



Gay Buddhist Fellowship

APRIL / MAY 2012 NEWSLETTER

On *Dukkha* and *Sukha*

BY DAVID LEWIS

David Lewis, a sangha member, has been following the dharma for 40 years and has a degree in comparative religious studies. He attended his first retreat in the Tibetan Shambhala tradition at the age of 17 and has been practicing Vipassana meditation since moving to San Francisco over twenty years ago. For the past five years, he has been practicing intensively, spending about six weeks a year in silent retreat. He is a graduate of Spirit Rock Meditation's Center's dedicated practitioner program. He gave the following talk at GBF on September 25, 2011.

It really does make me happy every Sunday when I'm able to come to GBF. I usually sit out there with you, and I always appreciate the fact that in San Francisco on a day like this when we could all be sleeping in on a Sunday morning or dressing up or dressing down for the Folsom Street Fair, we all show up here instead. And at the very least you're willing to sit in silence together for thirty minutes. I just think that's a remarkable thing, and that you/we are really a remarkable group of men. It's such a unique thing in our culture. So give yourself some credit. It's good merit for all of us and for all beings.

I don't exactly know why I get asked to speak here every once in a while. I don't think it's because I'm a particularly wise or deep teacher. I suspect it's because I have a lot of enthusiasm for the dharma, or the *dhamma*, as it's called in Pali. *Dhamma* refers to the teachings of the Buddha, but it also means just the nature of things, the way things are, what is revealed when we meditate, when we're silent, when we go inward rather than outward. I have a lot of enthusiasm for that, and it has supported my life in ways that I wish I were better at expressing. I think some of you that try to practice the *dhamma* in your daily life know what I'm talking about. The practice of *dhamma* brings a lot of happiness to my life, even when things aren't all hunky dory. The Buddha has been described as the first great scientist of happiness, and as you all may know, the Dalai Lama said, "My religion is happiness." I would certainly agree with that, and I think that the Buddha is the greatest psychologist who ever lived. One of the ways that the Buddha's psychology was different from Western psychology is that the Buddha saw that there was *dukkha* in the world, in our lives, *dukkha* being dissatisfaction. It's often translated as suffering, which I don't

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.

One of the ways that the Buddha's psychology was different from Western psychology is that the Buddha saw that there was *dukkha* in the world, in our lives, *dukkha* being dissatisfaction. It's often translated as suffering, which I don't think is a very good translation. *Dukkha* is dissatisfaction, wanting things to be other than they are. But the Buddha also taught that there is *sukha*. The opposite of *dukkha* is *sukha*. *Sukha* is happiness.

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So our lives are this balance of *dukkha* and *sukha*. Everything we do and every moment of our day is some balance of *dukkha* and *sukha*, and it's not like we can get rid of all the *dukkha* in our lives and just have *sukha*, which is a lovely thought. Nor can we only live in *dukkha*. Sometimes when things aren't going well, we can be okay with that. So for the Buddha and the Buddha's teaching, happiness is a fundamental condition. It's something that is part of our Buddha nature, according to the Mahayana tradition. It's something that you all have right now. It always exists; it's just covered up. So getting at tranquility and *sukha*, happiness in your life, is a matter of uncovering. Happiness comes from *sukha*, and *sukha* comes from acceptance of the moment as it is. A gratitude for the moment as it is, even if the moment is not perfect. In the West, we tend to think of happiness as something that needs to be pursued or gotten. In the West, we tend to view our *dukkha*, our dissatisfaction, as something that's missing. There's a sense of lack. And in order to transform that *dukkha*, that dissatisfaction, into *sukha*, into happiness, we need to go get something: we need to get possessions, we need to find the right relationship, the right job, the right apartment, whatever we need to change to

make things better. And the Buddha really tried to steer us away from that idea, that happiness is someplace other than where we are.

