



Gay Buddhist Fellowship

AUGUST / SEPTEMBER 2008 NEWSLETTER

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.

“In a Dark Time, the Eye Begins to See”

BY JOANNA MACY

Eco-philosopher and visionary Joanna Macy has developed an international following over the course of 40 years as a speaker and workshop leader on Buddhism, general systems theory, and deep ecology. A respected voice in movements for peace, justice, and ecology, she interweaves her scholarship with four decades of activism. She is author of many books including *Thinking Like a Mountain*, *World as Lover, World as Self*, and *Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect Our Lives, Our World*. She gave the following dharma talk at GBF on February 17, 2008.

Asked for a title, right off I said, though I've never given a talk with that title before, “In the Darkness, the Eye Learns to See.” I was bringing to mind a line from the poet Theodore Roethke that has often been quoted. It has been quoted by one of my teachers, Robert Jay Lifton, a psychiatrist who writes and thinks a lot about the challenges of our particular time, including the challenge to the psyche of weapons of mass destruction. I've seen this line quoted by psychologists for social responsibility and psychotherapists for also bringing to mind that “in the darkness the eye learns to see.” Then last night I went and got my volume of Roethke, an American poet of the mid-20th century, and I found I'd mis-remembered it, not very much, but I thought I'd read a couple of lines from it: “In a dark time, the eye begins to see.” So I wasn't too far off. And then some of the other lines:

I meet my shadow in the deepening shade . . .
What's madness but nobility of the soul
At odds with circumstance? . . .
I know the purity of pure despair,
My shadow pinned against a sweating wall.
That place among the rocks—is it a cave,
Or winding path? The edge is what I have.

A man goes far to find out what he is—
Death of the self in a long, tearless night,
All natural shapes blazing unnatural light.
Dark, dark my light, and darker my desire.
My soul, like some heat-maddened summer fly,

Keeps buzzing at the sill. Which I is I?
A fallen man, I climb out of my fear.
The mind enters itself, and God the mind,
And one is One, free in the tearing wind.

I am drawn to that line “In a dark time, the eye begins to see” because it brings to mind the darkness of this time we share: what’s happening to the natural world, what’s happening to humanity, what’s happening to our country, what our country is visiting on other countries. There’s so much darkness, and it has been my conviction and my experience that that is precisely what we must look at and where we find redemption and where we walk to find our—well, *freedom* seems so big a word. *Enlightenment* seems a great term. Enlightenment—it’s like the poets calling us to some endarkenment. And it has become a place where we as a people don’t want to go. We don’t want to look at the suffering, don’t want to look at the darkness. That’s why Robert Jay Lifton coined the term “psychic numbing.” We become numb, anaesthetized to our world and to our own strength, if we’re afraid of seeing what is. It takes a certain quality of courage to look into that dark. And it’s easier to shove it aside or bury it, pave it over with sermons on positive thinking, paste it over with little smiley faces. Our country, particularly American culture, seems to prize that the successful person is always brimming with optimism—a cheery word on the lips—and everything is just hunky dory. There are billion dollar industries that are devoted to keeping us in a frame of mind that everything is just fine. And we’re fine; we’re just great. For our politicians running for office, it can be like a kiss of doom on their campaign to talk about the suffering. It’s beginning to change a little bit, in case you haven’t noticed, at least with one of our candidates, daring to address the darkness of our time.

In the culture into which the Buddha was born, changelessness was prized: that’s what’s really real; what’s really real doesn’t change. And the Buddha just turned that over by saying “Everything changes,” and there is nothing outside change where you can go from it. You realize that you are movement itself. You are not a permanent abiding self or *atman* that needs to rise from, go from change to eternity, from darkness to light. You are just pure experience; you are pure movement; you are pure change. What is the self? The image he had for the self is a stream of being, a stream of consciousness. So in the meditation he taught, the mindfulness of breathing in and breathing out, the very first step is to notice that it is all changing. So self is process. It’s not a noun; it’s a verb.

