

Gay Buddhist Fellowship

OCTOBER / NOVEMBER 2002 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.

Mecca for Buddhists

BY KEVIN HAVENER

The experiment of living one full year in Cairo was over.

The evaporation of my freelance book design job, the dimming of hope about meeting an appropriate male partner, the difficulty of learning Arabic, the impossibility of getting onto an archaeology dig, and the lack of any type of meditation group caused me to decide to return to the USA [see *GBF Newsletter* article Aug. 2001]. Unenthusiastic, however, about a direct return to the USA (particularly post 9-11), I first proceeded to do something that I have wanted to do for years: visit the main Buddhist archaeological sites in India, and visit Nepal (for about three weeks each). This was definitely a pilgrimage as well, especially after a year in the Muslim world. The culture shock/direct comparison value of going from an Islamic country to a Hindu/Buddhist one was something I very much wanted to experience. It was my second visit to India [see *GBF Newsletter* article Dec. 1999/Jan. 2000] and my second (albeit inadvertent) circumambulation of the globe. I was so focused on the Buddhist archaeological sites, as well, that it was not until my trip was underway that I realized I was completely traversing rural India from the central west coast to the northeast border. I also felt some urgency to visit Nepal, which unfortunately seems to be drifting into civil war.

Leaving behind the Egyptian "republic" (dictatorship? police state?) with its Queen Boat 52 incident, its arbitrary political arrests, its guilt-ridden "gay" (but inevitably to-be-married) men, was actually not easy, however. I will always remember my warm and loyal friends there, the outpouring of sympathy and fascinating political discussion regarding 9-11, the stunning history and antiquities, the handsome Egyptian men, and the vibrant Egyptian music and culture. A very high point during my stay was the observation of the carnival-like *moulid* (Muslim saint's festival) of Abou el Hajjaj in Luxor, during which many "pagan" ancient Egyptian, pre-Islamic rituals and dances are performed [see *book reference to The Pharaoh's Shadow at end*]. Personally, this and the presence of Sufis in Egypt are some of the only hopeful signs regarding Islam that I could find there. (For a critique of Islam the religion, please refer to a New York Times article on the subject, reference at end. While the NYT is clearly heavily biased towards Israel, this is an excellent and insightful analysis.)

And so I left Egypt for a short stop in Kuwait and Mumbai/Bombay, India, immediately continuing on to Bhopal and then Sanchi. Within 24 hours I had transferred from a city of 17 million, to rural India. The temperature was not so different, but everything else was. In conversations with Indians, I immediately felt that I was in a democracy once again. Perhaps this was only in my mind, but I felt a great relief; there seems to be more freedom of thought, or more general intellectual depth, in

India. Also, border clashes with Pakistan (and post-colonial period upheavals) aside, Hindu Indians generally tend to be much more worldly about their religion, and there seems to be a higher tolerance for other religions. It only makes sense, considering the age of Hindu philosophical thought. While the Middle East region is the home of the three “revealed” or prophet-based religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, personally I question scholarship which praises these religion’s accomplishments too much. The innate human need for religion has existed since before the dawn of civilization, and its psychological development continues even today. Big ideas have been borrowed and traded continuously. (Of course Joseph Campbell wrote many a volume on this fascinating subject.) Creator/origin gods can be found in many early religions, including Hinduism, ancient Greek religion, and ancient Egyptian religion, etc.; it’s just that these creator gods were often not worshipped directly. Seasonal renewal/rebirth gods such as Osiris/Jesus and mother-goddess types such as Isis/Mary, also abound. What a joyous and liberating discovery! Too bad, however, that there are so many people in the world today getting stuck on their particular frozen-in-time version of the Bible, Koran, etc.

I enjoyed trading the well-covered, jewelry-unadorned Egyptian men for the casually near-nude, earring and finger-ring covered Indian men. Dark forehead prayer bruises were traded for brilliant red “third-eye” bindi marks; frequently bad teeth were traded for healthy bright ones (Indians use twigs from the anti-bacterial Neem (Margosa) tree to brush); the Egyptian galabiyya was traded for the colorful Indian lungi (a sarong or skirt-like garment occasionally seen); and frequent cigarette smoking was traded for tobacco chewing. Several constants between the two cultures, though, were of course jet-black hair, an abundance of moustaches, and a physical camaraderie untainted by western concepts of “inappropriateness.” It was also extremely refreshing to see Indian women interacting with men more freely, often displaying their beautiful long black hair, and even displaying the occasional midriff (as is customary in some women’s sari styles). As in Egypt, rural and farm women may wear brilliantly colored clothing (day-glow green or orange or purple or blue patterns), in stark contrast to the dusty greens and browns of their environment.

