



Gay Buddhist Fellowship

SPRING 2017 NEWSLETTER

Kalyana Mitta on the Spiritual Path

BY 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.

Truly embarking on a spiritual path—any spiritual path—is an act of warriorship. In these globalized modern times we have free access to dozens of religions and spiritual beliefs. Some are relatively new; some have been around for thousands of years. We have the privilege, not readily available to most of our ancestors, to pick and choose which, if any, spiritual systems are the best fit for us. Some spend a lifetime shopping around, cherry picking those aspects of various belief systems that are most comfortable and pleasant and avoiding those that are difficult. This is an aspect of “spiritual bypass:” cultivating a spiritual outlook that avoids difficulties such as suffering and human nature.

Spiritual leaders from most traditions advocate that we eventually settle down with one developed tradition, with the understanding that tried and true paths have been tested by millions of practitioners over many generations. The paths of the major human religious traditions have been refined and developed by the personal experience of our predecessors with the goal of some kind of freedom, insight, or unity. Perhaps unity with Christ or God, or perhaps some form of enlightenment or realization. The “Perennial Philosophy,” the theory that most spiritual beliefs are grounded in the same values, such as the Golden Rule, suggests that it doesn’t make a great deal of difference which path we pick. On the other hand, some traditional religious traditions insist that only they offer the truth, and everyone else is damned.

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.

Buddhism, which has been around for 2600 years, has always been famously tolerant on this issue. The Buddha emphasized the principle of *ehipassiko*, or “see for yourself.” In his famous teaching to the Kalamas, who asked who and what they should believe, he advised paying attention to the wisdom of their own direct experience rather than teachers, books, or rituals. This direct experience is accessed not by study or discursive thinking, but rather through the radical practice of meditation: simply relaxing into the present moment and noticing, without grasping or resistance, what arises. Mindfulness can be described simply as “an open and receptive nonjudgmental awareness of your present moment experience.”

You don't have to call yourself a Buddhist to follow this path or practice meditation. Indeed, the Buddha himself was not a “Buddhist.” “Buddhism” is a spiritual designation assigned by colonial invaders to describe people who followed certain spiritual practices, as developed by the historical Buddha and subsequent generations of monks. Since then some have described Buddhism as a religion, but it has no god or dogma. Others have described it as a science or psychology, but it is profoundly spiritual. The Dalai Lama has simply stated that “my religion is kindness.” But for practitioners in most Buddhist traditions, Buddhism is a vast catalog of teachings and practices whose purpose is to uncover the nature of reality and alleviate suffering, both our own and that of others.

The Buddha stated that “I teach suffering and the end of suffering.” This promise is a temptation to those who are drawn to spiritual bypass, who want to avoid suffering at any cost. But only a rudimentary amount of mindfulness practice shows us that suffering, as the Buddha described it, is a fundamental characteristic of human experience: we can't escape it. The “end of suffering,” we are surprised to learn, involves turning towards our suffering, recognizing and accepting it with equanimity. True spirituality requires us to be fully present for life, to look at the world situation as well as our own pain, and meet it with wisdom and compassion. In order to find freedom we have to face our own fear, prejudice, hatred, desire, neurosis, anxiety, and sorrow.

Opening ourselves to suffering, our own or the world's, takes a great deal of courage. Joseph Campbell's book *A Hero with a Thousand Faces* describes the archetypal hero's (or spiritual seeker's) journey. This journey is represented in the myths and stories of every culture throughout history: think of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Homer's *The Odyssey*, *The Lord of the Rings*, the Native American vision quest, or the Star Wars saga. The elements of this mythical journey are universal: The journey starts in the ordinary world. The

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“hero” or protagonist is called to enter a foreign, unusual, or unfamiliar world. Tasks and trials follow. The hero may be alone or may have assistance. There is a great challenge which often leads to a great gift (often self knowledge). If the hero survives and returns to the ordinary world, he may use this gift to help others.

