



# Gay Buddhist Fellowship

FALL 2016 NEWSLETTER

## The Kamma Vipaka of Spiritual Practice

BY BENJAMIN YOUNG

**Benjamin Young began meditation as part of his spiritual practice when he was in his early twenties. Over the last forty-four years, he has studied many spiritual paths, pursued a number of meditation practices, led spiritual retreats and given spiritual talks. Benjamin traveled to India for two months in 2001 where he and a close friend took monk's vows. He has been practicing a Buddhist form of meditation called *Anapanasati*—Mindfulness of the In and Out Breath—for the past 20 years and assisting others in developing their spiritual practices.**

Before I start, I was sitting in the bathtub doing my morning reading, which is where I do most of my spiritual reading. It's like going to the womb, it's very warm and comfortable. I started a new book by a monk named Ajahn Brahm. I don't know if you're familiar with him. He's a member of the Thai forest tradition, and is centered in Australia. He tends to write rather unusual books. The first one he wrote was entitled *Who Ordered this Truckload of Dung?* This one is called *Don't Worry, Be Grumpy*. He sort of touched on a lot of the stuff that I was thinking about. These are very short stories and I really recommend them because they're easy reading; they all have an interesting point and he has a good sense of humor.

My title is rather obscure if you're not familiar with Pali and if you haven't really thought about spiritual practice. *Kamma* is the Pali version of the word karma, which literally means action. It's really important, because the view we typically hold in our culture of karma is a lot more than action. To give you a formal definition, The Buddha defined it as volition. Any deliberate act, either skillful, wholesome, or un-skillful or un-wholesome. It means that we're engaged in karma every instant of our lives. Every breath we draw, every thought that arises, every movement of our body or hands is karma, action.

The second word is *vipaka*. *Vipaka* is a Pali word literally meaning ripening. The Buddha defined it as the results of *kamma*. In our view typically, we see karma as being both the action and the ripening of the action, but in reality they're two separate things. Both of them make up what is a result of our activities on the planet. We go around performing actions, resulting in ripening of those actions. Think about that every time you do something. Every time you draw a breath, every time you have a thought. Every time you make a move-

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 problems is the word ‘practice’ typically gets interpreted as meaning...preparation... Certainly when we’re talking about medical practice, we hope the person who’s practicing it isn’t getting ready to do it. We hope they have some skill at it...”

ment, it’s producing an action that will ripen. Which in turn will probably lead to another action. When the Buddha talked about *kamma* and *vipaka*, he was pointing out that this is the way we interact, not only within ourselves but with the entire world around us, within the entire universe, within all the universes. Every single action has an impact on our world, our solar system, our universe and all the universes.

Now what about the word “practice.” One of the problems is the word “practice” typically gets interpreted as meaning something like preparation. If you’re going to be a great tennis player you’ve got to go out and do a lot of practice. That’s how it gets used most frequently I think. Instead, I have a definition here: the actual application or use of an idea, belief, or method as opposed to theories about such application or use.

We talk about having a medical practice or a legal practice. Certainly when we’re talking about medical practice, we hope that the person who’s practicing it isn’t really getting ready to do it. We really hope they have some skill at it, otherwise we probably are going to have a major problem. That’s the term that I would like, or the way I would like to represent practice for our perspective today.

Part of our problem is we tend to take things in little pieces, so when we look at what the Buddha taught we may take a piece of it and look at it and spend a lot of time thinking about it and lose the context under which the Buddha was presenting it. The Buddha was trying to give guidance to lay people about what they should do with their lives. The first thing he did was to establish a foundation for why we should be doing a practice. The reason that we engage in a practice is because we recognize in our lives that there’s a certain amount of dissatisfaction which arises (First Noble Truth), and that we had someone who gave us enough guidance as to point out ways so we could actually find our way out of that (The Fourth Noble Truth). The way out of that is the Eightfold Path.

The Eightfold Path is the practice. If you basically look at what the Buddha defined as the Eightfold Path, you pretty much get laid out for you how to have a spiritual practice. Again, the difficulty for us is that it’s really complicated. I mean, it’s eight things we have to think about, and somehow integrate into our lives. That really seems like ... I mean, when I first looked at it, I spent some time memorizing it. I thought that was sort of cool

because I could recite it back. I now know what it is. Then I realized that well, okay, right view. Well, what is right view? I mean, not only what is it, but how do I apply it? I mean what’s right? What’s view? Or right intention? Or right speech? Or right livelihood? Or right effort? Or right mindfulness? Or right concentration?