Indian men often wear long knit scarves, and in the chilly, hazy mornings I would see them using a creatively-wrapped scarf like a combination head covering/shawl. Even if wearing pants, some Indian men tend to crouch when they urinate (and in general bathroom activities seem to be less inhibited for men but of course not for women). Pre-marital segregation between the sexes definitely exists in India, but not to the extent it does in Egypt. Pressure for Indian men and women to marry seems as strong in Hindu culture as in Islamic (and arranged marriages are common in both cultures), although with the appallingly campy Indian MTV “romance” songs and vulgar dance numbers abounding, one may wonder how long traditional primness is going to last.

Sanchi, a hilltop site famous for its early Buddhist stupas (symbolic funerary/reliquary mounds) initiated by emperor

Ashoka (the first great Buddhist ruler within the Mauryan Empire, 4th to 2nd century BCE), is today a beautiful park. Legend has it that Ashoka converted to Buddhism after a particularly bloody battle, and that he sent Buddhist missionaries (including his son and daughter) far and wide. His symbols of Buddhism were distributed all over India, and stylistically his artisans seem to have been inspired by contemporaneous Persian sculpture. Refurbished by later empires, Sanchi today features monastery and temple ruins, as well as several large stone stupas, the most massive of which is surrounded by a famous stone fence and four toranas (gateways). These toranas feature skillful relief carvings from the Buddhist Jataka tales. As at most of the Buddhist sites, clockwise circumambulation was a very pleasant ritual.

While taking a taxi to the train station at Vidisha, I took the opportunity to visit some Hindu rock-cut shrines at the cliff of Udaigiri. But the dawn taxi ride itself actually turned out to be the main highlight. We traveled through the rural farming region on tree-lined roads, passing people beginning their morning tasks. Suddenly the taxi came out into a large clearing – we were on a narrow bridge crossing high over a wide but shallow river. To both the left and the right were Hindu temples at riverside; one was pink and one was white. Local people were

near these small but beautiful temples, ritually bathing or washing clothes and dishes. The scene, illuminated in the dawn light, grabbed my attention and brought me to tears. I felt blessed to be able to visit such a timeless scene, a golden page from the book of history. It did not even occur to me to try to take a disruptive photo. There was no need anyway, for this scene will be imprinted on my mind until the day I die. To me, humankind’s psyche has not progressed one iota beyond the basic needs and actions demonstrated in this scene. In terms of human psychology, humankind’s place on earth, and basic human fulfillment, almost everything our species has accomplished technologically and intellectually in the past two or three millennia is irrelevant.

Crossing by train through the “Gangetic plain” (as the scholars love to call the vast, richly fertilized agricultural plains fed by the Ganges River) was a special joy. Tickets were cheap, and often fascinating companions would come and go from my compartment. Idyllic green landscapes, farmlands, arid zones, tree groves, and homesteads would pass by the window endlessly. These train trips contrasted greatly with the occasionally unavoidable local bus ride, which was always delayed, unbelievably overcrowded, noisy, dirty, and uncomfortable. (Indian and Nepali bus seats were not designed with six foot tall, bony-butted westerners in mind.) Of course, as usual, a handsome and/or comically gifted bus attendant calling out stops while hanging out the door, or climbing all over the outside of the bus while it was in motion, would make it all bearable.

