



Gay Buddhist Fellowship

AUGUST / SEPTEMBER 2014 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.

The Anatomy of Ignorance

BY DONALD ROTHBERG

Donald Rothberg, Ph.D., a member of the Teachers Council at Spirit Rock, has practiced Insight and Metta Meditation since 1976, and has also received training in Tibetan Dzogchen and Mahamudra practice and the Hakomi approach to body-based psychotherapy. Formerly on the faculties of the University of Kentucky, Kenyon College, and Saybrook Graduate School, he writes and teaches on meditation, daily life practice, spirituality and psychology, and socially engaged Buddhism. He is the author of *The Engaged Spiritual Life: A Buddhist Approach to Transforming Ourselves and the World*. For more information visit www.donaldrothberg.com

This morning I wanted to talk about a fundamental theme which is really a response to the deep question “What is the basic root for human suffering, for conflict, for the distress of our world, for our own individual distress?” In Buddhist tradition, we have a very clear answer: the root cause is a kind of deep spiritual ignorance.

It's interesting that the main alternative response to that question in our culture is that the root of problems is evil: evil people, axes of evil, and so forth. It's a very different view because when we see ignorance as the basic problem, it's at once sobering but also hopeful. When we see evil as the problem, it sets ourselves up for a lot of war, and probably sets us up for a lot of denial of our own so-called evil. It also makes possible a lot of Hollywood movies. If ignorance was our main paradigm in society, I think the movie industry would look very different.

I want to explore this morning a way of understanding what I sometimes like to call the anatomy of ignorance and point to ways of practicing. This is really giving an overview of our practice and pointing both to the dimensions of our own ignorance and ways that we practice both individually and more collectively to cut through ignorance.

Of course, it is very clearly stated in Buddhist tradition that the root cause is ignorance. These are some quotes from the teachings of the Buddha. “Warped perceptions are what keep your mind on fire.” Another one: “Delusion burns the bewildered, unaware of the noble *dhamma*.” The sense of ignorance there again is not ignorance of facts, or ignorance of specific information, but it's a sense of not really knowing who we are and how we are in relation to others. There's a line from the eighth century from Shantideva, who was a teacher and wrote the book *Guide to the*

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Bodhisattva's Way of Life, which some of you have probably read. He says, "This world is inflamed with insanity due to the efforts of those who are confused about themselves."

So what I want to do is unpack that sense of ignorance, first to talk a little bit more about the nature of ignorance in general, and then to point to three main forms that I think our ignorance takes. I'm going to call the first more personal and psychological, the second more social, and the third more spiritual. I think these intersect. In doing so, I'm not giving a totally traditional understanding. If we were giving a traditional understanding, we would go to the third aspect and we would particularly look to how we are confused about impermanence, the nature of suffering, and the sense of an enduring self. But I'm going to start a little bit earlier, first of all giving some images of ignorance that have been there, because it's really something that's shared by other traditions, including Western traditions. The Greeks also emphasized ignorance.

As I mentioned, when we see ignorance as the root problem, it can be sobering because we can see, or have an intuition of, the extent of our own ignorance. But I think it's also hopeful, and it also sets us up ultimately for compassion, both in looking at ourselves and looking at others. Ignorance is workable, but it can take a while. Some of you may remember the writings of Plato; some of you may have read Plato's *Republic* in Philosophy 101. Sorry to bring back disturbing memories. At the heart of that book, there's an image which is really an image of ignorance: human life as taking place in a cave. You may remember that the human condition is that of people who are in chains in a cave in the dark staring at shadows on the wall. The shadows are cast by a group of men whose images are cast as shadows because they're walking in front of a fire. The fire casts the light on the far wall, and there are shadows. We spend our lives, according to that image, being with the shadows and thinking that they're real. It's a very interesting image, maybe of television, or watching images all the time and somehow thinking that this is reality. Actually, it's quite contemporary in a certain way. In that text, what the spiritual aspect has to do is really turn one's life around, so one actually turns and sees that what one took to be reality is in fact a bunch of projections. You look and you see that, and then one also realizes that it's possible to go out of the cave. With tremendous effort, one can see that what one took to be real is a bunch of projections. One turns around and then, with the help of others, can move out of the cave and see reality as it is. It doesn't really end there because in Plato's story, once one is out of the cave, one still has to make the effort much like the bodhisattva to help others move out of the cave. Again, a very strong image.