Each of these things in themselves seem like I could spend months and years just sort of looking at them. How am I going to somehow integrate those into my life and make that my practice? Well, it’s taken me years and years and years and I’m not sure I still have an answer but at least I have some things that I can point at that might be useful. One of them is that the Buddha organized the Eightfold Path into three components. It seems that maybe three might be easier to deal with than eight. It would be nice if he could organize them into one, which he did, it’s the spiritual practice, but again, that’s a little more difficult to deal with.

Let’s look at the three components. The first component, wisdom, is the first two members of the Eightfold Path, which are right view and right intention.

What’s wisdom? Wisdom is a certain knowing and awareness. Right view and right intention must have something to do with a certain level of awareness in our lives. If it’s a path, it means it’s something that we have to sort of sustain or maintain throughout our lives. We have to maintain right wisdom. Although, that’s not really necessary because we assume that wisdom is right, but it does vary depending on whose perspective you take. The Pali word for wisdom is *pana*. It’s really the foundation for the Eightfold path, which is the foundation for spiritual practice. How is wisdom the foundation for spiritual practice? You can’t go anywhere if you don’t know where you are going.

The thing about the Eightfold Path is it isn’t a step by step process and yet it is. You can’t really get on the pathway without having some wisdom. You have to have at least a basic sense of where you’re going. The other components of the Eightfold path will come back and support wisdom as they develop, as you evolve them. You may have some components of those already integrated into your life and those will serve as a foundation as well. It’s not like we’re going to go through it, do step one, do step two, do step three. Which is sort of our way of approaching things generally in our culture. We’re going to try to progress along all of them, but we’re go-

ing to recognize that at least at the starting point some have to be emphasized more than others.

In the beginning recognizing right view—and not only right view but intention, right intention, which means commitment to a view—become really critical because you can't effectively put the rest of them in place unless you at least have view and intention.

The next three are right speech, right action, and right livelihood. The Buddha grouped these as virtue, or ethical conduct. We have wisdom and we're going to begin to try to do things in a way that appears to be from our wisdom, the right direction to move in.

A little about each of these: Right speech. What we're talking about not only is what we say to others, but how we say it, and what we mean by it. The intention behind it. It also means that dialogue that we maintain with ourselves that nobody else hears. We tend to view our brain-body relationship as being one directional: the brain tells the tongue to move and the tongue moves. We don't recognize that the tongue moves and the brain reacts. It's a two-directional street. Everything that's going on in our body is a two-directional street all the time. It's not only what we say, but what we think and how it affects us. Anger, tight tongue, rigidity. All those things are having an impact on our brain, as well as our brain having an impact on them. When we talk about right speech we're talking about not only the concept of the tongue moving in response to the brain, but the brain moving in response to the tongue.

It's also what we write. A good example is Email. One of the things we have to keep in mind is mindfulness. When you write something it's always wise to give yourself an opportunity to reflect, especially if you have the potential for holding it long enough before you send it. Secondly, recognize that no matter what you say, you can't control how it's going to be interpreted. Most likely your intent is never going to be fully recognized. That's the nature of being human, we're different. When we put things out into the world, they're subject to the other person's interpretation of what is being said. We can't do anything about that. You can say things in a way that isn't harmful. You can say things in a way that represent what you feel to be the best of your ability. You can say things without anger. You can say things without fear. Sometimes it's best just not to say it. Mindfulness is really the key because it takes away all of those things that make it selfish.

Next is right action. To abstain from killing, stealing, over indulging. This is essentially what the Buddha put out into the community as the precepts. Abstain from taking that which is not given. Abstain from sexual misconduct. What it really comes down to is very simple. Doing harm to someone else or harm to yourself. I don't think it really goes beyond that-- that's misconduct. I mean there are certainly a large number of ways one can indulge in sexual misconduct. Let's say that it's not only just the physical act of sex, it's also the sexual interactions between people where we tend to do a lot more harm. Getting angry with people because they are who they are, where we're involved in an intimate relationship. People not responding the way we want so we punish them. Punishing ourselves because we feel guilt. There are just massive numbers of variations about that. Abstain from telling falsehoods. Finally, to abstain from intoxicants, which are the occasion for carelessness. I like that, that's one of the best definitions I've heard of it. Because it's not about whether it distorts you, it's whether it makes you careless. Which is a distortion but it's a different way of saying it. Again, it's just sort of like one of the things we get presented with, and from the Buddhist perspective it's sort of like the Ten Commandments in Christianity. These are *not* the "thou shall nots." The Buddha never really said these are things you must do, he said these are guidelines for how to improve your spiritual practice. These are, let's call them recommendations. They're presented in all sorts of different forms. I happen to stumble across some that I like, so I use these.

