



# Gay Buddhist Fellowship

DECEMBER 2012 / JANUARY 2013 NEWSLETTER

## The Dharma and the Science of the Mind

BY 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. He gave this talk at GBF on August 13, 2006. This transcript first appeared in the GBF newsletter in October of 2006.**

I want to start by reading a bit of doggerel I wrote for my journal. It's called "Why I Meditate," and it was inspired by a poem by Allen Ginsberg of the same name.

### Why I Meditate

I meditate because I suffer.  
I suffer, therefore I am.  
I am, therefore I meditate.  
I meditate because there are so many other things to do.  
I meditate because when I was young it was all the rage.  
I meditate because of Siddhartha Gautama, Bodhidharma, Marco Polo, the British Raj, Carl Jung, Alan Watts, Allen Ginsberg, Alfred E. Newman, et al.  
I meditate because evolution gave me a big brain, but it didn't come with an instruction manual.  
I meditate because I have all the information I need.  
I meditate because the largest colonies of living beings, the coral reefs, are dying.  
I meditate because I want to touch deep time, where the history of humanity can be seen as just an evolutionary adjustment period.  
I meditate because life is too short and sitting slows it down.  
I meditate because life is too long and I need an occasional break.  
I meditate because I want to experience the world as Rumi does, or Walt Whitman, or Mary Oliver.  
I meditate because now I know that enlightenment doesn't exist, so I can relax.  
I meditate because of the Dalai Lama's laugh.  
I meditate because there are too many advertisements in my head and I am erasing all but the very best of them.

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.

- I meditate because I want to remember that I am perfectly human.
- I meditate because I love Jack Kerouac.
- I meditate sometimes because my heart is breaking.
- I meditate sometimes so that my heart will break.
- I meditate because a Vedanta Hindu master once told me that in Hindi my name Nisker means non-doer.
- I meditate because I am growing old and want to become more comfortable with emptiness.
- I meditate because Robert Thurman called it an evolutionary sport, and I want to be on the home team.
- I meditate because I am composed of 100 trillion cells, and from time to time I need to reassure them that we are all in this together.
- I meditate because it's such a great relief to spend time ignoring myself.
- I meditate because my country spends more money on weapons than all other nations in the world combined. If I had more courage, I'd probably set myself on fire.
- I meditate because I want to discover the fifth Brahma Vihara, the divine abode of awe, and then I'll go down in history as a great spiritual adept.
- I meditate because I am building myself a bigger and better perspective and occasionally I need to add a new window.

Why I meditate—just a few of the reasons there; there are others. This morning I'm going to talk about your mind and our mind: our mind because it is really a collective thing that we share, a particular organ, brain, nervous system, at a particular moment in evolution. We share a particular culture that determines a lot about our minds. So it really is a collective discussion about this thing that creates our reality or this thing that we perceive as our reality.

I think the most significant shift in my life that has come out of my meditation practice over the years has been my relationship to my own mind. We're still friends, but we're not quite so codependent as we used to be. I'll never forget my first meditation retreat, where I understood two very important things about my mind, and this happens to almost anyone who goes on any kind of retreat for any length of time: two very significant revelations, actually. The first one was the discovery of mindfulness itself. I was 27 or 28 years old when I first started meditating. I had a good degree from an American university. I had done some Freudian Gestalt therapy, but nobody in my culture had ever told me that you could actually de-

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velop this ability to step out of your own drama and simply observe it, this quality that has been called mindfulness. It's a huge discovery. It's like a double consciousness: that you can be aware of your own mind and your own awareness; that you can actually track yourself from what Christians sometimes call a higher self or the witness.

The second revelation, the one that really was shocking to me, was that I'm not in control of my mind. The instructions were simple: sit there, just pay attention to your breath, don't consciously or willfully do anything else. So I start paying attention to my breath, and voila, my mind continues to think and make plans and have regrets and fantasies without consulting me. It just went on. On my first meditation retreat, I had just come from being a news director at a rock and roll radio station in San Francisco, and that may have something to do with the fact that on the first couple of retreats that I did, my mind insisted on singing to me during meditation—and not New Age meditation music; it was pop songs with good hooks. And they would come into my head randomly. Something would trigger them, some cue, and they would repeat over and over again. I thought I was going crazy; I could not turn them off. Sometimes a song would pop into my head that was on an album side that I was familiar with, and I would track through the album side, sometimes flip it over and play the other side. It was insidious, really. A number of people that I have talked to about this say that they have had this phenomenon, which I call juke box karma. You listen over the years and it gets imprinted. Especially in combination with drugs, the music goes in deep. But this was a real revelation. Before I began meditating, I was completely lost in the contents of my mind. And still now when I go on a retreat or almost any time that I sit down to meditate, I am suddenly reminded that I have been totally lost in my own drama without any awareness of it, just rolling in it, completely unconscious, you might say, lacking any consciousness of it. Here's a quotation from Tibetan sage Tulku Urgen:

The stream of thoughts surges through the mind of an ordinary person, often called dark diffusion. In this state, there is no knowledge whatsoever about who is thinking, where the thought comes from, where the thought disappears. One has not even caught the scent of awareness, and the person is totally and mindlessly carried away by one thought after another.

