



Gay Buddhist Fellowship

JUNE / JULY 2010 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.

Death, the Third Heavenly Messenger

BY GARY OST

Before I begin my talk this morning, I want to acknowledge that I have some mixed feelings about speaking to you. I am feeling a little surprised, a little reticent, but also happy with the honor of being asked to offer my first dharma talk in the presence of my sangha brothers.

I have only been attending GBF since the fall of 2008, and I only started following the Buddha's dharma at that time. So I feel pretty green, new, to the practice of Vipassana meditation and every other aspect of Buddhist practice, really. Although I may be young enough in my practice still to reflect some of the insights of *Beginner's Mind*, about which Shunryu Suzuki speaks in his book *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, where the beginner's mind is "just [being] present to explore and observe and see 'things as-they-are,'" I may now be too long into it to be a beginner, while not into it long enough to be wise.

On the other hand, it is my fortune, because of having been able to retire early, to be able to meditate at least once a day, often twice, sometimes, "when I really need it," three times. In addition, I have been in the midst of some pretty big changes in my life during this time. This has created an environment in which I have truly dedicated myself to becoming as awake as possible.

The bottom line is I feel honored to have been asked by Jerry Jones to speak, and I'll do the best I can. I hope what I have to say will help us all a little.

Jerry asked me to talk about death. It was because he knew I retired as the parish priest of the Episcopal church in Rossmore, the "little" retirement community in Walnut Creek of about 9,000 people. He probably thought my spending 25 years with people whose average age when I started there was 73, but by the time I retired in 2007 had gone to 77, would make me an expert in dealing with death, other people's as well as my own. Well, maybe yes and maybe no. In accepting this assignment and thinking about it over the last several months, I have made some important discoveries about myself and my own relationship to death, which I will share shortly.

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But first I want to share some things I have learned that the Buddha said about death.

The awareness of death actually played an important role in the Buddha's waking up. A few Sundays ago our dharma teacher, Pamela Weiss, reminded us it is said that three experiences shook the young Prince Siddhartha awake: seeing a sick person, seeing an aging person and seeing a dead person. It is likewise said that Siddhartha's father yearned to cushion his son from the harsh realities of life, perhaps in part because at the boy's birth the seer had said that he would grow up to be either a great king or a great spiritual teacher, and his father earnestly hoped his son would become the great king, his successor. Siddhartha's father was motivated to protect him from the spiritual realities of life so much that he effectively imprisoned the young man in a Garden of Sensual Delights so over the top that he never even saw sickness, aging or death. In fact, the story is that his father dispatched gardeners every night to trim all the plants, cutting off all old blossoms and any imperfections!

Now, before you think that's just a cute story and none of us would ever be so clever about denial, I must ask if you can identify with an experience I recently had. In the midst of meditating on my cushion one day, I noticed some brown buds on the bouquet I had on my altar. I noticed that I was seriously tempted to interrupt my meditation in order to pick them off. Then I noticed something deeper. Not only do I always attempt to remove the imperfections in the objects I surround my life with, I always do so out of the motivation to look good in the eyes of others, even to get them to see me in a better way than I see myself, ultimately hoping they will tell me I'm OK. Some-

a part of me would rather hold onto the delusion that I am alone, separate, a special sufferer, even, than accept how life really is, with 10,000 blessings and 10,000 sorrows, the glass always half-full as well as half-empty, characterized not only by the fact that everything is changing and must come to an end, but also by the fact that at any moment something beautiful and surprising may arise.

Fortunately, in this little encounter with my mind, I had the grace to smile and show some compassion on myself. "So this is what I do," I said. And just to experience it a different way, I chose to let go for a short while of my obsessive-compulsive desire to be perfect, even at the price of isolation. When I could see how much I am like everybody else, I could not only drop a bit of my delusion, I could also feel less separate and alone. Then I said, "Thinking. Thinking," and continued my meditation.

When Siddhartha ventured beyond the safety of his false world, the scales began to fall from his eyes as first he saw a sick person, then he saw an aging person and finally he saw a corpse being carried out of the city. So significant was Siddhartha's confrontation with these three unsightly scenes that later the Buddha would refer to them as his Three Messengers. That catches my attention, because in my tradition, these would be called, "the Three Angels," "angel" being Greek for "messenger." Sickness, Aging and Death called Siddhartha like Angels to a pursuit of enlightenment.

However, the story makes an important distinction at this point. There was a Fourth Messenger. Siddhartha then saw an ascetic, from which the seed was planted in his mind to go out

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where in the course of the last year and a half, I heard that the Buddha considered the belief that we are separate and alone in life to be the central delusion behind suffering. And I notice that

and seek his own enlightenment. This is important, because the motivation behind the discovery of the dharma was not just fleeing from the suffering in life represented by the First Three

Messengers, but seeking relief from that suffering. The Buddha would go on always to say, “I teach two things. Suffering. And the end of suffering.”