The precepts are really sort of the aspects of looking out into the world. How we should effectively behave in the world. The Buddha was putting this out for lay people so they had some guidelines as to how they should interact with other people. The way monks interacted with the world is found in the *vinaya*. Believe me, you don't want to get involved in the *vinaya*. It's very long and very complicated and a lot of rules. Several hundred I believe. I think it was two hundred and twenty six or something. This is sort of a simplified version of the Eightfold Path ethical conduct.

Then we have right livelihood. Right livelihood means doing things that don't necessarily produce a lot of discomfort in our lives, professionally. The Buddha was pretty specific about it. He said you don't really want to go out and sell guns. You don't really want to go out and slaughter animals. Again, that was his perspective. Those are harmful to you, and obviously they can be harmful to

**“The Eightfold Path is the practice. If you basically look at what the Buddha defined as the Eightfold Path, you pretty much get laid out for you how to have a spiritual practice.”**

others, but they're harmful to you. I think we lose track of the perspective that the Eightfold path is defined for us. It's what we're going to do. It's not about the world. It's about what we're going to do in the world. It's our path, not the world's path.

We now have a view and an intention, which is wisdom. We now have a way of approaching the world, which is ethical conduct. We still have three components of the Eightfold Path to look at. The last three, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. How did the Buddha group those? He said those were *samadhi*, or the last one: concentration. If wisdom deals with setting the direction and ethical conduct deals with how we look at the world, what does concentration deal with? How we look at ourselves. Who and what we are. Right effort says we need to cultivate positive states of mind. We need to effectively evolve ourselves away from evil and unwholesome states into positive productive states. It's not about action in the world. It's about setting the intention of our mind so that we move in the direction we choose.

Right mindfulness. We have to be aware of everything that's going on. Not only everything that's going on around us but everything that's going on within us. It's not only what our brains are doing, it's what our bodies are doing. Because of that two-way relationship between body and brain. Finally, concentration, which is really sort of the pinnacle of this. Which is a meditative process, or a concentrating process where we actually learn the discipline of focusing our minds.

We have eight steps that are now three steps: Wisdom, direction. Ethical conduct, facing the world. Concentration, managing ourselves. Which sounds a little bit easier than the other eight, which are a lot more to remember. It's really quite complete, because you're looking at the pathway, you're looking at the

world, and you're looking at yourself, and obviously yourself within the world. It's very complete.

If you don't have a grounding in wisdom, you're not going to get anywhere with the last three of them. You're not even going to begin to look at the last three—at least from a Buddhist perspective—until you find that view and intention. What happens as you begin to practice, as you begin to really develop that mindfulness and that concentration and that effort, it has a profound impact on wisdom.

It becomes a very circular process, but it is linear and circular at the same time. It is very difficult for people to sort of get because if we have to assemble something, we look at directions that put us in the position of doing one thing at a time. This is not a one thing at a time process, even though you have to emphasize different aspects of it at different times. If you aren't grounded in wisdom, then the focus should be on wisdom not on concentration. If you're not grounded in ethical conduct then don't be heavily focused on concentration, because you're going to find it very difficult and frustrating.

Find a place to work. Look at what's going on with you, which is wisdom, and select the appropriate activities associated with that view. Seek guidance if you're having difficulty. Look for a good friend. That's the best thing in the world. That's what the Buddha said we should seek out. He didn't advise us to seek out teachers. Seek out good friends and talk about what's going on with you and ask them for their perspective. If they're good friends, what you're going to get back is an honest perspective. You have to recognize that we're all struggling along the pathway, so you include that in what's happening in the discussions. Who else is there to rely on? You're not going to get it out of a book. They're not dynamic enough.

Ram Dass did a musical album called Ram Dass a long time ago. He included some Songs of Kabir, that I

## The Buddha organized the Eightfold Path into three components.

The 1st component is wisdom: right view and right intention.

The 2nd component is virtue or ethical conduct: right speech, right action, right livelihood.

