



Gay Buddhist Fellowship

WINTER 2017 NEWSLETTER

Calm Down, Wake Up, Engage

BY PAMELA WEISS

Dharma Talk, July 16, 2017

The gay Buddhist
fellowship supports
Buddhist practice in the
gay
men's community.
It is a forum that
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traditions to address
the spiritual concerns
of gay men in the
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GBF's mission includes
cultivating a social
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inclusive and caring.

I wanted to open this morning with the story of the name of the company that I do my work under, which comes from an old Zen story. In this story, a student comes to visit his teacher, a revered, old Zen master who is on his deathbed. He comes to pay his respects, and he gets to ask a final question. He asks the teacher, "Tell me, what is the teaching of your entire lifetime?" Can you imagine? Poor guy is dying, right? But here's the student's last chance to get some wisdom from his beloved teacher. The teacher, in pure pith Zen form says, "What is the teaching of an entire lifetime? An appropriate response."

I've been teaching in a variety of venues, and I like to ask people why they would do something like practice meditation. I hear a variety of things, but it seems to me that there is a theme that runs throughout the various responses, which is that for whatever it is we think we're engaging in, we all want to know how to respond more skillfully, to ourselves, to each other, to the world.

I like the term 'appropriate response,' because it provides a balancing between being response-able (or responsible) and being reactive. For most of us, it doesn't take too long to think about the trouble that our reactivity causes, and when we look around, not even very far, we see the enormous reactivity and damage that's done and the messes that have to be cleaned up. But an alternative to that is to learn to respond with some intentionality, rather than react in a kind of knee-jerk, habitual way.

Maybe 20 years ago, I fell in love with this story, and I went to see my Zen teacher at the time, and I asked him a question. The question I asked was not, "What is the teaching of your entire lifetime?" No, I asked, "What is the meaning of the word 'appropriate'? What does responding appropriately mean?" I assumed, since this is an old Zen story from China, that the English word 'appropriate' is a translation of some Chinese character. I said, "What's the original Chinese character that we translate as 'appropriate'?"

A student comes to visit his teacher, a revered, old Zen master who is on his deathbed, to pay his respects, and he gets to ask a final question. “Tell me, what is the teaching of your entire lifetime?” The teacher, in pure pith Zen form says, “What is the teaching of an entire lifetime? An appropriate response.”

He lit up and said, “Actually, it’s three characters that get translated into the English word ‘appropriate.’ The three characters are ‘meet,’ ‘each,’ ‘teach.’” Also very pith, right? I thought, “Is it giving some instruction on how we meet each? How we meet each moment, each breath, each person, each situation, as a teaching? As something that we’re willing to allow to influence, to impact us, to touch us in a way that allows us to be malleable, to open, to grow, to learn?” Because I think that the state of reactivity is sort of the opposite, right? Basically, reactivity is, “I’m right and you’re wrong.” There’s not a lot of malleability. There’s not a lot of openness. There’s not a lot of interest in learning or in allowing a moment, a person, a situation to teach us something, to open us to something. We are instead kind of rigidly holding to our ideas, views, beliefs.

When I look around at the really extraordinary degree of mess in the world—there’s political mess, there’s cultural mess, there’s environmental mess—I see that this kind of reactivity is the seed. That not having the willingness to meet each moment, to be open enough to let the moment teach us, is at the heart of the mess that we’re in. If that’s the case—this is my hypothesis—then there is something here worth practicing. I’ve been looking for a simple frame—like “meet, each, teach,” to talk about the different elements or aspects of meditative practice.

As you may have noticed, meditation practice has gotten very popular. It’s on the cover of Time Magazine. There’s mindfulness this and mindfulness that. I think that’s a great thing, because it’s helped make what was once a kind of esoteric, not very accessible practice much more accessible.

But there’s also some distortion that comes with this popularization. So, I think there’s some confusion that’s

come into the field of meditation practice. It’s not just a self-help process, right? It’s not a self-improvement plan. That doesn’t mean that if you do it, you won’t help yourself. If you do it, you might improve quite a bit, whatever it is you want to improve. But that’s really not where it’s coming from. There’s quite a bit more that’s possible.

