

## gay Buddhist Fellowship

DECEMBER 2013 / JANUARY 2014 NEWSLETTER

## Don't Believe Everything You Think

BY DAVID LEWIS

David Lewis has been following the dharma path for over forty years and has a degree in comparative religious studies. He attended his first retreat in the Tibetan Shambhala tradition at the age of seventeen and has been practicing Vipassana meditation since moving to San Francisco twenty-five years ago. For the past five years he has been practicing intensively. David is a member of the Mission Dharma sangha, where he teaches an Introduction to Insight Meditation class. He is a long time member of the Gay Buddhist Fellowship and also leads a weekly sitting group for seniors every Friday morning. David is a graduate of Spirit Rock Meditation Center's Dedicated Practitioners Program and has been on the teaching team for Spirit Rock retreats.

y topic for today—I'm going to hold off telling you what it is for a minute or two—is something that I just brought up in passing the last time I talked here, and somebody came up to me and said, "Oh, make a dharma talk out of that." I just filed it away in the back of my head and, in the last week or two, I thought, okay, well, I'll put together a dharma talk. I'm going to talk about some big Buddhist concepts, so it's a little bit more of a tutorial than you usually hear coming from me in dharma talks, but there's nothing wrong with taking a look at big Buddhist concepts. I just want to preface this by saying that the Buddha himself was not big on big Buddhist concepts. The Buddha did not like to address metaphysical concepts. In fact, he actively discouraged people from picking up metaphysical ideas: questions like "what's the meaning of life?" or "Is there a god?" The Buddha generally just wouldn't answer them, or he would change the subject.

One of the interesting things and one of the things that attracts me to the Dharma is this avoidance of big metaphysical concepts. The Buddha said, "I teach only suffering and freedom from suffering." Just another way of saying, "I teach happiness." Nevertheless, in the course of his teaching, these big concepts came up, like the Four Noble Truths, *dukkha*, freedom from *dukkha*, and they sometimes come across as being treated dogmatically, and the Buddha, if anything, was not dogmatic. The Buddha said, "Whatever you hear coming from me, you should be able to check out in your own experience." By that he meant not your views and opinions about

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.

things, but what you see in the world and what happens when you meditate, when you get quiet. I'm going to use a few Pali words. Pali is the language or an approximation of the language of the Buddha's time, and I'll give you the translations, but sometimes, for me, hearing a Pali word reminds me that this concept might be bigger or different or somehow different than the English concept. I'm also going to give you a couple of those notorious Buddhist lists. I know they annoy some people.

stuff that happens in life, you know, just keeps happening, and that's unsatisfactory.

The third characteristic on that list is the one that doesn't get talked about so much in the sangha and in the Dharma world, and that's *anatta*. That's this idea of non-self. I spent the longest time trying to understand that from an intellectual perspective and was essentially not successful. It was only when I started to approach it through my practice, like I did with impermanence and with unsatisfactoriness, that it

Words of the Buddha: "Non-identification has been declared by the blessed one, for whatever way one conceives, the fact is other than that."...Our stories aren't reality. They're a conceptual projection. ... The problem isn't so much that we have stories and that we have ways of talking about ourselves; the problem is that we get identified or attached to our stories. I was at Spirit Rock for a retreat, and somebody had a bumper sticker on their car that said, "Don't believe everything you think." That would be a good title for this talk.

Because I'm talking a little bit about what I hope won't come across too much as concepts, and I would rather have them come across as practices, if it's not making any sense to you or if you're not wrapping your mind around it, just let it go and see what bubbles up. To start out, one of the really big collections of concepts, a really important list in the Buddhist teachings, is the three characteristics of experience. Do you all know what the three characteristics of all experience are? They're, in Pali, anicca, anatta, and dukkha. All of our human experience in the world is characterized by impermanence, by unsatisfactoriness, and thirdly by non-self. That's a big starting off point for a lot of people that come to the dharma, trying to wrap their minds about anicca, anatta, and dukkha. It's not so easy. For me the idea of impermanence was the easiest one, because I see that in my life. That people come and go. When I look at the world around me, it changes. When I meditate, my thoughts are all over the place. My mind changes. My body changes. I get older. My fingernails grow. My hair falls out. Dukkha, or unsatisfactoriness, took me a little bit longer to get, but I also got that through practice, and for me that's largely understood through my understanding of what impermanence is. If the world's impermanent, and if my mind's impermanent, if my experience is impermanent, then everything's changing, and that's unsettling. That's unsatisfactory. Even wonderful things that happen to us in life are temporary. They end, and that's unsatisfactory. The bad stuff, the unpleasant