The 3rd component is *samadhi*, or concentration: right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

“The Buddha...equated our lives to a pond with a very disruptive surface. Lots of ripples all over the place. He equated meditation as basically reducing those ripples until you have a smooth clear surface.”

particularly liked. It sort of addresses some of the things that we need to think about in our spiritual practice. The lyrics to one go:

*Friend, please tell me what I can do about this world  
I hold to and keep spinning out.*

*I gave up sewn clothes and wore a robe,  
but I noticed one day that the cloth was well woven.*

*So I bought some burlap, but I still  
throw it elegantly over my shoulder.*

*I pulled back my sexual longings  
and now I discover that I'm angry a lot.*

*I gave up rage, and I notice  
that I am greedy all day.*

*I worked hard at  
dissolving my greed  
and now I am proud of myself.*

*When the mind wants to break its link with the world  
it still holds on to one thing.*

*Kabir says, listen my friend,  
there are very few to find the path.*

When I was thinking about what I wanted to say, the point I wanted to make, I was really involved in the meditative aspect of my practice. A lot of it related to how one evolves in meditative practice.

Why meditate?

We talked about the Eightfold Path and the eighth step in the Eightfold Path was right concentration. When the Buddha talked about right concentration, he really talked about meditation. He equated meditation with concentration. Why would he do that? What does concentration have to do with this?

The Buddha sort of equated our lives to a pond with a very disruptive surface. Lots of ripples all over the place. He equated meditation as basically reducing those ripples until you have a smooth clear surface. A focused mind, which isn't really being traumatized by all of the continuous activity that goes on about us. Which, by the way, is what I talked about in the beginning as part of the title. It's the effects of *kamma*, that activity. That action that's going on all the time. Meditation really comes down to a practice of stillness. It's not only just mental stillness, it's physical stillness. Even in the motion of walking meditation, it's physical stillness. One of the

things I've done with my practice recently is I've expanded the amount of time that I focus on breath.

The one component that is always active in our body that we are quite aware of, is breath. The Buddha said take a look at it. He didn't just tell us take a look at it because it serves as a nice anchor for practice. He said take a look at it because it's a wonderful teaching tool about how we can attain stillness in motion. If you understand your breath, you'll understand how you can be still even though you're moving. Effectively not suffering the consequences of *kamma*.

When I started doing deep breathing, what I noticed was if I took a really deep breath my entire body got tense. It took me quite a bit of practice to reach the point where I could take a deep breath and not tense my body. Just as an example, breath is a pretty straightforward one to look at because it's something that we have with us all the time. If you look at right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, you see that all of these things are continually producing ripples in our lives. The reason the Buddha laid out these things was because he said, take a look at this because you're not going to be able to effectively concentrate until you've smoothed out the sources of the ripples.

If you live a disruptive life, you'll have a disruptive practice. You will find meditation is very difficult to do. When you get down to the *kamma vipaka* of spiritual practice, you're taking a look at all the things that need to be done on a moment by moment basis, that produce stillness in your mental states. If you do those things, the *vipaka*, the outcome of all that *kamma* will make the meditation happen. If the foundation is put in place, the meditation is a logical extension of it. If you try to do the meditation without building the foundation, it won't stand. It's not like the Buddha was saying wow, you have to go off and become a monk. He said you just have to make sure that you work at keeping everything clean. Right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood.

You know, we always have a choice of how we do things. We can do an action toward another with anger or with compassion and love. It's our choice. If you do it one way it will produce ripples all over the place. If you do it another way, it will make the pathway work for you. Think about it. You get to decide the outcome of your practice, by what you do every moment of your life. You lay the foundation. When you begin to recognize that meditation is really just a component of all of that activity that will come into alignment when that activity is done properly, it changes the entire view.

Thank you. ■

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# 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 12pm Everyone is then welcome to stay and socialize over refreshments till approximately 12:30pm, 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.

## 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)

The Gay Buddhist Fellowship is a charitable organization pursuant to Internal Revenue Code 501(c)(3) and California Revenue and Taxation Code #23701d.

# Calendar

## Sunday Speakers

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### December 4 **David Lewis**

David Lewis has been following the dharma path for over 40 years and has a degree in comparative religious studies. He started out in the Tibetan Shambhala tradition and has been practicing vipassana meditation since moving to San Francisco 30 years ago. For the past 10 years he has been teaching and 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 currently enrolled in the Spirit Rock Meditation Center's Advanced Practitioners Program and has been on the teaching team for Spirit Rock retreats.