The next main stop was the “Mecca of Buddhism,” Bodhgaya, a sleepy farm village inflated to the status of major Buddhist tourist destination during “the season.” There were temples, monasteries, retreat centers, and guesthouses from many different countries. Here as elsewhere, a lot of new construction seemed to be going on, which makes me feel

“Shashi and I were traveling through lands and hills very familiar to the Buddha.”

extremely optimistic about the future of Buddhism. There was also the more western oriented Root Institute for Wisdom Culture, and a very austere Vipassana retreat center. Mahabodhi temple is, of course, the focus of devotion in Bodhgaya, because it marks the spot where Siddhartha Gautama achieved enlightenment under the bodhi (pipal) tree. To mark this sacred spot, ancient temples were built through the centuries; then they were destroyed by the Muslims and other rulers; and then they were rebuilt over time. The current temple, excavated and restored in the 19th century, is in the Indian sikhara (“corn-cob”) temple architectural style, and it is surrounded by many small stupas (and also hundreds of circumambulating pilgrims). Around the back of the temple exterior wall is a small enclosure which shelters the large base of a living descendant of the original bodhi tree. Several monks were guarding the tree to make sure pilgrims did not pick off pieces of bark, etc. Gold leaf had been placed on the bark and it was smooth from thousands of touches. Many Tibetan and Thai monks were busy with prostrations, meditation, and devotional activities. A very westernized Japanese man and I eyed each other askance; I believe both of us were wondering, “Should I do prostrations or meditation here, and if so, how elaborate should I get?” (And both of us did, each to our own cultural comfort and propriety level.) On my third and final visit to this most auspicious and beautiful spot, when it was quite crowded, three men in street clothes tried to pick my pocket. Certainly, one needs to stay in the present moment, even here!

The Dalai Lama was scheduled to run a Kalachakra empowerment ceremony while I was in Bodhgaya (he later canceled, however, due to illness and some possible security concerns). The place had rapidly filled up with thousands of pilgrims and Tibetan monks from Dharamsala, Nepal, and even Tibet itself. Vast tent cities had been erected, and tourists also poured in. Dust clouded the air and some people wore surgical masks to breathe easier. Most fortunately I had a connection there: a young Indian man named Shashi. He had met a close friend of mine at a meditation retreat several years earlier, and I had been in contact with him via e-mail. Shashi was kind enough to have found a place for me to stay, and we also ended up traveling together. Shashi, a Buddhist studying Tibetan thangka painting in Nepal part of the year, was on a school holiday assisting his father (a sculptor of Buddhist statues).

Shashi was born in a small village near Bodhgaya, where part of his family still lives. In his and a taxi-driving friend’s com-

pany, I spent one very long day traveling to Rajgir (Vulture Peak), where the Buddha meditated and first delivered the Lotus Sutra. The Japanese have put a lot of money into India to excavate, restore, and preserve Buddhist monuments. They have also built huge white stupas called “world peace pagodas” at main Buddhist sites in India and Nepal; there was one of these at Rajgir. We then ventured to nearby Nalanda, the famous ancient Buddhist university – now a large, peaceful archaeological park with many restored ruins of monasteries and temples,



Kevin at Swayambhunath Temple (the “Monkey Temple”), Kathmandu, Nepal

and an excellent museum of objects and sculptures found at the site. At the museum, the contrast between east and west was in evidence: Tibetan pilgrims took their shoes off outside the western-style museum, treating it like a temple. Inside, they touched and bowed to almost every single statue, whether it was a Buddha statue or not. Foreheads occasionally banged against display glass. In short, the pilgrims were being respectful, devotional, and pious, making no distinction between the power or auspiciousness of the statues, and their outward form, material, or placement. And there I was, one of the very few westerners present, looking at and appreciating the statues in a standard western, rational, art historical, “this is a 6th century CE sandstone statue of so-and-so” sort of way. I couldn’t bring myself to bow to one of these statues, because for me it was in the wrong cultural context. I noticed this type of cultural/behavioral contrast again and again, at many Buddhist sites. Although I

too was on a pilgrimage, inevitably it was from my cultural framework, and that was just as “inescapable” as the Tibetans’ own cultural framework was for them.

But to experience this contrast of cultures was refreshing and highly thought-provoking. What is the value, what are the concrete benefits, of a western style education, with its dissected disciplines and points of view? And how many of us have met fellow-Americans with PhD’s, in some technical field for example, who seem to have a profound ignorance of basic human knowledge and behavior? With the archaeological evidence at some of these famous Buddhist sites not going back quite as far as legend insists it must, which should take precedence – the science or the legend? I am just asking the questions, not making a value judgment either way. And on the flip side, the behavior of many young Tibetan monks seemed to be highly un-monk like, and I came to learn that many Tibetan youths probably have nowhere else to go – little education and no jobs available in their home (or refugee) towns. Just as any arm boys become tourist police in Egypt, so young Tibetans become monks, even

if they're not particularly interested in Buddhism. Through the thickets of all of this "new world" thinking and "old world" thinking, perhaps the middle path, as the Buddha discovered, is the best way.