This is the case for most people, and this is the thing that meditation is designed to cure really, to break through that mesmerizing stream of our own mind, the products of our own mind. Of course, our civilization has come to emphasize thinking. That's what we get graded on in school. Descartes said, "I think, therefore I am," showing how much we have become identified with the thinking mind. I think Descartes should have said, "I think, therefore I think I am." And actually what he should have said is,

"I breathe, therefore I am," because we can breathe without thinking but we can't think without breathing. I think it is somewhat ironic that I spent the first half of my life learning how to think, and now I am spending the second half of my life learning how to ignore my thinking. What was I thinking?

I don't want to give the impression that thoughts are bad. It's our genius as a species. We make up these complex symbols that we agree upon and they can be expressed in sounds, and we use this ability to pass information back and forth and directions and discoveries, and then pass them on to the next generation. It's a brilliant adaptive system. But as a species, we've grown to overemphasize or over-romanticize it. We've grown to think that our thinking makes us superior to the rest of creation. In his secret notebooks, Darwin said, "Why is thought, which is a secretion of the brain, deemed to be so much more wonderful than, say, gravity, which is a property of matter? It is only our arrogance, our admiration of ourselves." And Stephen J. Gould said, "An octopus doesn't go around being proud of its eight arms." What they are saying is that the thinking mind is basically an adaptive tool. It's an evolutionary design that helps this particular species read the environment at a distance, and in fact, in time. You know, remember, plan ahead. A brilliant adaptation, no doubt, but nonetheless an

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adaptation. And that is actually how the Buddha saw it. If you look at the Buddha's texts, the thinking mind is the sixth sense, no more or less important than sight, which also allows us to read the environment at a distance. It is very liberating to begin to understand thinking as a biological function and as an adaptive function. It helps to both demystify and depersonalize our thinking mind, which causes us so much suffering because we think of it as so individual, as so much ours, as so self-created, when really it's created by evolution. 30,000 years ago, people were sitting around; guys were probably thinking, "What color should I paint my spear?" and "Who's going on the hunt tomorrow?" and "Is anybody watching the fire?" Now we thinking about our 401-K and the grocery list and so on, but it's basically the same stuff. It's survival stuff. Sometime, as an interesting little experiment, take a session of your meditation and see how many of your thoughts can be somehow placed in the category of survival: sex, money, shelter, place in the pecking order. It's all there.

I have found it very interesting and useful and liberating as a follower of this path, as a Buddhist practitioner, to understand what science, in particular cognitive science, neuroscience, evolutionary science, is saying about our brain and how it works. And it totally supports the Buddha's vision of how things are in

the world. We're looking at our minds with mindfulness, sometimes; the scientists are looking at our brains with these PET scans and CAT scans and MRIs and SQUIDS (the Superconducting Quantum Interference Device). They're really quite shocked at what they're finding. First of all, they're finding that most of our mental processes go on beneath our conscious awareness on what neuroscientist Daniel Dennett called the subpersonal level. In other words, most of our interpretations of the world, and even the motivations and the carrying out of our behaviors, are often done without our taking part in them. They go on beneath our awareness and consciousness comes in late in the game. The psychologists were telling us that for about a century—that there were all of these forces in the subconscious that were really ruling our lives. But now the cognitive scientists and the more materialist scientists are showing that that's the case based on some elaborate experiments.

A now very famous experiment by a cognitive scientist named Benjamin Libet shows that the brain makes decisions

for us. He wired subjects to monitors, galvanized skin response and brain pictures, and he told the subjects to push a button whenever they felt like it, just randomly push a button, and he discovered that the brain goes into a kind of readiness preparation; the brain starts doing this a half a second before the subject becomes conscious of making the decision to do it. In other words, the brain starts and the consciousness comes in later and says, "I'm doing this," when actually it was the brain that was doing it. The brain can do this and fool us into thinking we're doing it. The brain is a complete wonder: it processes an estimated 11,000,000 bits of information a second, all the information coming from inside of your body and from the outside world. It's a phenomenal organ.

