasions, turned back the question with the word *Nopeti*. "Nopeti" literally means "it doesn't come up like this," that is, you think it's a question, but actually it's nonsense, and I can't answer it one way or another. Most perplexing of all, when he was accused of avoiding the question because he didn't know the answer, he would again reply with silence or "Nopeti."

When I was a child, my grandfather used to vex me by asking, "When is a mouse if it spins?" and then answer, with a smirk, "The higher it spins, the fewer." "That's silly, Grandpa!" I would say and stalk off. The Buddha's *nopeti* tells us that any question about the ultimate nature of reality which is posed as a choice between opposites, or some combination of opposites, is just as silly. Reality is what it is; you can't get outside it and put it into categories, and if you don't see it as it is, explanations won't help. You'll have to keep practicing until you gain true insight.

Once upon a time there was a great king in the northwest of the Indian Subcontinent named Milinda, and he had a favorite Buddhist monk named Nagasena with

whom he liked to debate. On one occasion he asked Ven. Nagasena if the Buddha still existed. "Yes," said Nagasena. "Then where is he?" asked the king. Nagasena replied that the Buddha had completely passed away with no remainder, so he could not be pointed out as being here or there. "How could that be?" asked the king. "Your Majesty, where does a fire go when it goes out?" "It doesn't go anywhere, Bhante Nagasena," replied the

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king. "It can't be pointed out as being here or there; it becomes undetectable." (According to the physics of the time fire didn't disappear; it "went home"; it vanished from the phenomenal universe and became placeless or a kind of abstract potentiality. Today we might say that although the fire no longer exists as fire the energy has not been destroyed.) "Just so," said Nagasena. "The Buddha has gone into nirvana and cannot be located, but he can still be found in the Dhamma, the body of his teaching, and in the Sangha, the community of his followers. In this way, he still exists."

The Burmese student who asked the Buddha to bless you may not have read this passage from *The Questions of King Milinda*, but, although he had got the letter of the Dhamma wrong, he had captured its spirit. Theravadins will sometimes say, "Go with the Dhamma," as if it were a sort of person. That's more correct. When we listen to the Dhamma, we are listening to the Buddha.

Mahayana Buddhism expanded on this, claiming that "the body of Dhamma" (Pali: *dhamma-kaya*) really meant the universal, unmanifest body of the Buddha (Sanskrit: *Dharma-kaya*), which cannot be pointed out as being here or there but is the true formless form of all the Buddhas. They can say, "The Buddha bless you," and really mean it. But that's another story. ■

**If you have a question for Dharma Daddy send it by e-mail to [tashi5@juno.com](mailto:tashi5@juno.com) or by paper mail in care of GBF.**

# GBF

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## Gift for Jim Wilson

Those GBFers who have been around for a while have some idea of what a tremendous contribution Jim Wilson has given our sangha over the years. Jim is a former Zen monk and Buddhist scholar who for several years would deliver a dharma talk to GBF the first Sunday of every month. He also was the dharma leader for the annual GBF retreat for many years as well. After sharing with us many teachings about the dharma, and offering us his own insights into the Buddhist path, Jim decided a few months ago that it was time to move on and devote his time to other pursuits. In appreciation for all that he has given GBF, the sangha decided to give him this hand-carved Tibetan meditation altar. Jim was very touched by the gift, which now occupies a place of honor in his living room in Sonoma. Thanks again, Jim, for everything, and we hope to see you back in the sangha from time to time as your schedule permits. ■



## GBF's Annual Chimney Rock Wildflower Hike

On April 24 a small band of GBFers participated in the annual Chimney Rock wildflower hike and picnic potluck. The weather was brisk and sunny, and the wildflowers were abundant everywhere: irises, Indian paintbrushes, mallows, buttercups, among others. We spotted several whales migrating north and a number of elephant seal colonies. The food and company was great, and people all seemed to have a good time. ■



# Calendar

San Francisco / Bay Area Events

## 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.

## June / July GBF Sunday Speakers

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### June 6 Tempel Smith

Tempel Smith began practicing meditation in 1989. In 1997 he ordained as a monk in Burma with Sayadaw U Pandita and Pa Auk Sayadaw. Now, back in the Bay Area, he is works on integrating these deep meditative practices into daily life and in his work with the Buddhist Peace Fellowship. Tempel has taught meditation and Buddhist psychology, is the founder of the West Coast Teen Meditation Retreat, and founder of BASE House, an intentional community dedicated to Socially Engaged Buddhism.

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### June 13 Open discussion

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### June 20 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*.

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### June 27 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.

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### July 4 Open discussion

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### July 11 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 the widely praised *Vision of Buddhism: The Space Under the Tree*.

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### July 18 Darren Main

Darren John Main is an internationally known yoga and meditation instructor and author. His books include *Yoga and the Path of the Urban Mystic*, *Spiritual Journeys along the Yellow Brick Road* and *The Findhorn Book of Meditation*. In addition to his writing, he facilitates workshops, offers yoga teacher certifications, and gives talks on yoga and modern spirituality throughout the United States and abroad. He currently lives in San Francisco. For more information about Darren's work, see his website, [www.darrenmain.com](http://www.darrenmain.com).

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### July 25 Diana Elrod

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

In order to maximize the amount of time for our Sunday dharma talks, the Steering Committee has decided to eliminate the five-ten minute break after the meditation period. Instead, we will now just stand and stretch in place and then continue the meeting. Of course, anyone who has to go to the bathroom may do so, but you are encouraged to go before the sitting.

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## Miss a Dharma Talk?

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

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## How to Reach Us

For 24-hour information on GBF activities or to leave a message:

415 / 974-9878

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World Wide Web Site

[www.gaybuddhist.org](http://www.gaybuddhist.org)

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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](http://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