Bodhgaya, Rajgir, and Nalanda are all in Bihar, the poorest and least well educated state in India. Even the "good roads" were appallingly bad, and it took many hours to travel about, although distances were not that great. My day traveling with Shashi was fascinating because in addition to the famous sites of Buddhism, he took me to smaller, quieter places. One such place was in a tiny village, where he wanted to show me how the locals were bathing in a hot-spring pool adorned with ancient Buddhist statues. The feeling was much like that at Vidisha – I felt deeply privileged to observe a timeless ritual, undoubtedly unchanged for many generations. Taking photos here, too, was absolutely out of the question. Off the main street in the village, behind high walls, there was a huge, rectangular white ceramic tiled public bathing pool, at least 50 x 30 feet wide, sunken deep below ground level, partly filled with steaming hot-spring water. On one long side, tiled steps led down into the water. On both of the short ends, near the water-line, eroded black statues of Buddhist deities were inset into the white walls. Families, groups of young girls, and handsome young men bathed in their separate areas, discreetly covering their nudity at all times. How much of the bathing was just bathing, and how much of it was religious ritual, I am not sure. But I could not help but wonder how similar this scene may have been to a scene in ancient Harappa (the precursor Indus Valley civilization, flourishing around 2500-1500 BCE, which possessed large ritual bathing pools). Shashi and I were traveling through lands and hills very familiar to the Buddha. Except that in his day, the cleared fields were bamboo forests. Shashi and others believe that the exact sequence of movements of the Buddha and his disciples can be pieced together from the evidence.

I had Shashi's "protection" in Bodhgaya, and the principal of his brother's school protected me in Patna (still in Bihar state). Patna was definitely not a tourist-friendly town, and I was most appreciative of this gracious assistance. Patna has an excellent museum, and also contains the (now unimpressive) ruins of Kumrahar (ancient Pataliputra, the Mauryan Empire's capital). Outside of Patna is Vaishali, important as the site where women were first ordained into the Buddha's sangha, and where the Buddha gave his final sermon. On my own again, I took a train from Patna to Uttar Pradesh state and Varanasi, the famous Hindu religious center, population 3.5 million (and my biggest city stop). The train met the vast Ganges River at sunset, crossing over it on a high rail bridge; it was a thrilling sight to behold. Near Varanasi is Sarnath, another large Buddhist archaeological park comparable to Nalanda. Sarnath, also known as "Deer Park," is celebrated as the place where the Buddha gave his first sermon, "Turning of the Wheel of Law," converting five previously skeptical ascetic men, who became his first sangha disciples. Legend has it that even the wild deer listened to this

sermon coming from a lion (the lion being the symbol of the Buddha's former family clan, the Shakyas). Today there are large monastic ruins here, as well as the colossal Dhamekh stupa, built around 500 CE. Right outside the park entrance there is an excellent museum, which displays important Buddhist statues, as well as the huge and superbly well-preserved Ashokan column capital of four roaring lions and Dharma wheels, which is a modern symbol of India and its currency.

My final stop in India, near the Nepali border, was Kushinagar, where the Buddha's final exit, or mahaparinirvana, took place. Tourist amenities were clustered near the archaeological sites, all actually some distance away from the modern village of Kasia. In a park there was a modern restoration of the temple and stupa which mark the spot where the Buddha died. Inside the temple, a large stone statue of the reclining Buddha, around 15 feet in length, has been covered with gold leaf by pilgrims.

There are monasteries from different countries here, and the Thai monastery was especially pleasant. This monastery also runs a health clinic for the local villagers. The following day, I traveled by taxi to the Indian border. Sunauli, the town which straddles both sides of the border, was chaotic and unpleasant, and as soon as I got through the visa formalities I went to Bhairawa, a slightly more "real" town. From there, I could easily visit Lumbini, the place where Siddhartha Gautama was born. The Lumbini area is being developed for tourism by the Nepali government, and there were many construction projects, temples, monasteries, and retreat centers, as well as another of the Japanese world peace pagodas. The historic site itself was visually unassuming, but its major importance still attracts many visitors. I was happy to see a lot of archaeological

work being done there. A series of crumbling temples, one built over another, marking the spot where Maya is thought to have given birth to Siddhartha, have been carefully removed so that archaeologists can get down to the earliest historic layers.