Roethke the poet was an incredibly gifted heart-mind, a magician of words, an audacious weaver of perceptions and metaphors, particularly of the natural world, and he suffered from what back then was called manic depression, bipolar disease. He had agonizing periods of descent into darkness.

Each time he wondered whether he could climb out, and he had to be hospitalized some of those times. Often, in the manic phase, his gifts would accelerate and he could fly with the power of his poetry and leave such incredible poems. You can see it, but at the same time he’d be afraid: “Oh, boy, is this a prelude to me falling off the edge again?” And in a poem he may say, “I walk on the edge; I’m right on that edge.”

I find that that line is equally true for us as a culture: “In a dark time, the eye begins to see.” And that’s worth saying, because we, as a culture, seem to be afraid of the dark. We keep the lights on all the time. You might have seen those maps of Earth seen from space, from satellites, and the blazing lights around the cities across the country, across North America, that band which we are. And as we prepare for—if we’re preparing for—what will happen to us—our culture—with big oil and oil scarcity—oh, we can’t go into the dark! We have to keep the lights blazing! So in the darkness, what a good thing to learn to do, to see what the eye can see in the dark. This fear of the dark comes from the polarization or a hierarchy that has been endemic in western culture and also in the culture back in 6th Century India into which the Buddha was born, where light and dark are polarized. You go from the dark to the light, and that’s where you want to be; you want to get away from the dark and get into the light. And it’s a polarization from the many into the one, from multiplicity into unity, from imperfection to perfection, from brokenness into wholeness. These are set in opposition to each other. From change and turbulence to stillness and eternity, so that movement itself began to be seen as an illusion.

So now I’m going to switch. I have a three part talk: first there’s Roethke, then there’s the Buddha, and then there’s another poet, Rilke. I told this to my husband this morning. I said, “I have a three part talk,” and he couldn’t hear the dif-

ference between the two poets’ names. They’re favorites of mine, but I’d never before noticed that Roethke and Rilke sound so much alike! At any rate, now the middle part about the Buddha: He just blasted apart that hierarchy, that ontological hierarchy, that the spiritual path is to ascend from

what's broken to what is pure, from impurity to purity, from darkness to light, from death to life, from flesh to spirit, from change to stasis or changelessness. In the culture into which he was born, the Brahmanic-Hindu culture, changelessness was prized: that's what's really real; what's really real doesn't change. And the Buddha just turned that over, and with it the whole ontological hierarchy, by saying "Everything changes," and there is nothing outside change where you can go from it. You realize that you are movement itself. You are not a permanent abiding self or *atman* that needs to rise from, go from

You face the *dukkha*, and you see what is causing it, that it's contingent upon the arising of fear, hatred and delusion. It's not a life sentence. It's not a permanent condition. It itself is always changing. If you bother to look at it, it gets really interesting, so use a little curiosity with the suffering. It doesn't have to be that we are doomed forever to some inexorable fate.

change to eternity, from darkness to light. You are just pure experience; you are pure movement; you are pure change. What is the self? The image he had for the self is a stream of being, a stream of consciousness. So in the meditation he taught, the mindfulness of breathing in and breathing out, the very first step is to notice that it is all changing. So self is process. It's not a noun; it's a verb.

So then, this darkness, see how it is, what you learn to see in the dark when you look at the four noble truths. First of all, that first noble truth—boy, was this a stumbling block to me! To begin a faith tradition on that basis, *dukkha*, suffering? No thanks! And that's the darkness of the suffering, the dissatisfaction, the not-knowing, the restlessness, the yearning, the not-rightness, the brokenness—start with that because there the eye begins to see: things aren't just the way you want. Things aren't 100% perfect.