I want to offer three different aspects of meditative practice for you to reflect on, chew on, consider in terms of how you engage with the practice. Hopefully it will bring some clarity, maybe even a little insight. Then, we’ll circle back to the story at the end. What I have to offer is not quite as pith as “meet, each, teach.” By the way, for those who have been around Buddhism for awhile, you know that anything really worth talking about in Buddhism has to come in threes. “Meet, each, teach.”

“An appropriate response.” Well, it’s not boiled down to three simple words, but what I want to share are the three elements of meditative practice. I’m not claiming this is the truth. It’s just what I’m saying for today. Hopefully it will be useful.

The first element of meditative practice is, calm down. The second is, wake up. And the third is, engage.

Let’s start with calm down. Most often, when I ask an audience, “How many of you come to meditation practice because you want to reduce stress, find some quiet?” the answer is “Yes.” It’s a beautiful aspect of meditative practice, especially in the world that we’re in, which is like a 24/7 fire hose of nonstop experience, stimulation. We live in a particular time and place where that calming down aspect of meditative practice is really useful. You know, I taught yesterday afternoon and again this morning, and in both situations, I found myself in my car, in quite a bit of traffic, rushing and

kind of swearing at other cars on the road because I was trying to get to my meditation! Crazy. But that's what it's like. I'm confessing; even the meditation teacher needs to calm down, because the world, especially the Bay Area, is just nuts, isn't it?

Calming down is sometimes described as *Shamatha* or "concentration." It's a kind of gathering and stilling of the heart-mind. Being in the midst of this constant stimulation, in Buddhism, is often described as "the monkey mind." It's just swinging from branch to branch, screeching. We all know the monkey mind. It's sort of the interior of what we would display externally as multitasking, right?

It turns out that there's nothing actually wrong with multitasking or even with having a monkey mind; the mind does what the mind does. But all of that is kind of hard on your nervous system. We call that 'stress.' Our nervous system likes just one thing at a time. That's what calming down and a one-pointed focus of meditative practice is about. We are all familiar with what it's like when you get to do just one thing at a time, right? The nervous system likes it. Whether it's in an athletic endeavor, where you're completely concentrated on what you're doing, or listening to music, or seeing a beautiful piece of art, or walking in nature, or having a conversation with someone, where you're not checking your email every five seconds. There is even a lot of scientific research about how the cortisol levels go down, et cetera. Boy, we need that, don't we? Because when we're revved like that, it's very hard to respond appropriately.

There's a beautiful, useful image of meditation practice, which some of you may have heard before. If you take a glass jar and fill it with dirt and water, and you shake it up, what do you have? Right, dirty water. Muddy, dirty, churning water. That's us most of the time. That's me driving here in traffic.

So, this first aspect of meditative practice is just: put the jar down. This is an important way to think about it, I think, because otherwise we may turn this one-pointed concentration into yet another thing to do. The secret of

this element of practice is: you just stop. When you stop, you see that everything is happening on its own. You don't have to do it. This is such a relief, because when we don't stop long enough to see that, we're running around, imagining we're in charge. It doesn't take very long, sitting in meditation, to recognize you are not in charge.

You're sitting there, and what's happening? All kinds of stuff is happening. Did you ask that stuff to happen? You did not, if you're honest. Your mind is doing what it's doing. Your body is doing what it's doing. Your heart is doing what it's doing. The settling down is just the part that's worth noticing. You don't have to do all that. All you have to do is stop. So, the dirt settles. You put the jar down, and the dirt settles to the bottom of the jar. (It's not bad, the dirt. It's just dirt.) But now, what do you have in the jar? Clear water. And this is the second element of my theory of different aspects of meditative practice, which is waking up.