The relentless pursuit of happiness that we all do in our everyday lives takes two different forms in terms of our activity. One is looking for pleasure, looking for the thing, the person, the job, the activity that's going to make us feel better, and the other is turning away from our *dukkha*, turning away from whatever is making us uncomfortable. It could be that we're turning away from really big issues, like relationships and jobs, or it could be really small things. I did a retreat with a group of Theravada monks earlier this spring. One of the monks just delighted me by providing an example and a definition of *dukkha* which just resonated for me. This monk said, "*Dukkha* is dirty glasses." For those of you who wear glasses, you all know that all of a sudden you notice there's a smudge on your glasses, and you might not have a handkerchief or something to wipe it off, but as soon as you notice it, it drives you nuts until you fix it. Chances are you've been sitting around for half a day with that smudge on your glasses, and it's been okay until you noticed it. That's *dukkha*. Our lives are full of *dukkha*. So when the Buddha taught that *dukkha* is a condition of life, he's not saying we're all miserable all the time, or that we're all suffering all the time—that terrible word, suffering—it's just that one thing after another that needs to be fixed, or changed or altered. And our efforts at fixing, changing or altering *dukkha* so that we get some *sukha* or at least some relief, take the form of what the Buddha called craving: "I want things to be different; I want more of this; I want less of that." So this constant cycle of noticing things are a little bit wrong—dirty glasses, bad job, unsatisfactory relationship—and trying to either turn away from it or grab something that's better, is what's called *samsara*. It's the wheel of suffering that we're all on, that we're running on like hamsters for our entire lives. And the Buddha's teaching, the Buddha's path, is how to get off the wheel of *samsara*, how to step off the wheel.

Which is easier said than done, for those of you who have a practice or have even thought about it and tried to do it, because a lot of those activities that we've come up with over the course of our lives to turn away from our *dukkha*, or to find *sukha*, don't really serve us well. Sometimes they just add to our *dukkha*, add to our dissatisfaction. And the fact that we're always looking, that this craving is always craving something different—this craving for change is always present—leads to a whole set of behaviors that can become addictive. I actually think we all have addictions of some

sort, and our addictions are our ways of turning away from the present moment in order to feel better or have something more. So the Buddha's path invites us to look at our own experience and see what's going on. And if we could do that in a non-judgmental way, we have some opportunity to change our patterns. The things that we do to turn away from our experience in Pali are called *samkharas*, and *samkharas* are to a certain extent like our ordinary neuroses. They are just our habits, our patterns, our ways in which we deal with sadness, and the ways we deal with our happiness in our lives. It's our ways of dealing with the world that are unique to each of us, called *samkharas*. So when we meditate and especially if we have an opportunity to meditate for a couple of hours a day or have the opportunity to do a retreat, as many of you did last weekend, we have time to just sit in silence and see what arises without turning away. It takes a lot of courage to see what arises without turning away. We can see our *samkharas*; we can see our patterns. So it takes a lot of courage to be a practitioner. It means being open to whatever comes up without turning away from it. And that's not so easy.

One of my favorite monastic teachers, Ajahn Sumedo, talks about it as standing under whatever experience you are having. It might be a negative experience. You might have lost somebody close to you, and you might be experiencing grief, or you might have lost a job, or you might have lost your stock portfolio. Ajahn Sumedo talks about relating to that experience by standing under it, like standing underneath a water fall. If you're feeling grief, instead of turning away from it, try to just stand there and feel the grief, and

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watch what happens to it. And the wonderful thing, usually, that we end up seeing is that it's impermanent. If we stand under any experience, happy or unhappy, long enough, it changes. So one of the things our *samkharas*—our habits of life—cause us to do is to turn away from experiences that are unpleasant, just automatically. We turn away: we read a book, or we have a drink, or we get something to eat, or we turn on the TV. And pleasant experiences we latch on to, we grasp. Both are aspects of what the Buddha called craving, and the Buddha recommends that we just be with what's happening and appreciate it for its own nature and realize that it's going to be temporary. For the longest time, that practice was a real challenge for me because I have a kind of *samkhara* of my own, especially being judgmental of myself. So for the longest time when I started sitting at long retreats and regularly at home and I'd see stuff come up, I'd say, "Oh, that's not very nice; I need to change that," which of course just caused me to shut the door again and get buried. So the idea is to be able to see your own stuff as it comes up and not be judgmental of it, to know that this is the result of causes of conditions, and you probably had very good reason for coming up with this defense or habit. At some time in your life, it served you well. But recognize that right now it's not serving you quite as well, and maybe it's something you can let go of. If we see it enough times, we can do it.