started to make sense. That's kind of what I wanted to talk about today, and the way that I'm coming at it is not to try to define anatta, or non-self, for you, but to talk about how we self. How we make ourselves. How we create ourselves on a minute-to-minute, day-to-day basis. One of the ways we do this is through our view of ourselves, our opinion about In Pali that's called sakkāya-diţthi, self-view. Sakkāya-diţthi, or self-view, is basically the stories we tell about ourselves. They start very early in childhood and they get reinforced on a daily basis for the rest of our lives. Do you ever get tired of your story? Anybody? You ever find yourself telling your story sometimes and you just think, ahh. It's a great practice when you start realizing it's not true, or it's elaborated. The Buddha said that often in his teaching: It's not true. Words of the Buddha: "Non-identification has been declared by the blessed one, for whatever way one conceives, the fact is other than that." How do you think about yourselves? It's probably other than that. Our stories aren't reality. They're a conceptual projection. They may be kind of true. They might be based in truth. They might've been true at one time, but not now. Given the fact that they started so early in our lives, they may not have even been your story. They may have been something that somebody told you. your parents, a teacher. You're a slow learner. Or you're a good athlete. Or you're very good looking. These are all ideas that we pick up and attach to. We get identified with these views and stories, and that's the problem. The problem isn't so much that we have stories and that we have ways of talking about ourselves; the problem is that we get identified or attached to our stories. I was at Spirit Rock for a retreat, and somebody had a bumper sticker on their car that said, "Don't believe everything you think." That would be a good title for this talk. Don't believe everything that you think.

In mindfulness practice, this is something we can really work on: getting quiet, looking at what is going on with our mind, doing a certain amount of investigating. It's a wonderful opportunity to start picking apart some of those stories. In the first place, just listening to those stories, and then asking the question, "Is this true? Is this accurate? Is this me?" Another Pali word, bhāva, describes the way that we continue on a daily basis to elaborate our stories. Bhāva means becoming. It's how we are born. We are born in our own minds every day; we create ourselves. An interesting thing to look at in practice is how we define ourselves, how we become. I'll give you an example of it. Over the last couple of days, I worked on this talk, and then I started thinking about it. Oh, is this a good topic for this group? Am I qualified to talk about it and do I really know what I'm talking about? Are they going to like it and are they going to like me? Am I the right person to be doing this? That's all bhāva. You know, I could have completely gotten bogged down and stressed out and overwhelmed by my doubts-about myself, about the topic, about whatever I was doing.

My practice was, whenever that stuff came up, I would just let go of it. I would notice that, okay, it arises, now let it go, kind of like what we do in meditation. Stuff arises. We let go. Hamid Ali defines ego as "the psychic structure based on crystallized beliefs of who we are and what the world is." We have all these "crystallized beliefs," and they become our ego. They're us. We think they're us. What is us if us is not our thoughts and our beliefs about ourselves? The Buddha had teachings about that, too. This is another one of those really famous lists. I'm going run by it as quickly as I can. The Buddha said that there are five func-

unpleasant or neutral. A really interesting thing to do in your practice, whether it's just walking around daily life or sitting on a cushion, is to notice that whatever comes up, any thought you have, any feeling, any sensation, anything I'm saying right now, chances are you're either finding it pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. If it's neutral you might not be noticing. The third aggregate is perception, and that's recognizing or naming things. From previous experience, I know that the object beside me is a Buddharupa, a statue of the Buddha, and I know who that is. Somebody that has never seen one before would not have that same perception, but that's my perception. Joseph Campbell, by the way, said of perception, once you name something you stop knowing it. That's true of you, too. Once you name something you stop knowing it. The fourth aggregate is conceptions or mental formations, which is another way of saying "thinking," and including your emotions, thinking and feeling. I am my thoughts. I have my thoughts; my thoughts are me. The fifth is consciousness, consciousness itself. Like, who is doing this noticing? Consciousness.