When you slow down and let your nervous system settle, so that you're not in that kind of churned, jagged, muddy water, you're less reactive. You can see more clearly. The dirt settles. Now you have clear water. It doesn't mean that stuff's not going to bubble up from the bottom, or something's not going to fly in to the top of the jar. Meditation doesn't mean you're going to be in this kind of static bliss state forever. No, what it means is that you settled down enough that you can see what's happening. The water is clear enough so that you can see, "Oh. I'm angry." It doesn't mean you shouldn't be angry. Or you see, "Oh. I'm busy planning." It doesn't mean you shouldn't be planning. You want to see it clearly. This is the heart of insight meditation. You want to see what's happening.

What we generally do is, we see what's happening, and if it's a pleasant something, we want more of it, and if it's an unpleasant something, we try to get rid of it. Sometimes people even come to meditation practice and think, "Meditation practice...I'm not supposed to have any thinking." So they sit down and then they spend their whole time doing like, what's that thing..."Whack-A-Mole"? Whack, whack, trying to get rid of their thoughts.

When you slow down and let your nervous system settle, so that you're not in that kind of churned, jagged, muddy water, you're less reactive. You can see more clearly...This is the waking up aspect.

This is a violent way to practice meditation! All you have to do is settle, and then let whatever arises come and go, like clouds in a sky. Sometimes it's a very busy sky. Sometimes it's a very busy highway out there, as it was today for me, driving here. But you just notice what's coming and going. You pay attention. This is the waking up aspect.

There's an element of this that I think is really important and particularly useful for this time and place, which is that some huge percentage of what we see is delusion, confusion. We see our pettiness. We see our anger. We see our irritation. And then we think, "Oh, I must be doing it wrong." No. You're doing it exactly right. This is what the Buddha saw. What the Buddha saw was his—our—confusion. He saw how confusion happens...and how he didn't have to be entranced, enchanted by it. He could see it clearly without thinking it was the truth.

Part of the difficulty regarding the mess that is happening in our world, is that all of us are walking around, assuming that what we're seeing is the truth. When we start to practice meditation, when we calm down enough that we can start to see clearly, we see—I see—that my mind is a complete crazy person. Completely. It's just making "sh**" up all the time. Some of the stuff is kind of clever. But sometimes, it's not even true.

I remember a very distinct moment for me. I was on a meditation retreat, and I was sitting where you are, listening to someone give a Dharma talk. It was a month-long retreat, and I was a few weeks in, and I was very settled, so everything was very vivid. A lot of clear water. I don't remember who was talking, and I don't remember what they said, but I was completely wrapped. For those of you who haven't done a long retreat, the talks and the meals are all the entertainment you get. There it is, it's like going to the movies, somebody's giving a talk, and I was just completely wrapped, listening to what they were saying, and it's going right in.

Then the end of the talk comes, and I hear this voice in my head say, "Well, that was a pretty good talk, but it would've been better if they..." I had this opinion, and when I heard that, I thought, "That's not true!" What my mind said, had its opinion about how this person could've improved themselves, I didn't even think that. But there it was. My mind, all on its own, having its opinions. I say all of that to bring a sense of humor to it. Most of the time, we are walking around with what we would call in our sort of modern lingo "inherent bias." "We are not," as the great Anaïs Nin said, "seeing the world as it is. We are seeing it as we are."

But we don't think that. We think that what we're seeing is the truth. Then, somebody else has a different truth, and we're suddenly fighting. If you extrapolate this out, you can see the seeds of a lot of the mess that we have within our world. But when we practice this way, when we see how crazy the mind is, when we begin to see how biased we are, this doesn't mean we should just give up. No. This is a great thing because it brings us a kind of humility, for starters. We could use a little bit more of that in public life, right?