Although the awareness of death played an important role in the Buddha’s waking up and likewise it plays an important role in our own waking up, we begin to see that the Buddha did not really give death too much importance, because for the Buddha

And here’s what I notice. My mind actually used the situation in my retirement-community parish as the opportunity to avoid really looking at my own death. The first thing I notice is the role of delusion in my thinking. You see, I managed to arrive as the priest of this parish of old people as a thirty-five year old. That made me the age of their grandchildren. Even though I aged by 25 years by the time I retired, many of my parishioners

The Buddha considered the belief that we are separate and alone in life to be the central delusion behind suffering. And I notice that a part of me would rather hold onto the delusion that I am alone, separate, a special sufferer, even, than accept how life really is, with 10,000 blessings and 10,000 sorrows, the glass always half-full as well as half-empty, characterized not only by the fact that everything is changing and must come to an end, but also by the fact that at any moment something beautiful and surprising may arise.

death was not the cause of suffering. Desiring for things to be different from the way they really are is the cause of suffering. Death is natural. Trying to ignore death (delusion) or retreating in fear to any distractions from the reality of death (aversion) or glamorizing death in any way (which is really attachment) including too much speculation on the afterlife, even speculation on reincarnation (both of which can be called forms of attachment to death) are the causes of suffering in the matter of death. The Buddha actually made some comments about this in the context of his teaching on what he called the Four Imponderables. He said, “These four imponderables are not to be speculated about. Whoever speculates about them would go mad and experience vexation. Which four?”

1. The Buddha-range of the Buddhas (i.e., the range of powers a Buddha develops as a result of becoming a Buddha);
2. The *jhana*-range of one absorbed in *jhana* (i.e., the range of powers that one may obtain while absorbed in *jhana*, the meditative state of profound stillness and concentration, combined with liberating cognition);
3. The results of karma (as in, what happens after life);
4. Speculation about the first moment, purpose, etc., of the cosmos.”

So no attachment to speculation on the afterlife.

Jerry’s invitation to reflect on my proximity to death in my parish has allowed me to see the role of attachment, aversion and delusion, all three, in my own relationship to death.

were then in their late 80’s or early 90’s, which meant I was still young enough to be at most the age of their children. Although I won their respect, I was still always treated as the young man. And I bought into the illusion. So, although I ministered to more and more dying people and performed more and more funerals—one year we had 10, which for a congregation of 100 was literally a “decimation”—I could continue to think of death as something that happened to other people. I became proficient in ministering to the dying, without my really having to look at my own mortality.

But I was able to avoid looking closely at death by another avenue of escape, attachment. And this one is causing me a bit of work right now, for it comes right out of the beliefs of my church, about which I must now question and seek the honest truth for myself. For Christianity has a particular attachment to the Doctrine of the Resurrection, and although I have prided myself on being a member of a relatively progressive church, one that tends to be just as concerned about creating the Kingdom of God on earth as it is about awaiting the Kingdom of God in heaven, still there is something of the nature of life-surrounded-by-cotton-balls in believing that what happens to this body is less important than what happens to the soul after death. Through all those funerals, I preached comforting words that minimized the pain of death to the survivors, encouraging them not to think of their own death as an eternal death, which in the end even had the effect of glamorizing death as the gate-

way to Eternal Life. This often actually encouraged attachment to a wish about life everlasting. And that attachment could, and often did, work to make people less aware of how death, as painful as it is, is marked by more suffering when we yearn for it to be different from the way it is. Some Christians are so concerned about getting out of here and getting to the next place that I'm afraid they aren't alert to either the joys or the responsibilities of being alive now. This does not have to mean that

his transition, just as I would with any parishioner, and kept at bay the pain of my own loss. For the first month after he died, I even felt some relief. "Mission accomplished," I thought. "He's no longer in pain. I was a good partner right to the end." But one day I came home to the emptiness and faced it for the first time: "Wait. He's never coming back! He's really dead!" Ultimately, as a part of my grief work I did come out in my parish and even became known for being one of the first gay priests

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faith in God is escapist or wishful thinking, because "faith" can be defined as "trust," rather than intellectual belief—like "faith or trust in the interdependence of our relations," both trust in human relations and possibly also trust in a higher power or purpose or ultimate cause or mystery or some other explanation of how things came to be. (I know; cosmogony, or the contemplation of how things came to be, is one of the Four Imponderables. But some of us can't help ourselves!)

