



Gay Buddhist Fellowship

WINTER 2018 NEWSLETTER

Finding Equanimity in Difficult Times

By David Lewis

David Lewis has been following the dharma path for 45 years and has a degree in comparative religious studies. He teaches Insight Meditation and enjoys sharing the dharma at several sanghas around the Bay Area. He is a proud longtime member of GBF.

Over the past couple of years an increasing number of people have been coming to sangha and asking, “What did the Buddha suggest for living in difficult times?” People seem to be experiencing a higher degree of stress in their lives, feeling rudderless and disconnected by the turmoil of life and particularly national news and politics. There is a sense that something has broken in our culture, that communities that once lived in harmony are now in discord, that compassion and tolerance are no longer valued or practiced. So they come to dharma teachers and want to know what special teaching the Buddha offered about living in difficult times.

The mythical “secret teaching” has always been a rather open secret: it is simply to recognize the way things are. Right View, or the first step on the Noble Eightfold Path, is recognizing the nature of things. Right View has also been defined as simply acknowledging the Buddha’s Four Noble Truths: That being human is characterized by stress and dissatisfaction; that this dissatisfaction arises from our reactivity to thoughts, feelings, and events; that it is possible to alter and let go of our habits of reactivity; and that the Buddha offered his eightfold path to guide us on this journey.

In other words, there is nothing new under the sun. Most of the Buddha’s 40 years of teaching addressed how to persevere in a difficult world, whether it is difficulty of mind or difficulty of co-existing with others (when the Buddha talked about “the world” he was often referring to our *perception* of the world, which might not be the same for different people experiencing the same phenomena.) The Buddha himself lived in chaotic times. There was great political and intellectual turmoil in his community, with kingdoms, including his own, being uprooted and destroyed and belief systems being challenged. Then, like now, it seemed like the world was falling apart.

The Buddha’s teaching of the Noble Truths demonstrates that our difficulty with “the world” lies as much within us as in the outward circumstances of our lives. He used the examples of old age, illness and death, which cannot be avoided by anyone and yet they torment us. But he also talked about political turmoil, violence and discord in society. He taught that the way to cope with suffering is to find peace in your own heart.

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.

“Peace. It does not mean to be in a place where there is no noise, trouble, or hard work. It means to be in the midst of all those things and still be calm in your heart.”

Or as U Tejaniya, the contemporary Burmese meditation master says, “As a meditator, no experience in the world needs to disturb you. Instead, because every experience, whether pleasant or unpleasant, is something we can continuously be aware of, we can therefore use it to develop more confidence, energy, mindfulness, stability of mind, and wisdom.”

This is not to suggest that we become complacent about injustice, racism, or tyranny in our world. The Buddha himself moderated disputes between leaders and negotiated peace accords. But he recognized that some forces, like old age, illness, and death, are beyond our control and therefore need to be accepted as the nature of things. And likewise, the forces of politics, injustice, and oppression often feel like they are out of our hands. We want to *do* something but we don’t know what to do, or we want someone else to do something. In a time when it appears that the pendulum of liberal democracy is swinging away from us and a worldwide wave of conservatism, repression, and intolerance is gaining steam, what do we do?

We start by recognizing the nature of things, and we cultivate equanimity in our response. Only then do we gird our loins and step into the arena of activism. The great social justice advocates of recent times, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, the Dalai Lama, Mother Teresa, and Nelson Mandela were all particularly effective in their work because of a deep spiritual grounding. Many of their generation spent time in prison, but were still able to forgive their oppressors. They were able to reach out to their enemies because they didn’t harbor hate toward them. They advocated for harmony and reconciliation. We could use such leaders today, but perhaps that starts with us.

Hatred never ends through hatred.
Hatred is healed by love alone.
This is the eternal law.
-*The Dhammapada*

There is a story about the great king Ashoka, who united the continent of India in the second century B.C., and how he became a Buddhist. After a particularly bloody battle the king stood on a hill overlooking the carnage of the battlefield and he spotted a monk in a saffron robe peacefully strolling through the midst of it all, quietly chanting for the dead. The king was so impressed by the monk’s aura of peace and equanimity that he had him brought to his palace. It turned out that the monk was actually a long lost nephew. When the king was consolidating his power he had most of his

family killed: everyone, including his brother’s family, who might threaten his power. But this young man had gone off to become a Buddhist monk and thus escaped detection and assassination. Despite the fact that he was facing the man who had killed his entire family, the monk maintained his equanimity and compassionately offered to share the Buddha’s teachings with the king. Due to this fateful encounter, the king changed his ways and ruled by peace and diplomacy rather than war and violence. He made Buddhism the state religion and ordered the construction of a large number of stone pillars recording the Buddha’s teaching to be erected across the Indian subcontinent. Many of these pillars can still be seen today.