There's another nice, interesting way to say this that's in the poetry of Rumi, where he talks about our basic condition as being like a drunk who goes from tavern to tavern. I wanted to read this poem from Rumi. It is called "The Tavern." This is part of the poem:

All day I think about it, then at night I say it.
Where did I come from, and *what* am I supposed to be doing?
I have no idea.
My soul is from elsewhere, I'm sure of that,
And I intend to end up there.

This drunkenness began in some other tavern.
When I get back around to that place,
I'll be completely sober. Meanwhile,
I'm like a bird from another continent, sitting in this aviary.
The day is coming when I fly off,
But who is it now in my ear who hears my voice?
Who says words with my mouth?

Who looks out with my eyes? What is the soul?
I cannot stop asking.
If I could taste one sip of an answer,
I could break out of this prison for drunks.
I didn't come here of my own accord, and I can't leave that way.
Whoever brought me here will have to take me home.

So we have that image again in a lot of poetry, a lot of texts. Some of you remember that Blake says that if we could somehow cleanse the doors of perception, we would see things as they are. The writer Nabokov says, "We are artistically caged." So how can we both look at the nature of that ignorance and understand ways to work with it? I want to look at these three ways of talking about it, really three ways of understanding ignorance, and I think they all are intersecting. When we take each of them seriously, we have a broader view of our life practice that actually goes beyond traditional Buddhist understanding and really brings in some of the resources of the contemporary world. I'm going to look at what I'm calling personal or psychological ignorance, social ignorance (socially-conditioned ignorance), and spiritual ignorance. Okay, are we ready?

I'm thinking of this as both sobering and hopeful. So if you find yourself on one side, especially the sobering side, remember that we'll get to practice. I think it does point out a lifetime curriculum for training.

The personal sense of ignorance, which is especially looked at in psychology, is linked to how in mainstream psychology there's talk about the unconscious. We are not aware of large numbers of factors which actually drive us. That's a familiar sense in our culture. I think it goes well with the Buddhist notion of ignorance. There are forces that drive us, and I want to say again that the personal or psychological and the social and spiritual are interwoven; they're not totally distinct.

In my own both personal work and work with others, I do a lot of work with the theme of transforming the judgmental mind. I don't think I've given a talk about that here, maybe another time. It's a very powerful and almost endemic problem in our culture, and again I think probably most of us have worked with issues of self-judgment or judgment with others, and they go together quite a bit. It's certainly been a big issue for me. I sometimes say I'm a recovering judgmental person. You may be as well. In that work, we often see that there are strong self-judgments that people have. Again, it's very common in this culture, very common with people whom you would look at and say, "My gosh, these are magnificent human beings." We are often pained and even sometimes crippled at certain points by self-judgments.

One of the interesting areas of inquiry in doing this work is that, over time, we can really see that a lot of those judgments are driven by what I've come to call core limiting beliefs that many of us have that are often way beneath the surface. There can be negative beliefs as well as positive beliefs, but it's the negative ones that are particularly challenging. There might be limiting beliefs of "I am not okay" or "I am basically flawed." It could be about myself, or it could be about others. I cannot trust others. I cannot be myself and be loved by others. The world is dangerous, and so forth. Most of us, I think almost all of us, have some versions of this. We're often totally unaware of them, and they drive our behavior. When a person is told at age four that "you are not okay because of this whatever—your anger, your energy, your curiosity," that gets forwarded and most of us internalize a certain message, which is basically that you will not be loved unless you act this way.

We internalize that message, and then we start living our life. It doesn't get shifted until we come to California and start therapy. As you can imagine, it's often from conditioning at a very young age. A lot of this is explored by psychology, but also there are dimensions that are not necessarily looked at well. There are aspects of our own being that we're quite ignorant about that are driving us. Someone may have been told, let's say at age four, "Don't be angry. Angry people are bad." That person internalizes that. When that person becomes angry, there's self-judgment. When others are angry, there is judgment of them, and so forth. That person doesn't know why all this is happening, and there are vast networks of ignorance that all of us have.