I've worked and learned a lot from a Buddhist-inspired community development movement in Sri Lanka, called *Sarvodaya*, based on Gandhian teachings with a Buddhist cast to it. When they go into a village, they begin with the first noble truth. The organizers go into a village, and they don't bring a program. They don't say, "This is what you should do; we're bringing you a solution." They don't start with the solutions. They start with having a village-wide "family gathering" where people talk about what's not working in their lives: the divisiveness and the illiteracy and the ill health and the joblessness in their village and the pollution in the wells. And they are encouraged to talk about it. They begin not with, "We're going to fix it up right," and "I know" and "I have the solution." Instead, they say, "Go and find what your authority is, and your authority, or what you're an expert on, is this village and what is working or not working in it." In a dark time, the eye learns to see.

And so then here comes the second noble truth. You face the *dukkha*, and you see what is causing it, that it's contingent upon the arising of fear, hatred and delusion. It's not a life

sentence. It's not a permanent condition. It itself is always changing. If you bother to look at it, it gets really interesting, so use a little curiosity with the suffering. It doesn't have to be that we are doomed forever to some inexorable fate, for example, that our constitution has been shredded by the current administration. We dare to look at it. There's tremendous denial in our culture around what's happened to our civil liberties. Can't face that. So that second noble truth invites us to see what is the cause of the arising of the *dukkha*, how it works. What are those dynamics? And then the third noble

truth is that the *dukkha* can cease. *Dukkha nirodha*. You can move, and that's the declaration of intention and freedom to move into a life in your full capacity.

And then, of course, the fourth noble truth is the ways to behave so you can stay there in that freedom—with the eightfold path. So I want to conclude with the other poet in my other bookend to these reflections about darkness. And that is the early 20th Century German poet Rainer Maria Rilke. He had been very influenced by Nietzsche. You see, they had the same mistress, and this one woman that Nietzsche deeply loved became Rilke's kind of teacher/lover for a very important period in his young life. And he learned a lot about Nietzsche, including the declaration of Nietzsche that God is dead. Boy, Nietzsche was one who was able to look into the dark, and so that was freedom for Rilke—to honor our capacity to be in the dark. It didn't make him bitter. He said, "Oh, that doesn't mean that there's no God at all. That doesn't mean that there's nothing sacred. It's just the Big Daddy god that's dead. That omnipotent old geezer on the throne up there in heaven, so transcendent, becomes irrelevant. *That's* what's dead." But what we can do is discover the sacred somewhere else, right here in our experience and even in the dark.

His early poems resound with this wonderful word *dunkel*. *Dunkelheit* means darkness. "*Du Dunkelheit, aus der ich stamme.*" "You, darkness, of whom I am born."

You, darkness, of whom I am born—
I love you more than the flame
that limits the world
to the circle it illumines
and excludes all the rest.

but the dark embraces everything:
shapes and shadows, creatures and me,
people, nations—just as they are.

It lets me imagine
a great presence stirring beside me.

I believe in the night

And there's another. These are from a collection that I translated, says I, modestly. Not modestly, with pride! But listen to this. This is a book of very short poems to the sacred and to this god that comes out of the dark. This god from whom he says:

I have many brothers [he's speaking in the persona of a monk]

I have many brothers in the South
who move, handsome in their vestments,
through cloister gardens.

...
and I dream often of their Titians,
where God becomes an ardent flame

But when I lean over the chasm of myself—
it seems
my God is dark
and like a web: a hundred roots
silently drinking.

This is the ferment I grow out of.

Isn't that great? As you can see, he uses these organic, natural metaphors. Midway, this god he is talking to becomes the earth itself, and he says this:

As a deep ecologist, one deeply informed and grateful for the new cosmologies, I see that we've been on this journey for a very long time. Every atom and every molecule in every cell of our body goes back to the first splitting and spinning of the stars and galaxies. We've been on this path a long time. This form that we inhabit right now in this lifetime and even of this human species is very recent. The life that has brought you forth, the song that sings through you is an old one, lost in the beginnings of time-space, and will continue after your death in this form.