At this point, my Buddhist archaeological agenda was really complete. It was my first time in Nepal, however, and I was anxious to explore it. I took a local bus up to Pokhara (population about 150,000 and elevation about 2,400 feet), a friendly tourist town in the foothills of the Himalaya. For many years I had wanted to see the tallest and most famous mountains in the world, and get up into them, however briefly. On the bus trip, it was very refreshing to get back into hilly and mountainous countryside, after a year as a flatlander in Egypt! My plan was to stay in Pokhara for a few days, then go on to the Kathmandu valley (elevation about 4,000 feet). I have a Euro-American friend who is a Tibetan monk now, and we were going to rendezvous in Boudha, right near the city of Kathmandu.

Naively, I expected the Nepali people and culture to be sort of like the people and culture of India. But nothing could be further from the truth! Nepal is a very culturally different and diverse place, and many distinct ethnic groups have carved out historic niches for themselves there. Appearance-wise, some people do look Indian, but others look European, while others look Chinese. The only group that I could really get a handle

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on, identification-wise, was the Tibetans. Many ethnic Tibetans, now Nepali citizens, live and work in the mountainous areas. As India is a Hindu nation, so is Nepal. But a fascinating fusion of Hinduism and Buddhism has occurred in Nepal. People claim that the Buddha was the “9th incarnation of Vishnu,” thereby conveniently fusing the religions back together. There are also unique Nepali deities, such as Surya, the sun-god, or different Hindu deities which have been raised to positions of importance. Often, when looking at the unique and beautifully ornate Nepali temples (with their Asian pagoda style square/peaked and upraised roofs), I wasn’t sure whether I was looking at a Buddhist or Hindu temple. And while stupas were clearly Buddhist, these too had their unique Nepali design features.

Taking another bus (this time a tourist “luxury” bus!) from Pokhara to the Kathmandu valley, I then went directly to Boudha. This town, now fused into the Kathmandu urban area (population around 750,000), has become a Tibetan center. There are many Tibetan monasteries and schools, and this is where Shashi was studying thangka painting. I met my friend from the USA in Boudha, and we went on several long day hikes in the agriculturally terraced, verdantly green valley. These hikes, to the famous Swayambhunath temple, Hindu temples, the Kopan Buddhist monastery, and Patan, got me into shape

for my trek to the Langtang National Park, north of Kathmandu. I went on this seven-day trek after my friend left Nepal for the USA. Since I was going to trek alone, it was customary to hire a guide/porter, which I did through a recommended agency. I was extremely lucky weather-wise (blue skies), and with my nice but very young guide, I trekked up to over 12,000 feet, to view the snowy Langtang range (top elevation over 21,000 feet) from the village of Kyanjin Gompa (“gompa” meaning “monastery,” and there was in fact an old Tibetan one there). My guide and I spent evenings at Tibetan family-run guesthouses along the trail, up and back. These guesthouses were often cold and rustic, but more than adequate, and for most visitors they have become preferable to camping out. Guests would eat dinner in the dining room, and then huddle around the central wood stove talking until it was bedtime. I met visitors from South Korea, Germany, France, Japan, etc. I was also most fortunate to be there during Losar, the Tibetan new year. I had the opportunity to observe some new year’s rituals such as the raising of the new prayer-flag pole, and traditional women’s dances. It was a fascinating cultural experience. During my last few days back in Kathmandu, the Maoist insurgents called for a general strike (“bandh”) in the city. Except for

some foreign-owned restaurants, every single shop and business was closed up tightly. There were no vehicles on the streets, except for bicycle rickshaws and the occasional courageous motorcyclist. These strikes were serious and Nepalis were genuinely afraid. The Maoists, threatening violence for non-compliance, wield a lot of power in Nepal. And so I was both relieved and very sad, to board a plane back to the USA. My big international adventure was finally over.