The aggregates are real. You can't deny we have bodies and we have thoughts and we have consciousness. The fact that these aggregates make us up is not the problem. The problem is that we get attached to them. This body is me. If this body changes, it's no longer me; therefore it's disturbing. Our bodies age. That's a little scary, disturbing. Our bodies are going to die eventually. That's very disturbing to us. Our thoughts change. A lot of people find it very threatening to think that thoughts might not be accurate.

For all five of these *khandhas* we tend to say to ourselves, unconsciously, silently, "I take my body to be myself. I take my thoughts to be myself. I take my consciousness to be myself, my thoughts, my perceptions." The Buddha taught that none of these can be taken as self. None of these *khandhas*, which are real—no single one of them can be taken as self. There's an exploration we can do in our practice. Is my body myself? This ever changing thing—is my

# The aggregates are real. You can't deny we have bodies and we have thoughts and we have consciousness. The fact that these aggregates make us up is not the problem. The problem is that we get attached to them.

tions that make up human beings. Being a human being is kind of a matter of five functions. He called them the aggregates or the *khandhas*. In Pali, they're called *khandhas*, which means bundle or group. The translation is "aggregates." Here's what makes up a human being, according to the Buddha: our body, my body, the solid thing, earth, air, fire, and water is body; feeling tone, second one. Feeling tone isn't about emotions; it's our preferences. It's pleasant,

body what's essentially me? I know you've all heard other speakers talking about clinging. Clinging is the problem in this process. It's getting attached to our bodies, getting attached to our thoughts. Sometimes this is easier to see in other people than it is in yourself. If somebody is spouting really inane views or somebody has an idea of themselves that you know is not true, someone that you know is a pleasant, nice, attractive person who thinks they're just the

worst person on earth, and you just want to shake them and say, "That's not my perception." But we have these beliefs, so sometimes it's easier to see in other people than in ourselves, which is why other people can be our teachers. When my friends reflect things about themselves that I don't agree with or that I have a different perception about, very often now I say, "Oh, I do that, too." That's just a reminder. I do that, too. It's an opportunity for great compassion, for both them and for myself. It's, "Oh, I do that too."

Likewise, thinking is not the problem. Thoughts arise. One of the delusions that a lot of people have coming to meditation is that if they sit and close their eyes, their mind's going to go blank and they're not going to have any thoughts and it's going to be this very pleasant experience. Thoughts happen. Thoughts happen. They only become a problem when we attach to them in meditation.

ago my partner died. I'd been in the relationship for over twelve years, and we were best friends and really close. My identity was completely wrapped up in this relationship, more so than I knew. At the time my partner died, I was just overwhelmed with grief, and because of that, I quit my job and I gave myself a sabbatical. At the time, the plan was that I was going to give myself a sabbatical of a couple of years and just kind of reevaluate where I was in the world, rethink that. I ended up retiring, but the idea was a sabbatical. I was really quite shocked after a while and surprised to learn how much my identity was wrapped up in (a) being in a relationship that was welldefined and a habit, and (b) having a job and a profession. I knew what to say when people asked, "What do you do?" You know, I had an answer, an easy answer. And an easy answer to, "Oh, are you with somebody? Are you in a

Personality and self are really just habits of mind that we reinforce through repetition. It's the way the mind inclines in habitual ways. It's habit. Our personality is a habit. R.D. Laing says, "The range of what we think and do is limited by what we fail to notice." William James says, "Each of us literally chooses, by his way of attending to things, what sort of universe he shall appear to himself to inhabit." . . . I love that turn of phrase, "appear to himself." It's delusion. Our mindfulness practice can poke holes in this delusion. Our mindfulness practice can question authority. That's another good bumper sticker, "Question authority." Question your own authority. Awareness shines a light on these habits of personality, and we practice letting go of concepts of who we are supposed to be and opening ourselves to a living reality of our experience.

Our meditation practice is allowing thoughts to happen, allowing feeling sensations to happen, without attaching, and it takes practice, because we are so conditioned to attach. Thoughts are only problems when we take them as being the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Having just come through a political season, we heard a lot of people that thought they had the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Another example about myself and this whole process of solving, creating identity, or having identity, was about five years ago. Five years

relationship?" All of a sudden, I didn't have a relationship and I didn't have a job and I didn't know how to define myself. It was very disconcerting. Eventually, when I could let go of the need to have those identities, it was really liberating for me. But that wasn't an easy process. I kind of learned it the hard way. I imagine that many of you have attachments to identities. it's not your fault. We do it habitually, have attachments to identities that you just kind of take for granted, that you might not be too aware of. Your job, your relationship, your interests, your intel-

ligence, your hobbies, your families. Sometimes clinging to these identities feels like what's holding us together. I am this. I have the definition.