Du dunkelnder Grund

Dear darkening ground,
you've endured so patiently the walls we've built,
perhaps you'll give the cities one more hour

and grant the churches and cloisters two.
And those that labor—maybe you'll let their work
grip them another five hours, or seven,

before you become forest again, and water, and widening
wilderness

in that hour of inconceivable terror
when you take back your name
from all things.

Boy, he was looking in the dark! And many of us are looking at and seeing that kind of darkness now. Then he says,

Just give me a little more time
I only need a little more time because I
am going to love the things as no-one
has thought to love them
Until they're real, and ripe and worthy
of you

So freed from separating light from dark, befriending the dark, honoring the dark, he finds his heart open and capable of loving everything: what's wounded, what's broken, what's trashed, that too, to love it all, the clearcuts as well as the beautiful forest, as if you know in your heart that that's the way the healing must come.

And then I want to close with Rilke's last poem in the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, because in the dark time that we are in as a nation, it's been a great solace to me. This second volume of translations is called "In Praise of Mortality," and this is the last of the *Sonnets to Orpheus*.

My co-translator and I were translating this during the time when we were invading Iraq and the disastrous development of what we brought upon that country and upon ourselves. I was feeling my spirits fail me again and again. You may not agree with my political views, so forgive me for bringing it in. It's only to explain that I was feeling great darkness to view

what as a nation we were doing with our military. And this poem helped me a great deal.

Quiet friend who has come so far,
feel how your breathing makes more space around you.
Let this darkness be a bell tower
and you the bell. As you ring,

what batters you becomes your strength.
Move back and forth into the change.
What is it like, such intensity of pain?
If the drink is bitter, turn yourself to wine.

In this uncontainable night,
be the mystery at the crossroads of your senses,
the meaning discovered there.

And if the world has ceased to hear you,
say to the silent earth: I flow.
To the rushing water, speak: I am.

If you'll permit me, I'd like to read sentences from that again. "Quiet friend who has come so far." As a deep ecol-

Allow "don't know" mind. It's one of the things I so love about Japanese and Korean Zen, this phrase they bring forward: "the don't know mind," being free of the security of easy answers, or winning arguments, or having more information than the next guy, to stand openly with uncertainty, the darkness of uncertainty. That gives a lot of space for breathing. It's really important when you know we're in this darkness for the long haul. What's happening to our civilization and the birthings that it may allow into new forms—it's going to be quite a trip. To just be with it with an open mind, that's what adventure requires.

ogist, one deeply informed and grateful for the new cosmologies, I see that we've been on this journey for a very long time. Every atom and every molecule in every cell of our body goes back to the first splitting and spinning of the stars and galaxies. We've been on this path a long time. This form that we inhabit right now in this lifetime and even of this human species is very recent. The life that has brought you forth, the song that sings through you is an old one, lost in the beginnings of time-space, and will continue after your death in this form.

So he says, "Quiet friend who has come so far / feel how this breathing makes more space around you." So you notice then in your practice, we've been given this wonderful dharma practice of being able to feel the spaciousness and not that old solidity of the anxious self, let it loosen a little bit as we simply attend to the moment by moment unfolding of our experience. And it's really powerful for me because the basic practice for me is *anapanasati*, mindfulness of breathing in and breathing out.

And then my favorite lines: "Let this darkness be a bell tower / and you the bell."

Can't say anything to that. That says it all. Ring out! Ring out your knowledge of the dark! Let the dark speak!

"As you ring what batters you becomes your strength." Move back and forth into the change. And then this wonderful line of this curiosity, the kind of curiosity the dharma practice breeds, particularly vipassana. What is it like, this intensity of pain? Allow yourself to get really interested and curious about it. Oh, what is this? Whether it's a pain in your knee or a grief of loss or a terror of what might befall or has befallen, just get curious

about that. Permeate it. Direct that wonderful beam of attention. So much of our pain has been deprived of attention, and you give it that attention, pure and strong, and you know, you can experience how it turns into tenderness, into an acceptance so strong that it's like love. So "if the drink is bitter, turn yourself to wine."