Wouldn't it be good if we walked around not being so sure that we know how things are? Because the flip side of not being so sure, which may feel like anxiety, is actually a kind of openness, a curiosity, an interest. I want to understand how things are. I understand if I pay attention and I am privy moment by moment to my own confusion and delusion and bias. If I understand that very deeply, then I'm going to be way more interested in learning and being open to the moment, in this spirit of "meet - each - teach," don't you think? It could be like, "Okay, I already know my perspective, but I have no idea what yours is. It would be more interesting to hear from you." It would be so great if we had a world that was running more like that, don't you think? Where we all were walking around, wanting to know what the other person thinks, instead of doing "selfies" and posting whatever. We have so many ways to give out our opinion and declare how things are.

What engage really means is to bring this attitude...of Meet-Each-Teach into whatever it is we're doing, so that we bring...this willingness to be curious about what's going on on the other side.

It's from...this kind of paradoxical balancing of, on the one hand, totally honoring and celebrating the unique, quirky weirdness that each of us is, with, on the other hand, this connectivity, this unity and wholeness that is our shared humanity—if we can find a way to balance those two things, that, then, becomes 'an appropriate response.'

I was watching the ESPYs last night. I didn't even know what the ESPYs were, but I was watching them. And there was, suddenly on the stage, the lovely Michelle Obama. She was there to give an award, the Arthur Ashe Courage Award, which she was awarding to Eunice Kennedy Shriver, who is the founder of the Special Olympics. Eunice's son, who looks just like a Kennedy, got up onstage, and gave a very Kennedy-esque speech about his mother and her work with the Special Olympics. If you haven't seen this, I would really encourage you to watch it, because in addition to praising his mother, what he is basically doing is talking about the Special Olympics as an example of the beauty of inclusion. He's using it to make a larger point, about inclusion. This is that spirit, that kind of being willing to sit in the middle of our own delusion and be humbled again and again by how completely crazy we are. It's like a tenderizer. It's a softener. It helps us be more interested in people who may be different than we are.

Calm down, Wake up, and Engage.

The last piece, Engage, sounds like it's about running around doing a lot, but I think that it's a little bit of a paradox. What engage really means is to bring this attitude, to bring this quality of Meet-Each-Teach, into whatever it is we're doing, however we are being in the world, so that when we're at work, or when we are taking care of our family, or when we are marching in the streets, or when we're angry with someone, we bring this interest. We bring this kind of willingness to be curious about what's going on on the other side.

When we are able to see our own bias, in some ways even our own brokenness, that's where the light comes through, because as we are willing to sit with ourselves,

moment by moment, day by day, and meet our own experience with a kind of tenderness, with an openness, with an interest, with a curiosity, Rather than, "Good, I want it," or "Bad, get rid of it," which is our reactive, knee-jerk way of doing it, now we are able to meet the moment in a different way.

There is a secret teaching in this "Meet-Each-Teach" which I learned the hard way. I was explaining this story to someone, and somebody leaned over my shoulder and corrected me. I was explaining that Meet-Each-Teach is about meeting each thing and even celebrating the uniqueness of all of us, of each moment, and they said, "You know, the word 'each' is the Chinese character 'one.' It's a single stroke. It can be translated two ways. It can be translated as 'each,' the particularity, but it's also 'one,' as oneness, as wholeness, as connectivity." I think this is a beautiful, interior teaching in this story: that when we have the openness and curiosity, the willingness, to meet 'each,' the uniqueness of 'each,' we begin to close the divide of the divisiveness that we see and hear and feel so painfully all around us. We begin to find a real kind of intimacy for that 'other.' Whoever he, she, they are, they are not too different.

We begin to feel into a sense of our shared humanity. And it's from that place and this kind of paradoxical balancing of, on the one hand, totally honoring and celebrating the unique, quirky weirdness that each of us is, with, on the other hand, this connectivity, this unity and wholeness that is our shared humanity—if we can find a way to balance those two things, that, then, becomes 'an appropriate response.'

That's my current holding of it. Having said that, it's useful to be open and curious about other people's opinions. Like, yours. ■

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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 Newsletter Send submissions to:

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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

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

December 3 Alistair Shanks

Alistair Shanks has been a dedicated practitioner and teacher of the Taoist Internal Martial Arts for over 20 years. Since 2008, he has been an adjunct faculty member at the American College of Traditional Chinese Medicine/CIIS where he teaches Tai Chi. Alistair was a volunteer with Zen Hospice Project from 2004 to 2014 and was hired to serve as the Volunteer Program Manager in 2016.