There's a third part of this identity view business that the Buddha thought about, and that's another Pali word, another Pali concept. It's called *mana*, which is conceit. "Conceit" is the root of "conceited," in English. Conceit is about "I

actually happening, using our five senses plus thought. In Dharma there's six senses.

The Buddha has a refrain that comes up over and over again in the *suttas* that is pertinent to this. This is the Buddha's refrain, it's repeated very often: "Seen as it actually is, with proper wisdom, this is not mine. This I am not. This is not myself." We can apply that to any of those aggregates or

# We've spent our life building this definition of ourselves, this personality, this self-view. Letting go of it's not so easy. But when we do, there's a spaciousness and an opening and a freedom to it. It's an awakening experience.

am." Often conceit is about comparison. I'm better than him. I'm worse than her. I am not a good meditator. During the meditation everyone is so quiet and still while my mind is just going 10,000 miles a minute, and I'm not as good as everyone else who's sitting here at being perfect Buddhas. We feel conceit about our age, our race, our sexual identity, our religion, our nationality, our status, our class, even our spirituality. Conceit is actually the cause of some of our worst problems of the world. My country's better than yours. My religion is superior to yours. Conceit also works the other way. The other flip side of conceit is, I'm not as good as. I'm inferior. I'm not as smart as. One of the interesting things, I find, as a long term practitioner, about conceit is that it's said in the scriptures, in the suttas, that as we start letting go of fetters—fetters are obstacles to enlightenment, obstacles to awakening—and the Buddha taught that some obstacles are fairly easy to let go of and overcome, and other obstacles are the last to go. Conceit is one of the last to go. It's one of the things that's hardest to let go of: this comparison mind.

Personality and self are really just habits of mind that we reinforce through repetition. It's the way the mind inclines in habitual ways. It's habit. Our personality is a habit. R.D. Laing says, "The range of what we think and do is limited by what we fail to notice." William James says, "Each of us literally chooses, by his way of attending to things, what sort of universe he shall appear to himself to inhabit." I'm going to repeat that one. "Each of us literally chooses, by his way of attending to things, what sort of universe he shall appear to himself to inhabit." I love that turn of phrase, "appear to himself." It's delusion. Our mindfulness practice can poke holes in this delusion. Our mindfulness practice can question authority. That's another good bumper sticker, question authority. Question your own authority. Awareness shines a light on these habits of personality, and we practice letting go of concepts of who we are supposed to be and opening ourselves to a living reality of our experience. That's what we try to do in meditation: pay attention to direct experience, what is

thinking: this is not mine. Our body: this is not myself. Our preferences, liking this or not liking that: this is not me. It's a practice. When identity view starts to break up, which it does if we do this investigative practice, it can be disconcerting, as it was for me. But then, as it was for me, it can be liberating. We've spent our life building this definition of ourselves, this personality, this self-view. Letting go of it's not so easy. But when we do, there's a spaciousness and an opening and a freedom to it. It's an awakening experience. I'm not saying it's enlightenment. It's an awakening experience that any of us can have. Some of you have had awakening experiences this morning. Just sitting and letting your mind rest can be an awakening experience. The aggregates are still there: thinking, body, perceptions—they're still there. We just stop clinging to them. We start to let go of clinging to them. We stop empowering our habits. This is a good time for metta, compassion, kindness to ourselves, and for everybody else that's doing this, because we all do it.

Sharda Rogell says, "As the force of identification gets weaker, the I is not so demanding. We begin to smell the perfume of selflessness." *Anatta*. Non-self. The concept we started out with. Rumi says, "If you could get rid of yourself, just once, the secret of secrets would open to you. The face of the unknown, hidden beyond the universe, would appear on the mirror of your perception." That's all I have to say. I just encourage you to try practicing with some of this, rather than thinking about it. Notice what happens when you meditate.