One of my favorite versions of the hero's journey is *The Wizard of Oz*, perhaps because the protagonist is so vulnerable, or perhaps because she is so ably assisted by loyal friends. The Buddha called such companions *kalyana mitta* or spiritual friends, and considered them essential to the spiritual path, as they were for Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz*. Dorothy's journey started in her ordinary world; her own back yard. She met a wizard who described far off and mysterious places and practices. She set out on her path and met new friends on the yellow brick road: the cowardly lion, the tin man who believed that he did not have a heart, and the scarecrow who didn't think he had a brain. They were all trying to find something that they believed was missing, to make themselves whole, or to find their way home. Good witches and bad witches appeared to offer either help or challenges. Life threatening trials and challenges were overcome. In the end they all grew in wisdom and came to realize that their sense of lack and separation was a delusion. The lion showed great courage in the face of adversity. The scarecrow used his brain to overcome challenges. The tin man demonstrated profound compassion for his fellow travelers. And Dorothy discovered that she had never left home.

T.S. Eliot wrote that “We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.” The Buddha taught that Buddha Nature, or the awakened mind, already exists in each of us. Freedom is discovering the gift of what we already have.

The hero's journey is a suitable metaphor for the spiritual path. Spiritual practice is about discovering (or uncovering) ourselves, our hopes and fears, and the nature of our mind and the world. The spiritual path is not easy, and as the Buddha described it the first challenge that we come up against is suffering. He described suffering as the first noble truth. The universality of suffering is the byproduct of unreliability, or impermanence, in our lives. The cause of suffering (the second noble truth) is our impulse to grasp or resist, to obsessively try to control our experience. The third noble truth, or freedom from suffering, is the ability to let go of habitually wanting things to be other than they are. When we learn to face our fears and uncertainty, awakening happens on its own: suffering and awakening are a single weather system. Once we realize this we can accept the inevitable storms with less dread and more trust and hope.

It is only through understanding our own resistance to the unreliable nature of being human in the world that we can truly connect and empathize with others. And it is only through compassion that we can bear the sorrow and pain of the world outside of ourselves. The Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield says:

"In the heart of each of us, a potential exists for experiencing this compassion and wholeness. The problem is that we become so busy and lost in our own thinking that we lose connection with our true nature. When we reconnect with our wholeness, our being naturally expresses itself both in meditation and through sharing ourselves with others."

Sharing ourselves with others is *kalyana mitta*, which the Buddha famously described as "the whole of the spiritual path." While core practices such as concentration and mindfulness must be done alone, the support of spiritual friends can be a great help. The great Sufi teacher Rumi said "It's your road, and yours alone.

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Others may walk it with you, but no one can walk it for you." But spiritual friends can ease the burden and help you along. Some may do this by showing you the way, others may be dependent on you to help them along the path. In either case, making yourself available as a spiritual friend is a tremendous support to your own practice, as well as that of others.

So who are your spiritual friends? In Buddha's *suttas* they are the monastic community as well as those monks that carried the tradition on before us. In the lay community it's our sangha (spiritual community). We bow to both our sangha and our ancestors. *Kalyana Mitta* are also our teachers and wise friends: those who help us along the path, as well as those who might benefit from our guidance.

In recovery communities *kalyana mitta* are the sponsors and sponsored. The recovery model is a useful one for our practice, for what are we overcoming if not the addiction to habitual unskillful mind states? Vinny Ferraro, who teaches a Buddhist recovery model, notes that "the Buddha taught that freedom is going beyond conditions. For me, people who have been through the harshest conditions, and survived, have the greatest potential to transform the madness of their lives."

Spiritual friendship can be subtle. Have you noticed how much easier meditation is with a group of others as opposed to doing it on your own? Just sitting together in silence has a mysterious power. The Gay Buddhist Fellowship has many incarcerated brothers and friends who receive our newsletter and sometimes correspond with the sangha. We hear about sitting groups and sanghas that have formed in jails and prisons, where peace and tranquility are hard to come by. Spiritual friendship can be found anywhere.

Maya Angelou says "Everyone who has ever been kind to me has been a rainbow in my cloud. Plenty of clouds, plenty of rainbows. When I sit here I bring them all with me. The most important thing that you can do in life is be a rainbow in someone's cloud."