I know that probably for most or all of us, much of our adult life has been coming to know our own personal conditioning, to see some of those core beliefs, and to work to transform them, which is not always easy. A lot of times we start that work by seeing where there's distress, seeing where there's possibly judgmental mind. For the people I work with, seeing where that judgmental mind surfaces is a starting point and becomes something to track that we can follow to the depths, to the places where we don't know ourselves, to the places where we are confused about ourselves, and driven in all sorts of ways. It can manifest in many ways, but that is one whole area of our work.

It often intersects with the social and the spiritual. I've taught at Spirit Rock the two-month retreat a few times, and with people who are incredibly dedicated practitioners, a lot of the territory we've looked at is those limiting personal beliefs, those views of themselves. Again, judgment is a huge theme, but there are plenty of other themes that involve some kind of limiting belief that is largely unconscious that drives people. We all know that. Why do we find relationships that aren't going to work, right? What drives us? We can use those difficult experiences as a starting point to say, what's really there underneath the surface? What's really there for me? How do I come to self-knowledge?

The poet Rilke has a line, "We come of age as masks / We don't really know ourselves." We all come with this conditioning. Some of you know there was an image from

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the poet Robert Bly of two people meeting each other, maybe on a date, and they bring their personality there and then behind them they drag a long bag which he calls the shadow. It's like you could have a cartoon image of these two smiling people, meeting each other, talking about things with these twenty foot bags behind them. Does that resonate? It's there, and that's a first aspect of our ignorance. We could take a year or five years to explore that together. We could have a curriculum where we do that over time, so I'm partly giving a map and partly giving energy hopefully to see where we are called to explore.

The second type of ignorance, which overlaps quite a bit, is a socially-conditioned ignorance, again which is both there in the larger culture and gets internalized. It's an ignorance of all sorts of different forms. One of the main forms is how we internalize being part of the society. We internalize senses of people in a particular group either being good or bad. We know those very well, right? We know that there are ways that we internalize the message of society about race or ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class, age, and so forth. It's very strong conditioning. I'm sure that everyone here has worked with that tremendously to see that conditioning in oneself, and to work through it. I'm sure there are countless stories. We have to look at this conditioning honestly. One moving story is from the 1954 Supreme Court decision outlawing racial segregation in the schools. One of the supports for that decision came from studies done in Harlem by Mamie and Kenneth Clark. They were studies of young African-American girls. The studies, which were done in the forties and the early fifties in New York, involved showing these young African-American girls dolls, essentially a black doll and a white doll. They asked them, "Which is the good doll? Which is the bad doll? Which is like you?" When they asked these African-American girls which doll was good, they almost entirely pointed to the white doll. What is the bad doll? It's the black doll. They asked a series of other questions, and the last question was "which doll is like you?" Half of them could not answer the question. That was at a very young age, that internalization. We often call this internalized oppression. We internalize the messages of society, and the message of society in the case of everything I mentioned

is full of ignorance, full of constructions, projections about all these areas, right? And yet they're there, and we internalize them.

When I was in my twenties, I was really interested in dreams, and for about two years I think dreams were more real than waking life. Has anyone ever done that? I was writing down four dreams a night, and after about a year or a year and a half, I went back and looked at the dreams and started classifying them. It was twelve hundred dreams or something. I looked at them, and there were a lot of interesting patterns. My favorite dreams were the really lucid dreams, when I was aware I was dreaming and then all sorts of magical things happened. All sorts of altered states opened up, very amazing things. One of my favorite dreams was one of those lucid dreams. I was taken to the factory where causes and effects are manufactured. I recommend visiting the factory. One of the things I noticed was that there was a very strong association between black men and fear in my mind. I had grown up probably unlike most people of European descent. I had grown up going to school with African-Americans, with a lot of contact, but when I saw those dreams, that association was there in my mind.

There's a tremendous amount of work that we have to do on all sorts of levels. There's internalized oppression; there's internalized privilege; there's internalized racism, sexism, homophobia, everything—even for those who, as it were, have the right views. It's very deep, and we know that. There's ignorance around all sorts of things. We are ignorant about what our country does with its foreign policy. The culture is very ignorant about what's happening to climate change, and so forth. It's like we're kind of collectively moving towards the cliff. There is tremendous ignorance on a social level, and when we have the commitment to wake up, that's part of our awakening.