"In this uncontainable night, / be the mystery at the crossroads of your senses." So like those organizers I described in Sri Lanka, don't think you have to face everything with a solution, an instant remedy. Allow

"don't know" mind. It's one of the things I so love about Japanese and Korean Zen, this phrase they bring forward: "the don't know mind," being free of the security of easy answers, or winning arguments, or having more information than the next guy, to stand openly with uncertainty, the darkness of uncertainty. That gives a lot of space for breathing. It's really important when you know we're in this darkness for the long haul. What's happening to our civilization and the birthings that it may allow into new forms—it's going to be quite a trip. To just be with it with an open mind, that's what adventure requires. "Be the mystery at the crossroads of your senses, / the meaning discovered there. / And if the world has ceased to hear you, / say to the silent earth: I flow. / To the rushing water, speak: I am." Because when you let go of the easy answers, when you let go of being the clever one who has a remedy or a solution or a fix-it, you drop that fix-it mentality, and then you discover that your true nature is so much bigger than that, that it is inseparable from the living earth itself. So what you're allowing to happen, the poet suggests, is letting Earth live through you. A wider identity, a sense of participation in life, in our time with your brothers and sisters far bigger than the separate ego with all its projects and complaints. Yeah, we live with that, but our hold on reality is so much bigger than that. That's the promise of the third noble truth, too. So with that I thank you for your attention. ■

GBF

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Come Join Us for the Annual GBF Picnic in Tilden Park on Saturday, August 9

Now's your chance to enjoy what's left of this summer at the annual potluck picnic in Tilden Park, located in the Berkeley hills. The picnic will again be at the Lake-view Picnic Site, this August 9. Join us in a relaxing day of eating, hiking and general socializing in a beautiful natural setting. Please bring a dish or beverage to share with others; we will probably begin eating between noon and one o'clock. If you have any questions, you can call Clint at (415) 271-2780.

DIRECTIONS:

To reach Tilden Park from the south or east, take Highway 24 to Fish Ranch Road. Drive north to Grizzly Peak Blvd., where you will turn right. Pass by Lomas Contados Road, then turn right again on South Park Drive where you'll enter the south end of the park. Follow this to a "tee" intersection, adjacent to the Botanical Garden, where you'll bear right again. Follow the contour to the Lake View Picnic Area, which is located where the road takes a wide swing to the right.

To reach Tilden Park from the north or west, locate the University of California campus in Berkeley. Get on Oxford Street, which runs along the Bay side of the campus. Oxford runs into Spruce Street, which will lead you up into the hills. After a bend to the right, you'll come to a complex intersection where several roads come together. Take the one in the middle, Wildcat Canyon Road, and follow it along the contour in a southeasterly direction to the "tee" mentioned above, near the Botanical Garden. Follow the road around the bend to the left and look for the Lake View Picnic Area on your left where the road takes a wide swing to the right.

Note to Prisoners

The San Francisco Zen Center is mailing out copies of *Queer Dharma, Vol. 2*, upon request. The books were donated by publisher Winston Leyland. *Queer Dharma, Vol. 2*, is a collection of essays by gay male Buddhists on different Buddhist themes. Some of the essays were written by members of the GBF Sangha. If you wish to receive a copy of the book, send us a letter requesting the book. Allow 1 -2 months for the book to arrive from the SF Zen Center.

—With loving support, the GBF Prison Outreach Project.

How to Reach Us

www.gaybuddhist.org

For general questions about GBF write to:

inquiry@gaybuddhist.org

To contact Program Committee with suggestions for speakers and comments:

www.gaybuddhist.org/programs

Mail correspondence:

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Address changes or to subscribe or unsubscribe to the newsletter:

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

Calendar

Sunday Sittings

10:30 am to 12 noon

Every Sunday at 10:30am we meditate together for 30 minutes, followed by a talk or discussion till 12 noon. Everyone is then welcome to stay and socialize over refreshments till approximately 12:30, after which those who are interested usually go somewhere local for lunch. Our sittings are held at the San Francisco Buddhist Center, 37 Bartlett Street. (Look for the red door near 21st St between Mission and Valencia Streets).