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### December 11 **Dorothy Hunt**

Dorothy Hunt serves as the Spiritual Director of Moon Mountain Sangha, teaching at the request of Adyashanti. She has practiced psychotherapy since 1967 and is the founder of the San Francisco Center for Meditation and Psychotherapy. Self-inquiry, as taught by Ramana Maharshi, led to the first of a series of awakenings. In meeting Adyashanti, she was invited to see beyond identifications with either the Absolute or the relative. Dorothy is the author of *Only This!* and *Leaves from Moon Mountain*, a contributing author to *The Sacred Mirror, Listening from the Heart of Silence*, and the on-line journal *Undivided*. She is a featured spiritual teacher in the book, *Ordinary Women, Extraordinary Wisdom*. Dorothy offers satsang, retreats, and private meetings in the Bay area and elsewhere by invitation. For more information, please visit [www.dorothyhunt.org](http://www.dorothyhunt.org).

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### December 18 **John Martin**

John Martin teaches Vipassana, Metta, and LGBTQI themed meditation retreats. He leads an on-going weekly meditation group in San Francisco's Castro neighborhood on Monday's, from 6:00-7:15 p.m. He has had a dedicated practice while being engaged in the working world and emphasizes practice for daily life. He also has completed the SRMC/IMS/IRC 4-year teacher training in 2016. He recently retired as the Chief of the San Francisco Airport.

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### December 25 **Open Discussion**

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### January 1 **Open Discussion**

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### January 8-29 **Dharmachari Danadasa**

Dharmachari Danadasa has been practicing with the San Francisco Buddhist Center (SFBC) community since 1993 and was ordained in 2011. His current area of exploration is the cultivation of metta (universal loving kindness) as a response to all the hatred, discrimination and bigotry in the world out there.

In the *Satipatthana Sutta*, the Buddha describes mindfulness as the direct path to liberation. What is liberation? What is mindfulness? And how does mindfulness lead to liberation? During the month of January we will be exploring the four spheres of experience described in the Satipattana Sutta—the

body, the heart, the mind, and the teachings of the Buddha. We will also explore the relationship between mindfulness and the three Jewels of Buddhism—The Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. I would like to invite you to consider the month of January as a month long practice period, a time to put a bit more intentionality, discipline and energy into this beautiful and mysterious process of transformation.”

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### January 8 **Dharmachari Danadasa**

“The Mind and the Sangha.”

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### January 15 **Dharmachari Danadasa**

“The Heart and the Buddha.”

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### January 22 **Dharmachari Danadasa**

“The Body and the Dharma.”

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### January 29 **Dharmachari Danadasa**

“We are all in this together.”

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### February 5 **Eugene Cash**

Eugene Cash is the founding teacher of the San Francisco Insight Meditation Community of San Francisco. He teaches at Spirit Rock Meditation Center and leads intensive meditation retreats internationally. His teaching is influenced by both Burmese and Thai streams of the Theravada tradition as well as Zen and Tibetan Buddhist practice. He is also a teacher of the Diamond Approach, a school of spiritual investigation and self-realization developed by A. H. Almaas.

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### February 12 **Jon Bernie**

Jon Bernie is a contemporary spiritual teacher focused on the unfolding of natural wakefulness — the already enlightened basic state that lies at the core of human experience. He has four decades of practice and study in the contemplative traditions of Soto Zen, Theravada Insight Meditation & Advaita Vedanta. In addition to his work as a spiritual teacher, Jon is also an experienced healer and teacher of somatic embodiment via his extensive training in the Alexander Technique, the Qigong system of Dr. Yu Penxi and the Zero Balancing system of Dr. Fritz Smith. He has been in private practice since 1981. Jon leads classes, intensives and retreats in the San Francisco Bay Area and nationally.

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### February 19 **Open Discussion**

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### February 26 **Susan Moon**

Susan Moon is a writer, editor, and lay teacher in the Soto Zen tradition. She leads Buddhist retreats and teaches writing workshops in the U.S. and abroad. Her books include *This Is Getting Old: Zen Thoughts on Aging with Humor and Dignity*, *The Hidden Lamp: Stories from 25 Centuries of Awakened Women*, with co-editor Florence Caplow, and most recently, *What Is Zen? Plain Talk for a Beginner's Mind*, with Zoketsu Norman Fischer.

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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