It's a very audacious path to say I want to commit to awakening. There's the personal awakening; there's awakening on the social level, individually, collectively. It's a lot, right? It's a lot that we're talking about, but I imagine that everyone here is called in all three of these aspects.

The last one is what we call spiritual ignorance. Again, in the Buddhist tradition, this is outlined very clearly. It's

We can learn in our practice to be more with a sense of a flow and not be so caught up with taking things to be permanent. We see through the often mystifying power of language, which has us give a concept to everything. We experience this often in meditation, more of a sense of flowing with experience, where things are not so fixed, where we can be with what we call a tree, or with the natural world, and not be so consumed with the concepts. We can be with a sunset and not be saying, "This is a wonderful sunset," or instantly go for the camera. We can actually be more with the direct experience.

I like to interpret that sense of impermanence and that sense of not-self by pointing to what some psychologists call the flow experience, which we experience a lot. When you're with someone that you care about a lot, and you've dropped all your self-consciousness, and you're just with that experience, just with that flow, there's not so much a strong sense of self, and maybe your gifts come out more. It's not necessarily only a mystical sense of impermanence and not-self; it's also very ordinary: when we're in an activity and totally immersed.

done a little bit differently in different traditions. In the Theravada tradition, which is the one I'm most trained in, there are three main types of ignorance. One is that we are ignorant of the fact that things are impermanent. The second is that we are ignorant of the roots of suffering. So the first is that we're ignorant of impermanence; we tend to take things that are impermanent as permanent, or with ignorance. The second is we tend to take things which are unreliable and not lasting as sources of happiness. This leads to suffering. The third is we tend to think that we are separate independent selves rather than seeing our own interdependence. These are deep, deep forms of ignorance that are very much rooted in our conditioning. You can see how they go along with the personal and the social conditioning.

American individualism certainly doesn't help us learn about not-self in the Buddhist sense, right? There's so much conditioning here, and in our practice, especially when our practice develops where we can actually look at this—this is where retreats are really crucial—we learn to be more with a sense of ongoing flow; we see through. We can learn in our practice to be more with a sense of a flow and not be so caught up with taking things to be permanent. We see through the often mystifying power of language, which has us give a concept to everything. We experience this often in meditation, more of a sense of flowing with experience, where things are not so fixed, where we can be with what we call a tree, or with the natural world, and not be so consumed with the concepts. We can be with a sunset and not be saying, "This is a wonderful sunset," or instantly go for the camera. We can actually be more with the direct experience, so a lot of meditation is there to take us to being more with the direct experience of things, less with the concepts. Not seeing impermanence is very caught up with being bound by concepts. Concepts are obviously valuable, but when we get caught up with them we will not be able to see impermanence.

The second area that we study and that we learn about—again this is very traditional—is that we learn how to see what the roots of suffering are and not be so consumed by thinking, "Oh, this will make me happy." We stop grasping as much. I imagine this is something which everyone here has felt a lot of learning about in their practice, that we learn not to grasp so much, not to think,

"This will bring me happiness, this sense experience or this relationship or this trip or whatever," but that what we explore in the meditative path more and more is that the deepest happiness is more of a resting in our being and not grasping after things, letting phenomena come and go, acting skillfully where we need to, but not grasping so much. This is again a very long training for most of us. It's a long training for the deeper ways we grasp. I've found in my own practice I was able to let go of a large number of things fairly early in my practice, and they were mostly fairly insignificant. The deeper ones take time.

The third area is often the hardest to understand. It's this teaching called not-self, or *anattā*. We can sometimes talk about it more positively as interdependence. We learn to see that reality is much more interdependent, that we're much more in connection and not so separate. Again, we can get a sense of this in meditation. I think many of us have these experiences at times and I like to interpret that sense of impermanence and that sense of not-self by pointing to what some psychologists call the flow experience, which we experience a lot. When you're with someone that you care about a lot, and you've dropped all your self-consciousness, and you're just with that experience, just with that flow, there's not so much a strong sense of self, and maybe your gifts come out more. It's not necessarily only a mystical sense of impermanence and not-self; it's also very ordinary: when we're in an activity and totally immersed. We can see a lot of this with musicians or artists, even people in sports. In sports it's called being in the zone, where there's not a sense of self.