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#### Dana

Dana is a Sanskrit and Pali word meaning generosity or giving. In Buddhism, it also refers to the practice of cultivating generosity. This can be characterized by unattached and unconditional generosity, giving and letting go. The Gay Buddhist Fellowship has no dues or fees, offering the dharma and sangha freely to all.

Rent \$300.00

Newsletter \$320.00 (approximately)

\$300.00 (\$100.00 per speaker) **Speakers** 

\$200.00 Monthly Larkin Street dinner Mail box, website, misc. \$80.00

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monthly expenses \$1200.00

We ask for a weekly donation of \$10.00 or more. Thank you for your generosity!

#### How to Reach Us

#### www.gaybuddhist.org

Mail correspondence:

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For general questions about GBF write to:

inquiry@gaybuddhist.org

To contact Program Committee with suggestions for speakers and comments:

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#### **GBF Yahoo Discussion Group**

There is now a GBF discussion group for the general membership (and others) on Yahoo loin 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 31/2 blocks

PARKING: on street (meters free on Sundays) or in adjacent New Mission Bartlett Garage The Center is handicapped accessible.

#### **Sunday Speakers**

#### December I Joe Goode

Joe Goode is the artistic director of the Joe Goode Performance Group and a professor in the department of Theater, Dance and Performance Studies at UC Berkeley. He has had a meditation practice since 1979 and has incorporated Buddhist principles and meditation practices into his choreographic works. His work blends theater, dance, spoken word and focuses on the fallibility, the imperfection of being human. Goode believes that the creative impulse is a step toward the alleviation of suffering. He teaches workshops for people interested in unearthing this impulse called "Writing from the Body," "Start Simple," and "Finding the Bones."

#### December 8 Clint Seiter

Clint Seiter has been a long-time sangha member in both GBF and the Green Gulch Zen Buddhist communities. During his involvement in these communities, he has been the lead muffin baker in Green Gulch for twenty-five years and the head of GBF's monthly "feed the homeless" dinners at Larkin Street Youth Center for over twenty years. Clint will discuss his involvement in "engaged Buddhism" in both these projects and how they have become an integral part of his Buddhist practice.

#### December 15 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 thirty years. In 1981, Dale founded the first residential facility for people who wished to die consciously in the United States, The Dying Center. 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 thirty-five years.

#### December 22 David Lewis

David Lewis has been following the dharma path for over forty years and has a degree in comparative religious studies. He attended his first retreat in the Tibetan Shambhala tradition at the age of seventeen and has been practicing Vipassana meditation since moving to San Francisco twenty-five years ago. For the past five years he has been practicing intensively. David is a member of the Mission Dharma sangha, where he teaches an Introduction to Insight Meditation class. He is a long time member of the Gay Buddhist Fellowship and also leads a weekly sitting group for seniors every Friday morning. David is a graduate of Spirit Rock Meditation Center's Dedicated Practitioners Program and has been on the teaching team for Spirit Rock retreats.

### December 29 Open Discussion January 5 Open Discussion

#### January 12 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 one to three 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.

#### January 19 Charles Garfield

Charles Garfield, PhD, is founder of Shanti and Shanti National Training Institute, founding faculty at Metta Institute End of Life Counseling Program, a visiting scholar at Starr King School for the Ministry at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, and a mathematician on the Apollo Eleven first lunar landing program. Dr. Garfield is a Clinical Professor of Psychology in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of California Medical School, and a former Board member at the C.G. Jung Institute of San Francisco. He has published ten books including Sometimes My Heart Goes Numb: Love and Caregiving in a Time of AIDS, Psychosocial Care of the Dying Patient, and Stress and Survival: the Emotional Realities of Life Threatening Illness.

#### January 26 Sean Feit

Sean teaches the Dharma as a path of inquiry and integration and draws on twenty years of devotion to meditation and yoga. He was a monk in Burma in 2002, and has studied with many wonderful teachers including Jack Kornfield, Sylvia Boorstein and Eugene Cash (Dharma, meditation), David Moreno and Alice Joanou (yoga), and Steve Hoskinson (Somatic Experiencing). Sean teaches at Yoga Tree, Yoga Garden SF, Piedmont Yoga, and SF Insight, and leads kirtan, offering the practice of Bhakti Yoga as an integral aspect of a heart-centered Path.

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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 pedication of merit