



# 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.

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## NOTES FROM CAIRO

July 2001

by Kevin Havener

Why on earth would a GBF member - a Buddhist, gay Euro-American male, age 45 - venture to Islamic Egypt to try to live for a year or more? I have asked myself the question many times. The original reasons seemed so simple: my love of archaeology and anthropology, of Middle Eastern men, of Middle Eastern music and culture, and above all a yearning for adventure. But of course, the realities of life in Cairo are more complicated than I imagined they would be; after five months here, I continue to find that the city defies my expectations.



*At the sphinx, Giza*

The information I present here is personal and therefore anecdotal. Some of it is superficial, but some of it is based on quality readings (see the end paragraph for book references), as well as extensive conversations with highly educated and not-so-educated Egyptians. Needless to say, the experience of any individual jumping into Cairo - a historical, cosmopolitan, fascinating megacity of 17 million sentient beings - is bound to be vivid and unique.

Currently I am living alone in Ma'adi, a treed, expatriate suburb south of downtown Cairo. I've taken a conversational Arabic class in a community center here. The French-designed Metro commuter trains, forming a giant "X"

## GBF Committees

We always want and need interested participants, so please, JOIN IN! 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!

### *Steering Committee*

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David Holmes

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through and under the city, efficiently carry over four million riders per day; it is a quick (but often crowded and hot) 20-minute ride to downtown from my home. After the collapse of initial job offers and much searching for meaningful work, I now have a desktop publishing job with American University Cairo Press, a prestigious English language publisher here. (I do DTP for a living and my first project is designing an archaeology book - the ideal project!)

Cairo the city is an overwhelming place: crowded, chaotic, polluted, horrendously noisy. Yet with its strong overlays of European, Ottoman, Islamic, Roman, Greek, and ancient Egyptian culture, it is also an exhilarating and glorious place. As with other great cities in ancient lands, it is a place of shocking contrasts: a donkey cart loaded with vegetables almost gets sideswiped by a BMW; a completely black-clad woman (in an abeyya, all body parts covered except for eye-slit) carries a tray full of Pepsi and fried chicken in a Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant; a Radio Shack store is immediately next door to a mosque broadcasting the call to prayer; a young man in prissy fashion eyewear gets a mobile phone call while he talks with an illiterate galabiyya-clad fellah (peasant farmer in traditional gown-like garb).

As for the men of Egypt, I am embarrassed by my bald-faced, superficial fascination with them. For inexplicable reasons, I am magnetically attracted to them physically, finding every third man on the street interesting, if not downright handsome. Black hair,

moustaches, goatees, and large unguarded eyes predominate. Ethnicity is varied and skin color ranges from light to dark. As a member of a fine San Francisco social group, Men of All Colors



*Bizarre "arabized" meditation figure, Japanese Garden, Hawaii*

Together (MACT), I am finding that Egypt forces me to confront the question of why I am so physically attracted to non Euro-American men. The close observation of several albino Egyptians - identical in every way to their kin except for skin, hair, and eye pigmentation - has caused a lot of mental turmoil. Why

are they shockingly unappealing to me, while their darker counterparts are so alluring? As a pale skinned Euro-American man, am I "exoticizing" and sexualizing/fetishizing the cultural "other"? Is it a form of reverse racism? Is it a new way to (ethnically and homosexually) self-loathe? Am I caught eternally on the wheel of desire and suffering? And what would Marx or the Dalai Lama have to say about it? (Oh screw it, I'll sort out my dance card later!)

Egyptian men's behavior is also very different and fascinating. As the king of the heap in a resolutely patriarchal society, men here are psychologically well adjusted and very physical with each other. Joking, teasing, touching, and close loving associations between men are the norm. For a western gay man this arouses inappropriate erotic fantasies and expectations because the west (especially America) is so uptight and touch-starved. But don't forget about male pride, vanity, and egotism, also present here in good measure. One of the main differences is the powerful (religion-based) pressure for