Return to the USA (Los Angeles to visit a friend) was of course punctuated by reverse culture shock – the quiet, the orderliness, the cleanliness! Vast mall complexes, almost completely devoid of people, spilling over with costly, irrelevant luxury goods that would astonish an Indian or Egyptian. Except for my family and close friends, in general, of course, Americans show no interest in my year-long adventure (or are somehow resentful of it). Most people display a lack of understanding

about India, Nepal, and especially Egypt. Questions, if any, are usually shallow and contain the seeds of the answer they are expecting to hear. The political complacency of most Americans, and their neurotic self-centeredness (career obsession, health obsession, etc.) is also a given, but still it is always a big disappointment. How many conversations about career, buying a house, buying a car, buying a cellular phone, etc., can one endure? This is all, of course, part of the reason I left the USA in the first



Street scene outside the Mahabodhi Temple enclosure, Bodhgaya, India

place – to meet people with refreshingly different preoccupations (but perhaps no less “stuck” in their own way).

Mostly, however, I come back completely and utterly appalled at the horrific waste of money and materials exhibited moment by moment in the USA. In one day an American generates more garbage (wasted paper and plastic, plastic, plastic) than an Egyptian or Indian would in a year. Truly, the human race is doomed if everybody on earth hopes to emulate this American corporate-mediated “lifestyle.” Most Americans are also a very cynical, inexplicably anti-intellectual lot, and it is quite mysterious to me how a people so thoroughly at the top of the ladder of privilege can be so apathetic and/or bitter about their own country and its politics (much less about their own country’s place in the world). 9-11 has only aggravated this trend, with hollow flag-waving and jingoism crowding out any meaningful thought or dialog about why this terrible bombing happened to America. (And the answer is NOT because “they are jealous of us.”) Reading a little Noam Chomsky (published as a regular columnist in the Al Ahram Weekly newspaper in Egypt – but why not in the USA?) can illuminate some of the well-documented reasons why “what goes around, comes around.” And I must ask, how much true inner reflection has occurred here,

GBF

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one year after the event? The 9-11 event, rather than providing an opportunity for soul-searching and contemplation – which can be forged into a desire for meaningful diplomacy and dialog with sovereign foreign nations – has only made Americans more isolated than ever. I am strongly reminded of something Sharon Salzberg (one of the founders of the Insight Meditation Society) wrote, in reference to denial:

Sometimes as individuals, or as members of a group, we may sacrifice the truth in order to secure our identity, or preserve a sense of belonging. Anything that threatens this gives rise to fear and anxiety, so we deny, we cut off our feelings. The end result of this pattern is dehumanization. We become split from our own lives and feel great distance from other living beings as well. As we lose touch with our inner life, we become dependent on the shifting winds of external change for a sense of who we are, what we care about, and what we value.

Over the years, people in foreign countries have truly looked up to the USA for ideas and leadership, and the current USA government is contemptuously squandering every last ounce of this good will. Thinking Americans need to work harder than ever to turn the blight around, to buck this downward trend. Perhaps the growing American interest in Buddhism, direct social actions through organizations like the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, and the quiet but steady application of Buddhist philosophical and psychological thought, can eventually make a difference in the USA. ■

Suggested readings: *The Pharaoh's Shadow: Travels in Ancient and Modern Egypt* (Indigo/Great Britain 2000) by Anthony Sattin; "Radical New Views of Islam and the Origins of the Koran" (article in the New York Times, March 2, 2002, available online) by Alexander Stille; *Holy Places of the Buddha* (Dharma/Berkeley 1994) Tarthang Tulku, editor; *Walking with the Buddha* (Eicher Goodearth/New Delhi 1999) Swati Mitra, editor; *Indian Art* (Thames and Hudson/London 1976) by Roy Craven; *Buddhist Art and Architecture* (Thames and Hudson/London 1993) by Robert Fisher; *9-11* (Seven Stories Press/New York 2001) by Noam Chomsky. Quotation is from *Loving Kindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness*, page 20 (Shambhala/Boston 1995) by Sharon Salzberg.

Text and photos copyright Kevin B. Havener, Sept. 15, 2002.

Kevin Havener is a GBF member currently living in Chicago. You can e-mail him at khav01@yahoo.com.