So, I avoided looking at my own death by delusion and by attachment. Was I also averse? Well, I didn't think so, until I realized late in the process of thinking about this dharma talk—like, yesterday morning—that I wasn't planning on mentioning the most personal encounter with death I've had in my life, which actually occurred while I was the priest of this parish with all the death going on around me that I wasn't letting touch me. And I never let anybody in my parish see my pain around my own experience of loss. It was the death of my first partner in the early days of the AIDS epidemic. Ken lived 18 months after his first hospitalization with pneumocystis, and because he was not out of the closet as a doctor and I was not out of the closet yet as a priest, I ministered to him all of that time without telling my parishioners. I kept up a good front and helped Ken with

who came out and stayed, working through the difficulties. To their credit and mine, I stayed 19 more years, retiring with a big party at the end. Do I have problems with aversion to death? Gee, I think so.

But I had a dream a little over a year ago, about four months into my meditation practice, which I now think was another chance to welcome the Third Messenger. It was also, I think not co-incidentally, one month after my last partner Bob and I decided to end our relationship of 11 years, which was going to mean the dissolution of both a domestic partnership and one of the 18,000 gay marriages allowed during "the window of opportunity." And it was by my initiative. I was feeling ashamed and hurt. So I had this dream:

I was standing at the open door of a small airplane, getting ready to do my first solo sky-dive. (I have already done the easy one, a tandem jump, where I was strapped up against the butt of the cute Drop Zone manager and all I had to do was hang on! Sigh. There goes my life-long problem with yearning.) In my dream, it was my turn to jump, and there were people lined up behind me waiting their turn. You only have so much time, because everybody needs to get out about the same time to aim for the same

general landing area. But at the last moment I said, "Wait! I don't know who packed my chute!" Which is Safety Rule No. 1 in sky-diving: Know who packed your chute. Either you pack it yourself or you know and trust the person who did it for you. I didn't pack it, and I didn't know who did. I have never had a near-death experience. But this dream came very close. In a flash I saw how I truly feel about my life and my death. Life is wonderful and I would prefer it. But death is a part of life, and I was either just about to experience it or experience it later. I was ready to die if that was what was up for me, without complaint and without regret. But I was ready to live, if the chute deployed properly. The glass was half-empty and half-full. My life had 10,000 blessings and 10,000 sorrows. I was participating in the death of my marriage, but I was also participating in the creation of something new. I accepted the whole thing. Perhaps the most profound realization I had was that I was not afraid. I jumped. And that's when I woke up, before knowing how it was going to end. But I think I got the message.

I think I have now entered a time of beginning to re-construct the way I am in the world. If you look at your own lives, I think that you, too, will see how events and people have acted as messengers to help you to wake up, including the Third Messenger.

But remember, for the Buddha, death was only one of the Four Messengers that helped him wake up. It is no more important, nor any less important, than any other messenger that would help wake us up. The point is to wake up. Being honestly curious about our own relationship to death is therefore not only the courageous course of action, but, more important, it is the skillful course of action. I love how the Buddha's dharma puts things in their proper place, don't you?

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Death is included in the First Noble Truth as one of the pains of life that we must all experience. But the Second Noble Truth also teaches us that none of the three Heavenly Messengers, Sickness, Aging or Death, is the cause of suffering. Desiring for things to be other than the way they are is the cause of suffering. The Buddha neither fixated on death in the manner of attachment nor feared death in the manner of aversion. And he gave up the delusion that death does not exist or hurt. He was therefore ready to perceive the invitation of the Fourth Heavenly Messenger, the ascetic, to pursue insight meditation with the intention of fully waking up and becoming the Enlightened One.

We can be relieved from a good deal of the suffering we often experience around the idea of death by following the Buddha's example of entering into an honest investigation of how we receive the messenger of death.

I recommend inviting yourself to ask three questions:

First, how can I show compassion toward myself in looking at the ways in which I have been deluded in my relationship to my own death?

Second, how can I show compassion toward myself in looking at the ways in which I have been attached to certain beliefs about my own death?

And third, how can I show compassion toward myself in look-

ing at the ways in which I have had aversion to thinking about my own death?

If we can compassionately engage in such open-hearted investigation, then we can reduce our suffering about death, by neither fixating on death in the manner of attachment, nor fearing death in the manner of aversion, nor deluding ourselves into thinking that death does not matter. It matters because our awareness of it helps us wake up and become fully enlightened.

I hope these thoughts are of some use. ■

GBF

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GBF Annual Summer Picnic—July 10

Come help GBF celebrate the summer with an outdoor barbecue and picnic on July 10 at picnic spaces 15 and 16 in Speedway Meadows in Golden Gate Park. The picnic will start at 11:00 and go on through the day. Please bring food or beverages to share. There will be a barbecue grill available, so GBFers can cook food at the site as well. Speedway Meadows starts at John F. Kennedy Drive, by the Portals of the Past, just beyond the DeYoung Museum. Part of the park (including JFK Drive) will be closed to automobiles, so be prepared to walk a bit. For further information, call Clint Seiter at 415-271-2780 or email him at clintonseiter@gmail.com.