So the challenge is to remain open to whatever happens without seeking the solid forms, without trying to make it solid. That's usually what we do when something is good in our lives. Or on the other hand, remain open without seeking quick solutions to feel safe, which is of course what we do. If something scary happens, we reactively do what we need to do to feel safe.

So I have this poem by Hafiz that speaks to this somewhat. I really love it. It's called "Cast all Your Votes for Dancing."

I know the voice of depression
Still calls to you.

I know those habits that can ruin your life
Still send their invitations [*samkharas*]

But you are with the Friend now
And look so much stronger.

You can stay that way
And even bloom!

Keep squeezing drops of the Sun
From your prayers and work and music
And from your companion's beautiful laughter.

Keep squeezing drops of the Sun
From the sacred hands and glance of your Beloved
And, my dear,
From the most insignificant movements
Of your own holy body.

Learn to recognize the counterfeit coins
That may buy you just a moment of pleasure,
But then drag you for days
Like a broken man
Behind a farting camel.

You are with the Friend now.
Learn what actions of yours delight Him,
What actions of yours bring freedom
And Love.

Whenever you say God's name, dear pilgrim,
My ears wish my head was missing
So they could finally kiss each other
And applaud all your nourishing wisdom!

O keep squeezing drops of the Sun
From your prayers and work and music
And from your companion's beautiful laughter
And from the most insignificant movements
Of your own holy body.

Now, sweet one, be wise.
Cast all your votes for Dancing!

So, not to change subject, but I had kind of a nice intellectual surprise a couple of months ago. I was reading this wonderful book by Sarah Bakewell called *How to Live, or a Life of Montaigne*, a kind of biography of the French essayist. Montaigne lived in the 17th century in France. And he wasn't really a philosopher. If he lived today he'd be a blogger. He sat in this tower all day every day and wrote whatever was passing through his mind and left voluminous volumes of journals. And ever since the 17th century, he has come and gone out of fashion, and he's coming back into fashion now. He's a lot of fun to read; the guy's very amusing. But one of the things I learned reading this book was that Montaigne had a classical education, which meant he was raised in school where they were speaking classical Greek and Latin. So there's a whole section in the book about the Greek philosophers that he appreciated. I'm reminded that I haven't had Greek philosophy since maybe my freshman year in college. The classical Greek philosophers that we all know best, tended to be metaphysicians. The Buddha particularly supports metaphysical philosophy, but there was this whole different group of Greek thinkers that were also called philosophers, but they were really scientists of life. They were like Montaigne, interested in

the question, "How do you live?" There were three major schools of Greeks: the stoics, the Epicureans and the skeptics, and I'm not going to go into detail about all of them, but these were the three schools of Greek philosophy that looked at this question of how we should live and tried to answer it. They all had different bents on it, but there's one general path that they all seem to agree on. Being a dharma person, I really appreciate it. The best path that they seem to agree on to happiness, which in Greek—those of you who are Greek will forgive me my Greek pronunciation—is *eudaemonia*. The best path to happiness is through equanimity. Have you ever heard that before? The path to happiness is through equanimity. How do you get equanimity? Equanimity is achieved through the practice of mindfulness. Wow! I always thought the Greeks were diametrically opposed. I think of rationalism, a kind of fundamental basis for the whole philosophical Western culture, which is in so many ways different from Eastern culture, as coming from the Greeks. And here I find a bunch of Greeks who were pretty much teaching the same things as the Buddha was at the same time. In fact, when I talked to one of my dharma teachers about this—I said, "I just discovered the coolest thing about the Greeks"—he taught me that Hero, who founded the Greek school of skepticism, was in the entourage of Alexander the Great and spent a good deal of time in Northern India at the time or shortly after the time of Buddha. So there was this cross-fertilization of Western and Eastern cultures in 300 BC. So I'm not necessarily saying that the Greeks got their ideas from the Buddha, but you know dharma is dharma, and it's universal. It doesn't matter who says