Mindfulness is an open and receptive non-judgmental awareness of your present moment experience.

The Buddha’s prescription for the alleviation of suffering applies equally to our inner lives and the outer world. Over thirty years ago I was diagnosed with AIDS. The disease had only recently gotten a name and not much was known about it. There was only one medication at first, and a doctor told me that I probably only had 6 months to live. I’m grateful that I already had a meditation practice, for without its refuge I might not be here today. My practice taught me acceptance. Illness is like *this*: it’s nature at work. Then I went about researching what was known about AIDS, trying out alternative therapies, and even moving across the country to connect with and help others living with AIDS. I accepted my condition and then did whatever could be done to survive. Along the way I met others who were not able to accept their diagnosis and fell into a cycle of grief and despair. I found that acknowledging and accepting my condition deeply supported my well-being and ability to cope. It had nothing to do with hope, but everything to do with acceptance. Another lesson from that epidemic was that it’s important to hang out with people who embody our values and highest aspirations. That is the refuge of sangha.

I never expected to live another 30 years, and every new day is a precious gift. I still experience fear and worry, especially when something goes awry, but my days start with gratitude. Each new wart, blemish, and cough is first met with acceptance. Then I deal with it as best I can, always knowing that one day, perhaps sooner rather than later, something won’t be fixable and I’ll die. I’m ok with that too: it’s the nature of things.

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Many of the good people who come to our sangha looking for answers are suffering terribly from the daily news cycle. They can't turn their eyes away from politics and the harmful injustices of the world, but they also feel impotent as to what they can do. So, like my friends who were not able to accept their AIDS diagnoses, they sink into despair. Their activism is limited to sharing views and opinions on social media and they live in a constant state of stress. I worry about them; they are finding neither peace nor purpose in their lives.

Our times are not unique. There have always been wars, injustice, and oppression. Every living being who preceded us experienced old age, illness, and death. If we have been unaware of the suffering around us it's because we are deluded. But opening our eyes to the suffering of the world is the first step towards alleviating it. Seeing the nature of our own suffering allows us to recognize the same suffering in others. The Latin root words for "compassion" are *com* (with) and *pati* (suffering): we suffer together. My suffering is like yours.

The formula of the Buddha's path to freedom and happiness is the same whether your worries are about health, relationships, money, or safety, or whether you are primarily bothered by politics, injustice, tyranny, or environmental problems. First we accept the current nature of things, then we explore what can be done about it. "This is not supposed to be happening" is not a helpful response. Reinhold Niebuhr's serenity prayer always struck me as being very like the Buddha's teachings:

*God, grant me the serenity to accept
the things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can,
And wisdom to know the difference.*

Earlier this year a Thai youth soccer team, The Wild Boars, ventured into a deep cave and found themselves unable to get out. The story dominated the news for over a week and for a time it looked like all was lost. But their assistant coach was a former Buddhist monk and he taught the boys to meditate. Sitting for days trapped in a cold and completely dark cave, the boys meditated. There wasn't much else that they could do while they waited. One would think that those boys would have been wracked with fear, hunger and de-

spair, but once they were rescued some reported that it wasn't all that terrible. Those of us following the news may have suffered more worry and anticipation than the boys. They trusted their coach and they spent those days cultivating acceptance and equanimity. And they survived.

The Buddha's prescription for whatever ails us is mindfulness practice: not striving to wrap our minds around concepts or studying difficult texts, but fundamentally rewiring our brain to directly experience the world, our thoughts and feelings in a different way. This cannot be accomplished by thinking; mindfulness is about *noticing* rather than thinking. A useful definition of mindfulness is *an open and receptive non-judgmental awareness of your present moment experience*. And that is also a useful instruction for meditation practice. Simply sit quietly and open your sense doors, without judging, to whatever is happening in your experience. How difficult can that be?

Well, it can be a challenge for many of us, particularly when we are beginners, because we are not in the habit of accepting our experience without judging or trying to control it. We think the mind should be tranquil and then are frustrated when it is not. We have an idea of how things should be and then are dissatisfied when the actuality is different. We want more pleasant experiences and less unpleasant ones. This is the noble truth of suffering (dissatisfaction) and its cause (wanting things to be other than they are). Meditation practice starts with noticing the body, using just our senses. If you want to get out of your head, get into your body. Notice the heaviness of your body on your seat, the feeling of touch, of warmth or coolness, the experience of sounds (without even naming them: just "sound"), of taste and smell. Our body is always present in the moment, so it's a reliable refuge to return to if and when our minds drift off into thought. We simply notice that our mind has wandered and return our attention to the body or the breath, as many times as we are called to during a session of meditation. And repeat. In his *Satipatthana Sutta* (the foundations of mindfulness) the Buddha said that this simple practice in itself can carry us all the way to enlightenment.