The complexity is quite astounding. And this is really interesting: the brain is made up of all of these different little compartments that do the processing, these little groups of cells, little brain regions. For instance, loud sounds and quiet sounds are handled in different subsectors of the auditory center of the brain. The verbal areas of the brain are so specialized that nouns and verbs get processed by different groups of cells. In the visual cortex, one group of cells gets activated when you see a face and another group gets activated when you see a face looking at you. What the scientists say is that all of these little brain

regions are impersonal; all do their jobs; they receive these little electrical and chemical signals, and then based on the strength and the coding, they send signals on to where they're supposed to go. As one scientist said, "These different agencies of the brain have no more self or soul than your liver." So all of these little worker parts of the brain don't know who they're working for, and they don't know what the outcome is supposed to be; they just do their jobs. A kind of example: someone's coming towards you on the sidewalk. Streams of photons go hit the retina in your eye, get turned into electrical signals, which go to the visual cortex. All parts of the brain are on a constant resonating communication with each other. So immediately, the visual cor-

ments on the lateral hypothalamus suggest that our chronic internal state will be a vague mixture of anxiety and desire best described by the phrase 'I want' spoken with or without an object for the verb." I want. That's the setting of our brain.

Now you might think that that's depressing news. It is a little. But the fact that we can know it is really the beginning of our freedom, and when you sit in meditation and you see the mind moving constantly in this state of dissatisfaction, you begin to break your identification with it. This is not "I, me, mine"; this is evolution's brain. It's doing its thing. And you can learn to calm it, be okay with it, and find what the Buddha called a different kind of happiness. The Buddha recognized this setting in the brain. He

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tex sends signals to the memory center. As the image is being assembled, it asks, "Is this familiar? Does it look like somebody we know?" Maybe not. It goes to the emotional center, the limbic system, and asks, "Do we like this? Is this going to be good?" It goes to the behavioral center to get ready for some kind of movement. All of these centers of the brain are notified. All this information is coordinated with all of the other kinds of information that's coming in, like your intention (How strong is your intention to walk down the street without being interrupted, etc.). In the end, whether you wave to this person or cross the street to miss them is nothing more than a brain jerk reaction, as I call it. Based on your past experience, your past conditioning, and evolutionary demands, something will happen, within you and without you. Cognitive scientist Marvin Minsky said, "Just as we can walk without thinking, we can also think without thinking."

As a meditator, you start to get to understand this; you start to see it. You start to see both how the mind moves with desire or aversion and how the thinking comes, these clusters of thoughts, not only independent of your will but against your will, how this whole flow of mind just continually pours through you based on your own early conditioning, your psychology, and your biology—the instincts that live in you.

Now the scientists say that most of the stuff that flows through our mind has to do with survival, as I was talking about. Here's how a neurologist named Melvin Connor expresses some of the recent studies of the brain: "The motivational portions of the brain, particularly the hypothalamus, have characteristics relevant to the apparent chronic nature of human dissatisfaction. Experi-

called these instincts underlying tendencies, but he made them the basis of his second and third noble truth, the second noble truth being that the reason that we suffer so much is desire, meaning this desire and aversion, this constant dissatisfaction in our minds. And the third noble truth is that we can work with it; we can understand it and work with it. But our suffering comes not because we haven't fulfilled our latest desire; our suffering comes because of the endless wheel of desire that goes around. Life is a little like Chinese food. It's great, but fifteen minutes later, you're hungry again. Understanding that is really a revolution; and I think the dharma, meditation, is a revolution in consciousness, and we're all in on the early stages of it. I mean, 2,500 years ago, in biological time is the blink of an eye. Humans are just waking up to their own condition. When you think about it, Freud and Darwin and Jung and Einstein are our contemporaries. This is a whole new ballgame that we're involved in.

One of the most interesting things that happened in my meditation practice over the years is that when I started dropping down from the thinking mind and into my body and feeling, there was almost always some kind of emotion accompanying the thinking, especially the repetitive clusters of thoughts and the insistent thinking when I would get lost. If I would come and check my body, I would realize that there was some mood that had invaded or had taken me over. I was coming into the body and actually feeling that the thinking mind is run by the engine of the limbic system. Emotions have been around for 100,000,000 years; thinking has only been around for a few hundred thousand maybe, at the most. We're just learning how to

think, but the limbic system, the emotional system, is very heavily wired. I've found that the more you can come in and experience the engine, the emotional engine of your thinking, the more liberating it is. We can get very identified as an individual with the thinking brain, but with the emotions, fears, sadness, anxiety, all of that stuff, it's generic. There's a way that when you start to feel your life being lived on that level, you gain what I call evolutionary intelligence. You become more identified with your species self than you do with your individual drama. Evolution is such a good way to understand the mind.