I find that spiritual friendship is particularly rich in the LGBTQ community. The Gay Buddhist Fellowship is one example of that, but I also attend a "mixed" and very diverse sangha, open to everyone, where 25% of the members are gay: a larger percentage than in the community at large. Most retreats that I have sat have had a disproportionately large LGBTQ attendance. I think that this is because most of us have experienced or are experiencing the hero's journey, and recognize it in each other. As gay people we have overcome formidable obstacles, both social and personal. We know what it is to question our perceived identities, also an important wisdom practice in Buddhism. We already know something about liberation. ■

INSIDE OUT

Words and Works from our Spiritual Friends in Confinement

About three years ago, when I first arrived at Corcoran, there was a Buddhist service that met on a weekly basis. It was not very organized as far as I could see. It mainly consisted of people lying on a carpet and reading from a Buddhist book. There didn't seem to be much actual practice going on from what I could tell. Even so, it was nice to be able to gather with a group of like-minded people and converse about what we were reading.

Shortly after my attendance at a few services, they stopped running. Apparently the chaplain that was overseeing the service was not coming in anymore. That was their excuse for not running the service when I inquired about it. Since I was chosen to be the secretary while services were running (and no one else was willing to take action), I decided to appeal the issue since it is our constitutional right to be afforded an opportunity to practice religion.

To make a long story short, once the appeal got to Sacramento and they were under scrutiny here to actually adhere to the U.S. Constitution and RLUIPA (a federal law—the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act—which among other things, prohibits the imposition of burdens on the ability of prisoners to worship as they please), the issue was resolved by the administration, assigning me as the “inmate assigned minister,” which means that I am approved to run the services without a chaplain being present at the chapel. I wasn't sure that I actually wanted that responsibility, especially because there is usually retaliation whenever anybody tries to stand up for their rights around here, which I had already experienced from the appeal I had previously submitted concerning services. However, I have stuck with the position and given it my best effort over the past couple of years, even though it seems that there are not many others willing to stand up for their rights and beliefs.

By writing to all the Buddhist addresses that I could find, I have found one in San Diego that donated five boxes of books to create a Buddhist library (even though I had to appeal the issue and actually search through a supply closet to find the boxes of books, because the warehouse here stated that “no boxes of books were received here”).

On another occasion, I wrote to the Pema Chödrön Foundation in Canada asking for book donations. Later I

received a letter from her with a list of the books and CDs that she had mailed to me. Shortly after that, an inmate approached me selling some sets of CDs that came from Pema Chödrön on “How to Meditate,” among others. He worked in R&R (Receiving and Release) and intercepted the CDs, wanting to sell them to make money. I ended up getting most of the CDs for our library without paying for them.

So, these are some of the things one may experience when this responsibility is dropped on them. Not to mention backlash and attitude from the administration when you point out that your “religion” is not being treated fairly and equally like all of the rest, which is what the U.S. Constitution and RLUIPA demand.

You have to be able to overlook these minor obstacles and stay focused on the bigger picture, which, overall, has been successful. Now we have a weekly service on Wednesday which includes a dharma talk on a weekly topic, some chanting and then a meditation. We have a Friday morning service for yoga practice (the coach even provided us with mats), and now we are starting a Tuesday evening time, which is dedicated to learning about natural/holistic medicine, like acupuncture, reflexology, Reiki, chakras, etc., because, as everyone knows, healthcare here in prison is a joke. So, the more we can do ourselves, the better off we will be.

And since there were a fair number of people interested, the CRM started working with “Buddhist Pathways Prison Project,” and our friend De Hong, a Buddhist monk from Los Angeles, is generous enough to show up here monthly for a mindfulness meditation group and bi-monthly for a day-long mindfulness meditation retreat.

So, this has been great progress for true practitioners! Though it has taken years to accomplish, this is a step in the right direction and hopefully things will continue to progress in this fashion. Anyone can do this with a little patience and persistence and I urge you to, because everyone should have the right to practice what they believe.

Thank you.

NAMASTE



BEFORE YOU KNOW WHAT KINDNESS REALLY IS

before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.
what you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.
how you ride and ride
thinking the bus will never stop,
the passengers eating maize and chicken
will stare out the window forever.

before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,
you must travel where the indian in a white poncho
lies dead by the side of the road.
you must see how this could be you,
how he too was someone
who journeyed through the night with plans
and the simple breath that kept him alive.

before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
you must wake up with sorrow.
you must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.

then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day to mail letters and
purchase bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
it is i you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
like a shadow or a friend.

