



Newsletter
May 2000

Gay Buddhist Fellowship

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 Bay Area, the United States, and the world. GBF's mission includes cultivating a social environment that is inclusive and caring.

Practice and Paradox

A Dharma Talk given by Darlene Cohen, March 12, 2000

This morning I'd like to talk about my favorite thing about Zen practice, or my favorite thing right now—you know, it switches all the time. My favorite thing right now is how practice, not just Zen practice, embraces paradox. That's the moment-to-moment intermingling of things that supposedly don't go together. Seeing contradictory notions as just two parts of the very same thing.

Why do I like paradox so much? It's because when you encounter paradox, things that are logical and rational are subverted. Paradox slips underneath all the things that are in their place that are neat and orderly, all the ideological socks that are arranged according to color and style, and put in the drawer in different compartments.

Paradox subverts all this neatness and presents you with life as it usually is—very messy and gushy, ideas flowing in and out of each other without any warning. Just knowing that this unruly realm exists, when I'm walking my linear plank, ready to trip at any moment and be engulfed by this unruliness, makes me relax a little and just let things be how they are.

From this perspective, I think it's funny that we see consistency as a good thing. We try to be consistent. We try to get our ideas in order so they don't contradict each other. I question the value of this exercise.

I spent many years of my life trying to be consistent, to be the same way in this situation as I was in that situation. I tried to develop a consistent self, because people seemed so alarmed when you're not consistent. I remember my college roommate complaining to me that sometimes I was superneat, and sometimes I was very messy, and therefore she didn't know how to conduct herself. She said I was inconsistent. This bothered her a lot, because she didn't know how to play off it. She used herself as a paragon of virtue in this matter, saying she was always messy. (Laughter.) I just conceded the point.

Then when I was in a radical political group in my twenties, I was expected to have clear, solid, immutable opinions. But in some circumstances I was against the death penalty; and sometimes, I wasn't. Sometimes I thought we should kill the pigs, and other times I thought just thinking that way was counter-productive.

Try as I would, I couldn't squeeze all of my selves into one single self that when confronted with different moments in time, was always consistent, always the same. Life just seemed too complex to me. But since other people always pointed this out as a huge character flaw, I thought for a long time that it was, too.

GBF Committees

We always welcome and need interested participants, so please, **JOIN US!** Call the contact person on the committee, or talk to him (or anyone on that committee) at a GBF sitting or event. This is a great practice opportunity and a wonderful way to serve your Sangha

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If you would like to volunteer, please contact us at 415.974.9878.

A few years later, when I experimented with various psychedelic drugs, and got to know the non-linear realm in a really compelling way, I had new respect for the constantly shifting nature of things, and what makes things shift. I finally gave up on consistency altogether. Some time later I ran across Carl Jung's remark that "Consistency is the mark of mediocrity," and that made perfect sense to me.

Because, of course, if you try to squish all of your selves into a single case-ment, like a sausage, then of course you have to chop off all the ornamental edges, all the designs, all the curlicues, if you will, to make it fit in that casing. Then you don't have the benefit of all that complexity, some of which is merely entertaining, or merely ornamental, but a lot of it is the stuff in you that is resonant with any particular situation that you encounter.

I think it probably helps me to ventilate the airless cubicles that are my personal opinions by realizing that things that appear to be different from each other are actually usually, and always can be, aspects of the same phenomena. You have to, if you're going to look at things this way, ask yourself the question, what makes things different from each other in the first place? What makes all of you different from the wall that I'm perceiving? What makes the black cushion different? What makes you different from you? What does make things different from each other?

Well, we—perceiving beings—assign differences in values to things. We pick out the stuff we're going to pay particular attention to at any particular time according to our desires and our fears in that particular situation. According to our attractions, or our aversions, in any particular situation, then we differentiate things and assign values. This picking out particular things to want or to run away from is what creates all of our problems.

It's not necessary to pick out anything in particular. Suffering is delight, delight is suffering. There's suffering in delight, there's delight in suffering. It's all mixed up together. We call things by different names, so that we can talk about them, but our actual experience is not so easily reduced.

For instance, you're making love to someone, and you are delighted by them, but you think, you *know*, that they're going to leave you soon. You can just feel it. Or *you're* going to leave *them* soon. You know that; you've made that decision. That's suffering present in delight. They're intermingled.

I give workshops for people in pain, and one of the things we do is pair off, and people tell someone else about their suffering. Usually, when people do this, while they're telling about all the terrible afflictions of their life, they suddenly feel very light and joyous, because this person has been assigned to listen to them. They actually can tell someone about their suffering for a certain amount of time, and it's embarrassing how joyful you feel, talking about your suffering in this way. That's when joy penetrates suffering.

These things are not clean. If you stick to your experience, then you can't actually use categories that way. We operate by maintaining categories of things, but when we understand how profoundly those categories are based on our own desires at the time, we can shake up our categories at will. We can make them bleed into each other, whatever the situation calls for. This is a very important aspect of living your life, if you wish to live it fully.

If you have an idea of the kind of life you'd like to be living, and you see it as very different from the life that you're actually living, in order to live fully you have to diminish your clinging to your ideal life, and turn toward the life that you actually have.

For instance, it's very difficult for us to have a strong functional body replaced by a helpless weak one, whether