In the *Satipatthana* and other suttas (teachings) the Buddha offered a wide variety of practices for different sensibilities and circumstances. The first and most fundamental foundation of mindfulness is the body. The

second is the feeling tones that arise with every single mental and physical experience: either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Noticing feeling tones, like awareness of the body, can carry us far along the path. The third foundation of mindfulness is mindfulness of the mind and emotions. Mindfulness of mind is not about deeply exploring our thoughts but rather noticing the nature of the mind. We see that thoughts simply arise and pass away of their own accord if we don't feed them or attach to them. This is a somewhat more challenging practice since we are accustomed to thinking (i.e., following) our thoughts rather than letting them come and go like random sensations. But it's a very rewarding practice as it teaches us that our thoughts are ephemeral things and not at all personal. This is how we come to understand and cultivate a peaceful mind and compassionate heart.

Michelle McDonald, a Canadian mindfulness teacher, has a formula for helping us work with thoughts, particularly difficult thoughts. Its acronym is RAIN:

- *Recognize* whatever is happening in our experience
- *Accept* it non-judgmentally
- *Investigate* how it feels in the body (investigation is not a thinking activity)
- *Non-identify*: don't take it personally.

Another way of describing non-identification is "letting go." In our daily mental habits we subconsciously become enchanted by random thoughts that arise in our experience. We feed them and turn them into stories so

Every moment of mindfulness will re-condition your mind and give rise to further moments of mindfulness.

that they can become our reality. Our thoughts, whether true or not, become the story of us. We can spend days nursing worry or anger or fear, whereas those fleeting emotions might otherwise arise and pass away in a moment. In the language of the Buddha's time there is a word called "nibbida" which means "disenchantment." One of the goals of meditation practice is to break our enchantment with thinking and habitual mind states. It is also helpful in curtailing our addictive craving for mental stimulation, for the abuse of substances, and obsessively trying to distract ourselves from simply resting in the present moment.

This is freedom from suffering: the absence of greed (wanting things to happen), aversion (wanting things to

not happen) and delusion (confusion or lack of awareness). We can experience some relief even in our very first meditation. Every moment of mindfulness will re-condition your mind and give rise to further moments of mindfulness. With time and practice it gets easier and more natural, like learning a language or playing an instrument. Neurologists say that this practice creates new neural pathways in the brain. But no matter where you are on the path, you can take refuge in the knowledge that peace is available in any moment, no matter what is going on in your own experience or the world at large.

So if you see something particularly upsetting in the news, or are simply experiencing some conflict in your life, notice how that feels in the body. What emotions have arisen? Anger or judgement, perhaps? Is it hot or cold? Contracted or relaxed? If it is a problem that you cannot directly influence, try letting it go. How does that feel? Or if you worry about illness or aging, how does *that* feel in the body? How do you experience fear? And if you don't know what the future holds, can you let go of worrying about it? Simply ground yourself in the present moment and do what needs to be done.

I once offered a meditation class in a local hospice for people living with life threatening conditions. Some were actively dying. We often started with a guided meditation focusing on mindfulness of the body, exploring our direct experience of the senses without thinking or interpreting our experience. Then we would explore the question, "What exactly is wrong in this very moment?" More often than not, no one in that room full of very sick people could identify a single problem through their direct experience in that moment. But if they thought about it for a moment, problems arose. So by simply resting in mindfulness of our direct sensory experience of the present moment we often discover: no problem.

Liberation from suffering is readily available to anyone who is willing to do the practice. You don't need to be learned or spiritual. The instructions are simple: practice abiding in your present moment experience and letting go of judgements about it or wanting things to be other than they are. With practice you will eventually achieve some stability of mind and equanimity. Then, peaceful and grounded in the present moment, you will be ready to go forth and do what needs to be done.

Don't read books

Don't read books!

Don't chant poems!

When you read books your eyeballs wither away
leaving the bare sockets.

When you chant poems your heart leaks out slowly
with each word.

People say reading books is enjoyable.

People say chanting poems is fun.

But if your lips constantly make a sound
like an insect chirping in autumn,
you will only turn into a haggard old man.

And even if you don't turn into a haggard old man,
it's annoying for others to have to hear you.