This constant cycle of noticing things are a little bit wrong—dirty glasses, bad job, unsatisfactory relationship—and trying to either turn away from it or grab something that's better, is what's called samsara. It's the wheel of suffering that we're all on, that we're running on like hamsters for our entire lives. And the Buddha's teaching, the Buddha's path, is how to get off the wheel of *samsara*, how to step off the wheel.

it. You get the same thing from Native Americans who had no access to the Buddha, but the dharma is the dharma. It really pleased me to get the same lessons from the Greeks.

The motto of the school of the skeptics, Hero's motto, is "I suspend judgment." The skeptics believed that the judgments, for even simple views and opinions, were so subjective that they should really be kept to yourself because mine are different from yours, and if you do share views and opinions, you should be deeply respectful of the fact that there's no such thing as an absolutely true view or opinion. It's always subjective. The Buddha certainly believed this also, and taught that one of the primary forms of craving is views and opinions. Our views and opinions are something that we attach ourselves to. They become me, mine. They support our sense of self, and are fundamentally disrespectful of anyone who thinks otherwise.

So I wanted to go off on that idea a little, on views and opinions, then get some of your views and opinions. We have an election year coming up. I don't know about you, but I'm hearing a lot of views and opinions. It's really interesting to watch my own reaction and my own stuff come up. You might have heard this from me before, but I periodically take news holidays where I just stay away from the news. I cancel the newspapers but I still get the Sunday *New York Times* because I like the book review and the entertainment section. But this morning I got my *New York Times* and I started looking at it and became immediately pissed off. So after a couple of articles because today I was giving a dharma talk and I was trying to be mindful and be in the moment, I needed to put that away. I don't watch CNN; I don't watch Fox News. It's not because I disagree with everybody but one of the things I notice is that if you turn off the sound and watch a little bit of Fox News, or CNN, you get the same thing, you get the same message. You get agitated people talking a lot. So the Buddha didn't say, "Don't have views and opinions." He did advocate for what he called discernment, so that in any given circumstance, including politics, the Buddha would say evaluate the situation, do what you can do, and don't fret about it, because most of the pain that we cause ourselves in politics is purely internal. Michelle Bachman doesn't annoy you. You annoy yourself in response to Michelle Bachman. It's a really useful distinction to look at in your practice because part of what craving is about is blaming our mood on somebody else: my partner, my job, my Michelle Bachman. Did you notice what came up when I mentioned Michelle Bachman? We all have a response, and in a different group, Barack Obama would produce the same response. So what I'm trying to end with, and I hope I'm doing this skillfully, is to get us to pay attention to our response and how we create our own suffering by that response, because

So the idea is to be able to see your own stuff as it comes up and not be judgmental of it, to know that this is the result of causes of conditions, and you probably had very good reason for coming up with this defense or habit. At some time in your life, it served you well. But recognize that right now it's not serving you quite as well, and maybe it's something you can let go of. If we see it enough times, we can do it.

I think there's going to be a lot of opportunity for creating suffering coming up, if it hasn't already started in this election year. It doesn't have to happen. We can act with discernment. We can do the right thing. We can be engaged Buddhists, but we don't have to sit around grinding our teeth.

I just wanted to remind you of this before I end. Bill Weber was here about a month ago, and for those who were here, he used a really poignant metaphor that I just wanted to remind you of. It was a story about the Vietnamese boat people after the Vietnam War when they were evacuating people, and people were trying to get away, and there were hundreds if not thousands of over-loaded boats trying to get out to the American warships, trying to escape. And the boats were all over-loaded because as soon as a boat would leave the beach, people would swim out and climb on it, and the boats were turning over and people were panicking and jumping up and down and waving their arms. Bill had read a story someplace and quoted it here at GBF about someone noticing that if a boat had one calm person on it, just one person not panicking, that boat was much more likely to make it. That person might have been quietly bailing water while everyone else was jumping up and down, waving their arms, excited, but if there's one calm person in the boat, the merit of their practice impacted everyone else on the boat, and they were more likely to make it. That story really stuck with me. So I just want to encourage us as practitioners, or Buddhists, or just citizens of the world, to take the opportunity to be the one calm person in the boat for whatever is coming up. And who knows what's coming up? ■

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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.