Come Celebrate Thanksgiving with GBF

Bob Ross has graciously agreed to host this year's GBF Thanksgiving potluck celebration in his beautiful home at 76 Parnassus Road in the Berkeley hills. The celebration begins at 2:00 Thanksgiving afternoon, with the dining starting at 3:00. Bring something tasty to share with others. Please coordinate with Bob about what to bring (so we don't wind up with 30 pumpkin pies and a can of cranberry sauce), by calling Bob at (510) 845-9694 or emailing him at rjinsf@aol.com

Directions are as follows: From San Francisco: take the Bay Bridge, get onto Highway 80, take the University Avenue exit, turn left on 6 Street, then right on Cedar Avenue. Follow Cedar all the way up the hill to the end. Turn left on La Loma, go two blocks, turn right on Buena Vista Way. Buena Vista Way eventually becomes Delmar. Turn right on Parnassus Road and right on Parnassus Court. Bob lives on the corner of Parnassus Road and Parnassus Court.

For those of you doing Mapquest, Bob lives at 76 Parnassus Road, Berkeley, 94708.

Prisoners Urgently Need Buddhist Books

The most frequent request from gay Buddhist prisoners, other than for pen pals, is for books. In many prisons, they are circulated among small sitting groups and are used in daily and group practice. All books are welcome, particularly those suitable for beginners. If you have any available, please call Don Wiepert at (510) 540-0307, or email him at GDWiepert@aol.com. Don will arrange to collect them and get them to prisoners.

Calendar

San Francisco / Bay Area Events

Sunday Sittings

10:30 am to 12 noon

Every Sunday followed by a talk or discussion, at the San Francisco Buddhist Center, 37 Bartlett Street (near 21st St between Mission and Valencia).

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 (75¢ first hour, then \$1 per hour, \$5 max). The Center is handicapped accessible.

October / November GBF Sunday Speakers

October 6 **Wes Nisker**

Wes Nisker, the co-founder and editor of the international Buddhist journal *Inquiring Minds*, has practiced Vipassana meditation for 30 years. He is the author of *Buddha's Nature: Evolution As a Guide to Enlightenment* and *Crazy Wisdom: A Romp Through the Philosophies of East and West*. In addition to leading a regular sitting group in Berkeley, he teaches classes in meditation and philosophy at Spirit Rock and at other locations around the country.

October 13 **Open Discussion**

October 20 **Jim Wilson**

Jim Wilson, the former abbot of the Chogye Zen Center in New York, has studied in the Chogye, Fuke, and Soto traditions of Zen. In addition to speaking at GBF on the first Sunday of every month, he leads two weekly sutra salons here in the Bay Area.

October 27 **Justin Hecht**

Justin Hecht is a psychologist who practices in San Francisco, specializing in stress reduction and personal growth. He has practiced Vipassana meditation for many years and seeks to integrate his Western psychological training with Buddhist spirituality.

November 3 **Jim Wilson**

November 10 **Open Discussion**

November 17 **Sean Hargens**

Sean Hargens is a doctoral student at the California Institute of Integral Studies. He is currently working on a number of projects with the philosopher of consciousness, Ken Wilber. Sean is a practicing Tibetan Buddhist who has recently lived in the Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan for over five months.

November 24 **Diana Elrod**

Diana Elrod, an active member of Soka Gakkai International (SGI), will speak about the Nichiren tradition.

Miss a Dharma Talk?

You can listen to it on the Internet. Audio files of dharma talks are available at the GBF website.

How to Reach Us

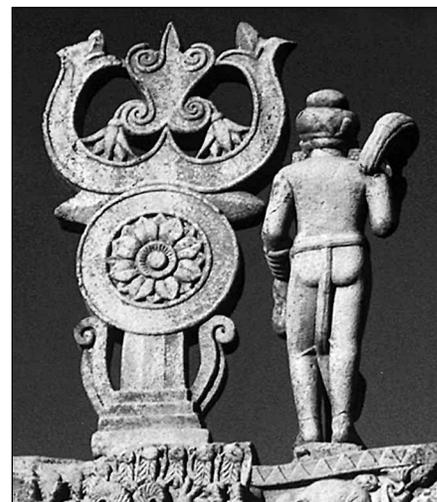
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Detail: Sanchi Stupa gate, India
By Kevin Havener

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