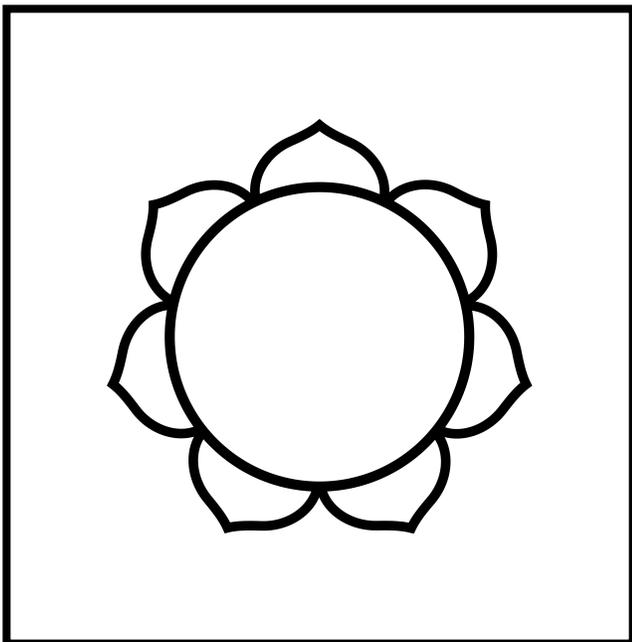
It's so much better

to close your eyes, sit in your study,
lower the curtains, sweep the floor,
burn incense.

It's beautiful to listen to the wind,
listen to the rain,

take a walk when you feel energetic,
and when you're tired go to sleep.

-Yang Wanli (Chinese, 12th century)



Meditation Instruction on Mindfulness of the Body

Sit comfortably and relax. Let your eyes gently close. You may notice that when you close your eyes, your other sense doors—hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching—become more apparent. Your sense of touch reminds you that you are in your body, even with the eyes closed. Notice the touch points of where your body meets your seat, where your hands are resting, your feet on the floor, the touch of your clothes on your skin. Sitting still simply feels like *this*.

Bring your attention to your breath, wherever you notice it most predominately: the tip of the nose, the expansion and contraction of the chest with each breath, or the rise and fall of your belly. You can become very intimate with the breath when you are mindful of it. Notice the coolness of the in breath, the warmth of the out breath, the space between breaths. Focusing narrowly on the breath or the body helps to stabilize and calm the mind.

Now open your awareness to any other sensations that you may be experiencing, without trying to control, judge, or change anything. Notice areas of tightness or discomfort. Perhaps you can relax an area of tension with your next out breath. Or perhaps you just need to acknowledge that discomfort is present and notice its changing nature. Notice any sense of warmth or coolness, any energetic sensations: vibrating, tingling, dullness. Are you sleepy or alert? Notice sounds meeting the sense door of the ear: they arise and pass in an instant. No need to block them out or wish they would go away; they will change and fade away on their own.

Inevitably, thoughts may arise. This is just the habit of the mind. If you notice a thought arising, simply let it be: watch it come and go, as ephemeral as a sound. Don't try to prevent thoughts, and don't get attached to them no matter how seductive they may be. If you find that you have unconsciously gotten caught up in a train of thought, story, or fantasy, simply note that that has happened, let go of it, and return your attention to the breath or your body. Becoming lost in thought is not a failure of meditation, but rather an opportunity to notice what has happened, let go, and return to the here and now of sitting in the present moment. You can restart your meditation in this way as many times as you need to for as long as you choose to sit.

At the end of your meditation notice how you feel, in both body and mind. Any different than at the beginning? Practice meditating as often as you can: it gets easier with repetition and the more you do the greater the benefit.

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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 12pm. Everyone is then welcome to stay and socialize over refreshments till approximately 12:30pm, 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.

Your Thrift Store Donations Earn Money for GBF

GBF members can donate their quality cast-offs to the Community Thrift Store (CTS) and GBF will receive a quarterly check based on the volume of items sold. This is a great way to support our Sangha, and the community. So far this year we have received over \$800 through members' generosity. Bring your extra clothing and other items to CTS at 623 Valencia St between 10am and 5pm, any day of the week. The donation door is around the corner on Sycamore Alley (parallel to and between 17th and 18th) between Valencia and Mission. Tell the worker you are donating to GBF. Our ID number is 40.

Information: (415) 861-4910

How to Reach Us

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GBF Yahoo Discussion Group

www.groups.yahoo.com/group/gaybuddhistfellowship

Find us on Facebook

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The Gay Buddhist Fellowship is a charitable organization pursuant to Internal Revenue Code 501(c)(3) and California Revenue and Taxation Code #23701d.

Sunday Speakers

December 2 David Lewis

David Lewis has been following the dharma path for 45 years and has a degree in comparative religious studies. He teaches Insight Meditation and enjoys sharing the dharma at several sanghas around the Bay Area. He is a proud longtime member of GBF.