One of my friends, Andy Cooper, wrote a book called *Playing in the Zone* about the psychological and spiritual dimension to sports. Amazing stories of people who had these experiences where they were totally psychic, and they could almost be in the minds of their teammates. They didn't talk about it very much. I think we know that from a lot of everyday experiences. I don't think this is at all just an artifact of meditation. Let me just end with a quote. This is from an Egyptian novelist named Naguib Mahfouz, a book called *The Palace of Desire*. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988. These are just a few sentences: "The problem is not that truth is harsh, but that liberation from ignorance is as painful as being born. Run after truth until you're breathless, and accept the pain involved in recreating yourself afresh." ■

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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.

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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

August 3 Alistair Shanks

Alistair Shanks has studied Tai Chi, Qigong, Taoist Meditation, Taoist Breathing and Ba Gua with his teacher, Lineage Master Bruce Frantzis, since 1994. He currently teaches Tai Chi at the American College of Traditional Chinese Medicine on Potrero Hill, and he also teaches classes, workshops and private lessons around the Bay Area. He has been a volunteer with Zen Hospice Project (ZHP) since 2004, and for the last four years has assisted in training new volunteers. He also is an adjunct faculty member of the ZHP Education Center, conducting trainings and presentations on the Zen Hospice approach to end of life care. He has been practicing Vipassana meditation since 2003 and has sat long retreats at Spirit Rock, Insight Meditation Society, and the Forest Refuge.

August 10 Joe Rodriguez

Joe Rodriguez is a Soto Zen student from the Shunryu Suzuki lineage, studying under Furuo Nancy Schroeder (Abiding Abbess, Green Gulch Farm Zen Center) and serving as a board member of the San Francisco Zen Center. As a business executive and a long-time LGBT activist, he practices in order to bring awareness, compassion, and forgiveness to daily life.

August 17 Open Discussion

August 24 Daigan Gaither

Rev. Daigan Gaither began Buddhist practice in 1995 in the Vipassana tradition and then began to study Zen in 2003 with Ryushin Paul Haller Roshi. He received Lay Ordination in 2006, when he was given the name Daigan or "Great Vow." He received Priest Ordination in July 2011. His work, practice, and free time include many hours devoted to community service in a variety of ways, including his work as one of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence and as a volunteer at Zen Hospice Project. He has spoken na-

tionwide on a variety of issues and has sat on a number of boards and committees that serve community and social justice.

August 31 Tom Moon

Tom Moon has been a practitioner of Vipassana meditation for fifteen years. His spiritual home is Spirit Rock Meditation Center. He is a psychologist in San Francisco, working primarily with gay men. His chief commitment is in exploring the interface between Buddhist practice and psychotherapy.

September 7 David Lewis

"The Four Foundations of Mindfulness: Part One"

David Lewis has been following the dharma path for forty years. He attended his first retreat in the Shambhala tradition at the age of seventeen and has been practicing insight meditation since moving to San Francisco over twenty-five years ago. David teaches an insight meditation course at the Mission Dharma sangha and facilitates a weekly meditation group for seniors. In 2013, he led the Gay Buddhist Fellowship's fall residential retreat. A graduate of Spirit Rock Meditation Center's Dedicated Practitioners Program, David also has a degree in comparative religious studies.

September 14 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 illnesses and their families for over thirty years. In 1981, Dale founded the Dying Center, the first residential facility for people who wished to die consciously in the United States. He has taught and lectured extensively on the topics of spiritual support for those with life-threatening illness, caregiving as a spiritual practice, and healing at 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 thirty-five years.

September 21 Open Discussion

September 28 Carol Newhouse

Carol Osmer Newhouse has studied Insight Meditation for more than twenty years and has been teaching for ten. Her root teacher is Ruth Denison, who was empowered by the great meditation master U Ba Khin of Burma. She has also studied with Dr. Rina Sircar at CIIS and Dr. Thynn Thynn in Daily Life Practice. She is the founding teacher of the Lesbian Buddhist Sangha in Berkeley.

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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