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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

April 1 Jerry Martin

Jerry has been attending the GBF since 2008. He was an ER doctor for over twenty years and now works in an urgent care setting. In between, he graduated from Pacifica Graduate Institute with a masters in counseling with an emphasis on depth psychology. His thesis looked at resilience among the generations of men who came out together following Stonewall. As an MFT, he has done individual counseling and led groups for HIV-positive men, bereavement and cancer support. Having had a life full of challenges and (mis)adventures, he will speak of his own resilience and how he views this as a part of his Buddhist path.

April 8 Jim Stewart on Buddha/Jesus/Easter

In honor of Easter, longtime GBF member Jim Stewart will share aspects of his experience integrating the teachings of Jesus and the Buddha.

April 15 Jana Drakka

“Gengetsu Junsei” received Dharma Transmission in the Soto Zen Buddhist Lineage from Zenkei Blanche Hartman, the first woman in this lineage. Jana’s nonprofit organization, Jana Drakka’s Community Services, provides a wide range of services including support groups, workshops, classes and talks. Jana’s community work is based in Harm Reduction Principles—a way to meet everyone with complete acceptance—and allows for a client-centered modality. Among her many activities, Jana leads a meditation group at Glide Memorial Church on Monday evenings. She also facilitates an ongoing peer support group for case managers at Tenderloin Housing Clinic, where she runs a mindfulness group and a grief/stress support group and gives one-on-one counseling to staff and clients.

April 22 Tova Green

Tova Green began sitting at the San Francisco Zen Center in 1990 after many years of Vipassana practice. She became a resident there in 1999 and was ordained as a priest in 2003 by Eijun Linda Cutts. Tova co-founded the Queer Dharma Group at the Center and is currently the Director of the San Francisco Zen Center’s City Center.

April 29 Open Discussion

May 6 Elia and Halima Van Tuyl

Elia and Halimah Van Tuyl have been married for over 40 years, raised a family of four daughters in Palo Alto, and since 2005, turned their attention to problems of poverty among children in Cambodia. As co-founders of Friends of Cambodia, they have travelled many times to Asia to develop and fund programs for children who had been working and living at the infamous Steung Meanchey garbage dump close to Phnom Penh. Their current focus is on the Cambodia Scholars Program, which aims at providing disadvantaged Cambodian youth with adequate education and training to successfully transition into adulthood without falling back into poverty. Details of their program and a link to a blog may be found at www.friendsofcambodia.org.

May 13 Heather Sundberg

Heather Sundberg began teaching meditation in 1999 primarily to youth and families. She has completed the four-year Spirit Rock/Insight Meditation Society teacher training and continues to be mentored by Jack Kornfield. She is also a graduate of the Spirit Rock Community Dharma Leaders program (CDL2). She held the position of Spirit Rock Family Program teacher and manager from 2001-2010. Currently she teaches classes, day-longs, and retreats throughout California, especially at Spirit Rock, and through the Mountain Stream Meditation Center community. 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.

May 20 Open Discussion

May 27 Daigon Gaither

Daigon Gaither began Buddhist practice in 1995 as a Vipassana practitioner and began to study Zen in 2003 with Paul Haller. He received Lay Ordination in 2006 and became a resident of San Francisco Zen Center in 2008, where he currently lives and is in training to be a Priest. His work and practice include many hours devoted to community service as one of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence (since 1995) and a volunteer caregiver with Zen Hospice Project (since 2003). Daigon is a full-time student working towards a graduate degree in Buddhist Studies to become board certified as a chaplain. He is also the co-facilitator of San Francisco Zen Center’s Queer Dharma, which meets once a month on Saturday afternoons.

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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