December 9 JD Doyle

JD Doyle serves as a Core Teacher at the East Bay Meditation Center (EBMC) and has served as a Board member and was the co-founder of the LGBTQI meditation group. JD is in the Spirit Rock Meditation Center teacher-training program and was in the Dedicated Practitioner Program (DPP2) and the Community Dharma Leader Program (CDL4). JD has practiced Buddhism since 1995 in the U.S., Thailand, and Burma. For over twenty-five years, they worked as a public school teacher focusing on issues of equity and access. JD holds a Bachelors degree in Environmental Studies from Cornell University and a Masters degree in Language and Literacy and Sociocultural Studies from the University of New Mexico. JD identifies as gender non-conforming. They are committed to celebrating the diversity of our human sangha, addressing the impact of racism on our communities, expanding concepts of gender, and living in ways that honor the sacredness of the Earth.

December 16 Charles Garfield

Charles Garfield, PhD, is Founder of Shanti and the Shanti National Training Institute; founding faculty at Metta Institute End of Life Counseling Program; Research Scholar, Starr King School for the Ministry at the the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley; and a mathematician on the Apollo Eleven first lunar landing program. Dr. Garfield is a Clinical Professor of Psychology, Department of Psychiatry, University of California Medical School, and a faculty member at the C.G. Jung Institute of San Francisco. He has published ten books including *Sometimes My Heart Goes Numb: Love and Caregiving in a Time of AIDS*; *Psychosocial Care of the Dying Patient*; and *Stress and Survival: The Emotional Realities of Life Threatening Illness*.

December 23 Open Discussion (Christmas)

December 30 Open Discussion (New Year's)

January 6 Baruch Golden

Four Part Series: Intimacy and the Dharma, Part One

Baruch Golden is a longtime GBF Member who has been practicing Vipassana meditation since 1998. He completed Spirit Rock's Community Dharma Leaders program in 2012 and the Buddhist Chaplaincy Training Program with the Sati Center in Redwood City in 2013. He teaches dharma primarily at the East Bay Meditation Center. Baruch is a registered nurse and did hospice work for the past 14 years.

January 13 Baruch Golden

Four Part Series, Part Two

Intimacy in Relationships and the Dharma, with JD Doyle

January 20 Baruch Golden

Four Part Series, Part Three

Sexuality, Intimacy and the Dharma: Baruch Golden and Daigan Gather

Rev. Daigan Gaither began Buddhist practice in 1995 in the Vipassana tradition and then began to study Zen in 2003 with Ryushin Paul Haller Roshi. He received Lay Ordination in 2006, when he was given the name Daigan or "Great Vow." He received Priest Ordination in July 2011. His work, practice, and free time include many hours devoted to community service in a variety of ways, including his work as one of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence and as a volunteer at Zen Hospice Project. He has spoken nationwide on a variety of issues and has sat on a number of boards and committees that serve community and social justice.

January 27 Baruch Golden

Four Part Series, Part Four

Daigan Gaither and Baruch Golden: A Conversation with the Sangha

February 3 Open Discussion

February 10 Jennifer Berezan

Jennifer Berezan is a unique blend of musician, teacher, and activist. She has created 10 albums—a combination of singer songwriter CDs as well as long-playing healing works. She recently released "Song For All Beings Live," the live video of the recent performances that included over 100 artists, activists and spiritual teachers. Her lifelong involvement in environmental, women's, justice movements and earth-based spirituality are at the heart of her work. She has been a Buddhist practitioner for over 30 years. She teaches at the California Institute of Integral Studies in the department of Philosophy and Religion.

February 17 Dave Richo

Dave Richo, Ph.D, MFT, is a psychologist, teacher, and writer in Santa Barbara and San Francisco who emphasizes Jungian, transpersonal, and spiritual perspectives in his work. He is the author of *How to Be an Adult in Relationships*. For more information, visit www.davericho.com

February 24 Kirk Phillips

John Kirk Phillips has been sitting zazen for about 30 years. His first exposure to Buddhism was through Alan Watts in 1968. In 1986 he had the good fortune to meet Issan Dorsey who inspired him to practice zazen, and was also influenced and guided by the work of Ram Dass. His focus is applying Buddhist practice to death and dying. He has been working as a Nurse practitioner at Kaiser since 1998. He studied for 11 years with Darlene Cohen, and was ordained as a Zen Buddhist priest in 2009. He is currently a priest with Great Spirit Sangha in San Francisco led by Cynthia Kear.

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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, believing in the equality of all that lives.

—GBF dedication of merit