Probably one of the most important discoveries of the 20th century, and not heralded enough, was one made in the 60s by Dr. Paul MacLean at NIMH. He was studying the evolution of the brain and discovered that we don't have a brain, we have three brains, and that they develop in each of us in the womb in the same order that they developed in nature. We get the brain stem first, the reptilian brain, and over that grows the limbic system, the mammalian brain, and over that eventually grows the new human brain, or the neo-mammalian brain. And MacLean also discovered that one brain doesn't override the other brains. In fact, they're very intimately connected, and in fact the reptilian and mammalian brains are really fully engaged. They work 100%. We only use 30%, maybe, of our new human brain—at least the capacity—and there's some speculation that we use the new human brain mostly to make excuses for the behavior generated by the other two brains. A very likely possibility. And it's funny—they've done studies now with people with split-brain injuries, and they've found that the left hemisphere weaves everything we do into a story that we tell about ourselves. We want to think about ourselves as an integrated being and have meaning, and the left hemisphere is continually weaving everything we do into this narrative. But whether it makes any sense outside of our own brain is another question.

You have to bow to your reptilian brain, your lower brain. You have to bow because it's taking care of your body temperature, your hunger, your sex drive, your metabolism, and if you had to consciously do that, you wouldn't have any time to think.

**The individual human life first and foremost is life; secondly, it is human; and only thirdly and narrowly is it individual. You know, we share 99.999—thirteen nines—percent of our DNA with each other. The IQ and the personality—it's all just a thin coat of paint over the basic design.**

The upshot is, "Who makes the decisions in your life?" What's becoming clear is that you are not necessary, and in fact, you can't be found. There was a *Time Magazine* cover story in the summer of 1995. It was called "In Search of the Mind." I'm sure that many people were shocked to realize that the mind was lost and were even more shocked to realize that the scientists couldn't find it. I thought this article was so interesting that I cut it out, and I've been reading the last paragraph ever since to people. I love it.

Despite our every instinct to the contrary, it seems that consciousness is not some entity inside the brain that corresponds to self, some kernel of awareness that runs the show. After more than a century of looking for it, brain researchers have concluded that such a self simply does not exist.

This is in *Time Magazine*. Why wasn't there a nationwide panic? The scientists have discovered that the self does not exist. It turns out that the brain is a self-organizing system, and it doesn't need you. I was wondering whether the scientists who were now beginning to understand the processes of the human brain would be feeling some degree of self-liberation themselves to see this. Maybe not. A few years ago, for *The Inquiring Mind*, I interviewed a renowned cognitive scientist and Tibetan Buddhist, the late Francisco Varela. He said he didn't think many scientists got it. He was a Tibetan Buddhist, and he got it. He told me, "Many cognitive scientists close the door of the lab after studying all day about the selflessness of the brain and go right back to their normal self-absorbed life." He said, "The best science can do is give a stamp of validity to the notion of selflessness." And his conclusion: "You can have an intellectual understanding of *anatta* [*anatta* being the Buddhist Pali word for selflessness] while the emotional root that weaves that understanding into your life remains absent." And that's really what we're doing, partly, in meditation, especially in more advanced practices, working with this idea of "no self." It's not just seeing through the boundaries of self. It's seeing that we are much more than this individual drama, and in fact that we are much bigger selves than we think we are. I like to put it like this: "Our individual human life is first and foremost life, with all of the constraints and glories that all life forms have." When you come and sit down and meditate, you start with the breath. The breath is not just an object for you to concentrate on; it's a sign of life. And considering that you were dead for a long time before you were alive, and you're probably going to be dead for a long time after you die, it's very special to feel. Let the fact of life reverberate in you. It can bring such a sense of delight and wonder. The mystery is right here. The mystery that nobody understands is right here as close as your breath. The individual human life first and foremost is life; secondly, it is human; and only thirdly and narrowly is it individual. You know, we share 99.999—thirteen nines—percent of our DNA with each other. The IQ and the personality—it's all just a thin coat of paint over the basic design.

In meditation we can begin to understand and weave our understanding into the emotional root of our lives and really learn to regard our individual drama with less pathos and less striving and less fear and less anxiety. I know of no other way to do it than this process of mediation. I know there are some pills you can take. But they don't heighten your awareness; they block out parts of it.