Lazy Man's Nature Hike on Mount Tamalpais—July 31

Join us for a leisurely hike July 31, down the Steep Ravine Trail on Mount Tam, where you will experience both shady redwood groves, cataracts (little ones) and sweeping views of the bay. The trail (about four miles) is all downhill and ends in Stinson Beach, where we will have lunch at the Sand Dollar Café. We will arrange to drive back to the parking lot, avoiding all those troublesome upward climbs. Interested parties will meet at 9:30 a.m. at the Bartlett St. GBF center and carpool to the Pan Toll station on Mt. Tam. For further information, call Clint Seiter at 415-271-2780 or email him at clintonseiter@gmail.com.

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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

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

June 6th Bhavani Kludt and Ivan Corado

Topic: Restorative Justice and the Dharma

Bhavani Kludt began active spiritual practice in the yoga tradition in 1990 and became a yoga teacher in 1996. She started to include Vipassana practice in 1998 and began teaching yoga/meditation in the SF County jails in 1999. Her "home" sangha is SF Insight, where she serves on the Steering Committee, and her primary teacher is Eugene Cash.

Ivan M. Corado is a facilitator in the Resolve to Stop the Violence Project (RSVP) in the San Francisco County Jail. RSVP is designed to support men to stop their violence to themselves and others. Ivan was introduced to yoga as a participant in the RSVP program in 2008 and has continued his own personal practice since then. He keeps a regular yoga practice as part of his work in the Restorative Justice Field and his own personal recovery from alcohol addiction.

June 13th Open Discussion

June 20th Shantanu Phukan

Shantanu is a new member of GBF, having joined the sangha just last summer. He has been a practitioner of Hatha Yoga since he was ten and growing up in Calcutta, India. After immigrating to Los Angeles in 1976, he has meditated, intermittently, through college and then graduate school at the University of Chicago. Though not a card-holding member of any religion, Shantanu holds both Hinduisim and Islam close to his heart. For his doctoral work, Shantanu studied comparative literature, specifically the literary interactions between Hindus and Muslims in India. He has found much pleasure in translating Rumi, Faiz, Iqbal and other Persian and Indian poets into English. Other activities that have been sources of joy for Shantanu are feeding his friends with new, but not elaborate, recipes; landscaping his rock-

garden; and, finally, discovering new species of birds both in India and far-flung corners of the United States. Shantanu teaches comparative literature at San Jose State University, and will talk about the connection between spiritual experience and the translation of lyric poetry.

June 27th Heather Sundberg

Heather Sundberg began teaching meditation in 1999, primarily to youth and families. A graduate of the Spirit Rock Community Dharma Leaders program, she is currently in teacher training under the guidance of Jack Kornfield. Beginning her own meditation practice in her late teens, Heather has studied for over fifteen years with senior teachers in the Vipassana and Tibetan traditions, and has sat 1-3 months of retreat a year for over a decade. She has been the Family Program Teacher and Manager since 2001, and is a teacher for the weekly Women's Class. She brings to her teaching a passion for the depth of retreat practice, combined with a playful creativity for integrating the teachings into daily life.

July 4 Open Discussion

July 11th Larry Robinson

Larry Robinson has been practicing meditation since 1969. He is a student of both Zen (Diamond Sangha lineage with John Tarrant) and Vipassana (through Spirit Rock). He is a retired psychotherapist whose work focused on ecopsychology. Larry has served on the Sebastopol City Council since 1998, including two terms as mayor. His passion is the restoration of the oral tradition of poetry.

July 18th Mushim Ikdeqa-Nash

Mushim (Patricia) Ikeda-Nash combines extensive grounding in contemplative and mindfulness practices, both monastic and lay, with diversity facilitation and training. She teaches meditation retreats for people of color and social justice activists nationally. Mushim co-edited *Making the Invisible Visible: Healing Racism in Our Buddhist Communities*. She is a Leadership Sangha member and core teacher at the East Bay Meditation Center in Oakland. Under the name Patricia Y. Ikeda, she is the first recipient of the Ragdale Foundation's Alice Hayes Fellowship for a writing project having to do with social justice issues, and is working on a book-length collection of brief autobiographical fiction, *Elegy with Blue Shirt, Tie and Gun and Other Stories*.

July 25th No Meeting

The Gay Buddhist Fellowship will not be meeting on this day due to a San Francisco Buddhist Center event.

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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