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. The Center is handicapped accessible.

Sunday Speakers

August 3 Bill Weber

Bill Weber is a senior Vipassana practitioner and a 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 Eugene Cash, among others, and has fifteen years of extensive retreat practice. He is also a documentary filmmaker and video editor.

August 10 Doug von Koss

Doug is the Artistic Director of THE NOAH PROJECT, a men's ritual performance group in the San Francisco Bay Area. Through a magical blend of chant, movement, poetry and ritual, Doug weaves a spell that encompasses the ecstatic, the sacred and the wise fool. He draws from many of the world's religious traditions—Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, Zoroastrian, Christian, Jewish and Sufi—to create a glorious mosaic that is, above all else, a celebration of the human spirit.

August 1 Frank Ostaseski

In 1987, Frank Ostaseski co-founded the Zen Hospice Project, the first Buddhist hospice in America. In 2004, he created the Metta Institute to develop innovative educational trainings that reaffirm the spiritual dimensions of dying. His groundbreaking work has been widely featured in the media, including the Bill Moyers television series *On Our Own Terms*, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and in numerous print publications. In 2001, Frank was honored by the Dalai Lama for his years of compassionate service to the dying and their families. In 2003, he was named one of America's 50 most innovative people by the AARP magazine. He is a longtime Buddhist teacher and a student of A. H. Almaas. Frank leads programs internationally.

August 24 Jeffrey Schneider

Jeffrey Schneider is a Zen priest and has practiced at the San Francisco Zen Center since 1978. He started the Meditation and Recovery Group at Zen Center and leads meditation retreats at many different centers.

August 31 Open Discussion

September 7 Ven. Amy Miller

Ven. Amy Miller came to Tibetan Buddhism in 1987. She has traveled on retreats in India, Nepal and the United States and acted as Tibet pilgrimage leader for the Institute of Noetic Science in 1987 and 2001. In 1990, Ven. Amy co-founded Tse Chen Ling Buddhist Center in San Francisco, California. She completed a solitary, seven-month retreat at the Vajrapani Institute where she was Director from 1995-2004.

Ven. Amy was ordained as a Buddhist nun in June 2000 by Tibetan master Ven. Choden Rinpoche and has taught extensively since 1992. During most of 2005 and part of 2006, she organized and accompanied international teachings for the Tibetan Buddhist master, Ven. Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche. Her teaching style emphasizes a practical approach to integrating Buddhist philosophy into everyday life and helps people connect with meditation and mindfulness to gain a refreshing perspective on normally stressful living.

September 14 Joe Weston

Joe Weston is an experienced workshop facilitator, life coach, and body worker. Born and educated in New York, Joe lived in Amsterdam for 17 years, coming in contact with people from various cultures, and working with companies and individuals around the world. He now lives in California and is committed to helping others embody spirituality. Joe brings a wealth of insight to his work based on many teachings, including Tai Chi Chuan, Tibetan Buddhism and other spiritual traditions—plus his experience in theater and various organizational trainings. As initiator of the Heartwalker Peace Project, Joe connects others who share similar views on peace and violence. He also volunteers for the Liberation Prison Project, teaching Buddhism to inmates, and presently teaches meditation at the Tse Chen Ling Center in San Francisco. For more info, see www.joeweston.com.

September 21 Dave Richo

David Richo, Ph.D., M.F.T., is a psychotherapist, teacher, workshop leader, and writer who works in Santa Barbara and San Francisco California. He combines Jungian, transpersonal, and mythic perspectives in his work.

September 28 Open Discussion

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

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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