His other volunteer work includes working as a Buddhist chaplain at San Francisco General Hospital and leading meditation sessions for inmates in the San Francisco County Jail. Alistair has a degree in Philosophy and Religion from SF State and a Masters Degree in Buddhist Chaplaincy from the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. In his spare time he plays with San Francisco's legendary hardcore polka band Polkacide.

December 10 Jennifer Berezan

Jennifer Berezan is a unique blend of musician, teacher, and activist. She has created 10 albums—a combination of singer songwriter CDs, as well as long-playing healing works. She recently released "Song For All Beings Live," the live video of the recent performances that included over 100 artists, activists and spiritual teachers. Her lifelong involvement in environmental, women's, justice movements and earth-based spirituality are at the heart of her work. She has been a Buddhist practitioner for over 30 years. She teaches at the California Institute of Integral Studies in the department of Philosophy and Religion.

December 17 Heather Sundberg

Heather Sundberg began teaching meditation in 1999. She has completed the four-year Spirit Rock's Insight Meditation Society Teacher Training. Beginning her own meditation practice in her late teens, for over twenty years, Heather has studied with senior teachers in the Insight Meditation and Tibetan traditions, and has sat 1-3 months of retreat a year for the last fifteen+ years. She is a Teacher for Mountain Stream Meditation Center in the Sierra Foothills, and also teaches classes, daylongs and retreats nationally, especially at Spirit Rock Meditation Center. For more info, visit www.heathersundberg.com.

December 24 Open Discussion

December 31 Open discussion

January 7 Amanda Ream

Amanda Ream facilitates the QSangha for the queer community at SF Against the Stream, Oakland Dharma Punx and the Social Justice Sangha at the East Bay Meditation Center in Oakland. She also practices with Generative Somatics and is a union organizer with domestic workers. She lives in Oakland.

January 14 Prasadachitta

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.

January 21 Joe Rodriguez

Joe Rodriguez is a Soto Zen student from the Shunryu Suzuki lineage, studying under Fuyu 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, his practice is to bring awareness, compassion, and forgiveness to daily life.

January 28 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.

February 4 Open Discussion

February 11 Bill Weber

Bill Weber is a senior Vipassana practitioner and a graduate from Spirit Rock's Community Dharma Leaders program. He has twenty five years of extensive retreat practice and currently practices at home with his husband or sits with a small group of gay men. He is also a documentary filmmaker and video editor; whose latest projects are To Be Takei and The Untold Tales of Armistead Maupin which will air on Independent Lens early next year.

February 18 Gary Ost

Gary Ost is a retired Episcopal priest living in San Francisco. He began his study of the dharma in 2008, starting with the Shambhala school of Tibetan Buddhism. Since then he has practiced daily samatha-vipassana meditation. He recently declared his aspiration to help Christians understand Buddhism better and Buddhists to understand Christianity better. Gary has taken informal bodhisattva vows, and is studying the Lojong teachings of the 11th Century Tibetan monk Atisha. Out of those teachings he continues to explore the transformative psychological effect of Tonglen, a personalized mantra practice accompanied by taking in and sending out the breath. He would like to share today some insights on the effectiveness of this practice in helping people find a skillful way to respond to the challenges of the current political climate.

February 25 Laura Burges

Ryuko Laura Burges, a lay entrusted Buddhist teacher in the Soto Zen tradition, lectures and leads retreats at different practice centers in Northern California. A teacher of children for over 30 years, she trains other teachers to bring mindfulness practice into the elementary classroom. Laura co-founded the Sangha in Recovery program at Zen Center and has a particular interest in the intersection of Buddhism and Recovery. She is the abiding teacher at the Lenox House meditation group in Oakland.

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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