— NAOMI SHIHAB NYE
FROM *THE WORDS UNDER THE WORDS*

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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.

How to Reach Us

www.gaybuddhist.org

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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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Address changes or to subscribe or unsubscribe to the newsletter:

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GBF Newsletter Send submissions to:

editor@gaybuddhist.org

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

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

March 5 Trip Weil

Trip Weil has been practicing in the Theravadan tradition since 2004. He is a graduate of Spirit Rock's Community Dharma Leader and Dedicated Practitioner programs. Trip serves on the board of San Francisco Insight, where he also leads sitting groups and teaches meditation classes. He is a psychotherapist in private practice in San Francisco and a former attorney.

March 12 Tom Moon

Tom Moon has been a practitioner of Vipassana meditation for fifteen years, and 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.

March 19 Open Discussion

March 25 Heather Sundberg

All day retreat at Bartlett Street.

March 26 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 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, caregiving as a spiritual practice, and healing at the edge of illness, of death, of loss, of crisis. He is the co-author of *Journey of Awakening: A Meditator's Guidebook* and has taught meditation for the past 35 years.

April 2 Baruch Golden

Baruch Golden is a longtime GBF Member who has been practicing Vipassana meditation since 1998. He completed Spirit Rock's Community Dharma Leaders program in 2012 and the Buddhist Chaplaincy Training Program with the Sati Center in Redwood City in 2013. He teaches dharma to many sitting groups in the Bay Area. Baruch is a registered nurse and has been doing hospice work for the past 14 years.

April 9 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. 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.

April 16 Roy King

Courage and Compassion: A Journey
Born and raised in San Francisco, and a 10-year member of the GBF, Roy King has been on a journey of Self-Discovery brought on by experiences of loss and grief. From March 2006 through

September 2012, he lived through the deaths of six wonderful friends and family, including his beloved mother, Victoria. Directly involved in the care and dying processes of those loved ones, Roy learned many important lessons that have shaped his life today, and would like to share how those lessons have brought him closer to his inner truth.

April 23 Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence

The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence: Spirit Incarnate. Since their first appearance in San Francisco on Easter Sunday, 1979, the Sisters have devoted themselves to artistic expression, community service, ministry to those on the edges, and to promoting human rights, respect for diversity, and spiritual enlightenment. As the original holy card spelled out the group's mission: "SPI is an Order of gay male nuns devoted to the promulgation of universal joy and the expiation of stigmatic guilt." Sisters planning to attend and share their experiences include Sr. Merry Peter, Sr. Plush Lovebud, Sr. maeJoy B. withU, and our own sangha's Sister Mary Media.

April 30 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.

May 7 Prasadachitta Dharmachari

As an ordained member of the Triratna Buddhist Community, Prasadachitta teaches meditation, yoga and Buddhism at the San Francisco Buddhist Center. His practice and teaching grows out of a valuing of friendship and community. He is interested in the Buddhist theories and poetic expressions that communicate links between lofty ideals and our ordinary life. He is also a *photographer* and aspiring filmmaker.

May 14 Emilio Gonzalez

Emilio began his Tai Chi and Qigong practice in 1973 with Grand Master Kai Ying Tung and still studies with him today. For over forty years he's taught classes in N. California and conducted workshops for Kaiser, the VA, persons with PTSD and HIV, and at recovery conferences. He taught Qigong at the first GLBT residential retreat at Spirit Rock in 1985. Since then most meditation centers have added daily Qigong exercises at all residential retreats. In 1995 he produced a three-part television series, "Qigong for Health", broadcast nationally by PBS, and is still being aired in some cities.

May 21 John Morales (with Lee Robbins)

John Frias Morales, Dr.BA, conducted an empirical case study of the GBF under the guidance of Golden Gate University professor Lee Robbins, Ph.D. Morales analyzed hundreds of GBF historical documents (1994-2012) and elicited 24 oral histories to answer the question: how does the relationship between gay fellowship and dharma inquiry impact a nonduality consciousness? Morales will reflect on the transformation and values he observed and documented. He lives with his partner in Sacramento, works as a data scientist in healthcare, and teaches management courses as an adjunct professor.

May 28 Open Discussion

Memorial Day Weekend

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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