Let me just end with this story about a disciple coming to Bodhidharma, who brought Buddhism from India to China. The disciple comes and says, "Please help me quiet my mind." Bodhidharma says, "Okay, bring me your mind and I'll quiet it." And after a moment, the disciple says, "But I can't find my mind," and the Bodhidharma says, "There. I've quieted it for you." ■

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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](http://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

### December 2 Dale Borglum

Dale Borglum is the founder and Executive Director of The Living/Dying Project. He is a pioneer in the conscious dying movement and has worked directly with thousands of people with life-threatening illness and their families for over 30 years. In 1981, Dale founded the first residential facility for people who wished to die consciously in the United States, The Dying Center. He has taught and lectured extensively on the topics of spiritual support for those with life-threatening illness, care-giving as a spiritual practice, and healing at the edge—the edge of illness, of death, of loss, of crisis. Dale has a BS from UC Berkeley and a PhD from Stanford University. He is the co-author of *Journey of Awakening: A Meditator's Guidebook* and has taught meditation for the past 35 years.

### December 9 David Lewis

David Lewis has been a member of the Gay Buddhist Fellowship for five years. He has a degree in Comparative Religious Studies and has been a dharma practitioner for 40 years, first in the Vajrayana tradition and more recently in the Vipassana tradition. He is a graduate of the Spirit Rock Meditation Center's Dedicated Practitioners Program and shares the dharma at several sanghas in the Bay Area.

### December 16 Susan Moon

Susan Moon is a writer and teacher and for many years was the editor of *Turning Wheel*, the journal of socially engaged Buddhism. She is the author of *The Life and Letters of Tofu Roshi*, a humor book about an imaginary Zen master, and editor of *Not Turning Away: The Practice of Engaged Buddhism*. Her short stories and essays have been published widely. Sue has been a Zen student since 1976, practicing in the lineage of Suzuki Roshi at Berkeley Zen Center, Tassajara Zen Mountain Monastery, Green Gulch Farm, and now with Zoketsu Norman Fischer's Everyday Zen sangha. She received "entrustment" as a lay teacher in 2005. She is the mother of two grown sons and the grandmother of Paloma.

### December 23 Open Discussion

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### December 30 Bob McMullin

Bob McMullin started attending Gay Buddhist Fellowship in 2008 and then took a hiatus for two years while working at the Abbey of New Clairvaux, a Trappist monastery north of Chico, California. He returned to San Francisco and reconnected with GBF in 2011. He grew up in an American Baptist household and was an American Baptist seminarian in the late 1960s. Like many of his generation, Bob explored alternative lifestyles and spiritual expressions after leaving seminary. While working at the LA Gay and Lesbian Center in the 1990s, Bob was struck by the lack of spiritual options for gay men and lesbians in our culture and began a renewed journey of self-discovery and commitment to the spiritual needs of the gay community that continues to this day.

### January 6 Open Discussion

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### January 13 Heather Sundberg

Heather Sundberg began teaching meditation in 1999, primarily to youth and families. A graduate of the Spirit Rock Community Dharma Leaders program, she is currently in teacher training under the guidance of Jack Kornfield. Beginning her own meditation practice in her late teens, Heather has studied with senior teachers in the Vipassana and Tibetan traditions for over fifteen years and has sat 1-3 months of retreat a year for over a decade. She has been the Family Program Teacher and Manager since 2001 and is a teacher for the weekly Women's Class. 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.

### January 20 Gary Ost

Gary Ost is an Episcopal priest living in San Francisco. Upon retiring from 30 years of parish ministry, he began to explore other spiritual paths, including the Vision Quest and Sweat Lodge path and Buddhism. He served as the first board chair of the Earth Medicine Alliance, a non-profit organization that works to reconcile humans with their other than human relations. He is also a member of the Third Order of St. Francis. He enjoys meditating, reading, cycling, walking, traveling, helping prepare good food, expressing himself musically and offering Reiki treatments. Gary is currently giving attention to *Way of the Bodhisattva*, an 8th century CE text that not only gives up-to-date instructions for people to live sanely and openheartedly in our very troubled world but also, in the words of Pema Chödrön, provides "essential guidance for those spiritual warriors who long to alleviate suffering, their own and that of others." The aspiration to follow in this Way is what he wants to talk about today.

### January 27 Dave Richo

Dave Richo, Ph.D, M.F.T., is a psychotherapist, 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](http://www.davericho.com).

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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