



Gay Buddhist Fellowship

FALL 2018 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.

Why Do We Practice?

BY PAMELA WEISS

Pamela Weiss has practiced Zen and the Theravada traditions of Buddhism for over 30 years. She is trained in both the Zen and Theravada traditions, including several years of Zen monastic training and teacher training with Jack Kornfield at Spirit Rock. Pamela leads a Wednesday evening sitting group at SF Insight, and teaches classes, workshops and retreats internationally. She is also an executive coach and the founder of Appropriate Response, a company dedicated to bringing the principles and practices of Buddhism into the workplace.

It's always nice for me to be here, nice to see some familiar faces. I have been deep in the process of writing, immersed in a variety of topics that blend Buddhist teachings, stories from the life of the Buddha, and memoir. So there are a few of the themes from that I'm hoping to bring forward, share, and engage in conversation and dialogue with all of you today.

If we start at the beginning, there's a question about why we practice. What brings us to this? I'll share a bit about my own experience and a little bit from the life of the Buddha, and invite you to reflect for yourself: what is it that brings you today? In technical Buddhist terms we would say: what causes and conditions have come together to have you here, this morning? To have you interested and engaged in Buddhist teachings, practices, principles?

I came to Buddhist teaching in my 20's. I started in the Zen tradition, and I lived at San Francisco Zen Center, at the City Center, Green Gulch Farm, Tassajara, for a period of about five years. And maybe because I was young, I'm not sure, people would ask me, "Why are you doing this?" The pith response I came up with was, "searching and suffering."

It seems to me this reflects what may be true for many of us. On one side, there is just the "ouch" of life. And sometimes that "ouch" comes in a very dramatic way. Right? Perhaps there is a loss, a diagnosis, a death.

This was true for me. I was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes when I was 10 years old. So for a long time, what we call in Buddhist teaching "Old age, sickness, and death," was very close. It came for me at an age that was much too young for that to be true. But it was.

In the myth of the life of the Buddha, it's said that he was the prince of the Shakya clan. He lived a very privileged life. and at some point encountered an

And all of those pleasant things, whether they are internal or external, create an automatic set of reactions: I like it; I want it; I grasp it. That's how it goes. Pleasant, like, want, grasp. If we pay attention, we can also notice that as soon as we get to "grasp," we lose contact with the direct experience, and it's not pleasant anymore.

old man, a sick man, and a corpse. And this mythic, archetypal encounter that many of us have with old age, sickness, and death, woke him up.

So, that's one side, the side of *dukkha*; the side of the truth that there is suffering, difficulty and disease in human life. No matter how much we try to avoid or get around it, it's here. And the more we face it directly, the more we look at it straight up (which doesn't mean you have to go around and find it, it's already here), the less time we spend trying to ignore or get away from it or build walls, the more doors and windows can begin to open. Then we can step in, step through, into the real fabric of our lives.

So, suffering is one side. But there's also, as in my pith description, a piece about searching. And I think that searching has to do with the deep yearning in all of us for a greater sense of meaning, of purpose, of "Why am I here?" It may be, for some of you, as was true for me, that you have had the experience of getting what you thought you really wanted, and then being, like, "Really? That's it?"

There's a second story in the life of the Buddha that's less well-known. Apparently the young prince was a bit of a party animal. There were wild parties that would go on in his palace. One story goes that, after a night of drinking and dancing and music and so on, he woke up in the middle of the night and saw a room full of people who had, just hours earlier, looked beautiful in their costumes, and jewelry, and make-up. And he saw them, now, strewn around the floor, snoring and drooling with their costumes askew. He had an experience of seeing through the veil, if you will, of what's supposed to be happy-making, and realizing the seed of what's called, in Buddhist teaching, *nibbida*. It's not often talked about, because it's not an encouraging way to invite people in, but one translation of *nibbida* is "disgust." I think a better translation is something like "disenchantment."

And probably we've all had, if not many times, at least once, an experience of disenchantment. We get the gold ring, and then it drops. It shatters. I remember when I got married, I had the experience some months, maybe even weeks afterward, being in a lot of distress and saying to a friend, "But I thought getting married would make me happy!" I really did. I was that naïve! Fortunately, I didn't believe my distress fully. I didn't do what we so often do, which is something like: "I don't like this.

There is something wrong. I'll just go get a new one." Instead, what I recognized was, "Oh, this is how it is." The things out there that we reach for don't offer lasting happiness. That's not where happiness is found.

Which turns us towards the second thing I want to speak about: true happiness. There are two terms: *nibbida*, which is disenchantment, and *nibbana*, or nirvana: waking up, enlightenment, awakening. It's a little bit taboo to even talk about *nibbana*. But I think whether we talk about it or not, many of us carry a not-very-well-thought-through idea, idealization or fantasy about what it means to wake up. I'm not claiming to know what it means. But I thought it would be interesting to share what it says in the teachings about awakening. And I encourage you, as I speak and share these stories: listen for what feels true or resonant for you.

Awakening is the premise and the promise of the Buddhist path. So it's a bit odd that we don't talk about it much. What does awakening mean in San Francisco in 2018? In a world where we have the boom of secular mindfulness practice? Where we have meditation practice and Buddhist teaching infused with neuroscience? I think the infusion of science into meditation has done an enormous amount to make the benefits of meditation practice more accessible and more available to many, many people. But it also runs this risk of chopping the potential of the practice off at the knees.

Maybe it's useful to start with talking about what awakening is *not*. This way we can illuminate ideas about awakening that we may be carrying, overtly or covertly, consciously or unconsciously. I think many of us imagine waking up as somehow some kind of a 24/7 happy place; a place where everything is all pleasant, all good.

But I don't think it works that way. Fundamental to Buddhist psychology and understanding—of who we are and how the mind works and how life itself is—there is a very simple, potent way of understanding. Buddhist teaching says that every moment of experience is colored by what's called "vedana;" a flavor or feeling tone. And there are just three flavors: there's pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. For most of us, neutral flies off the radar. We don't notice neutral experience, or we call it "boring."

But we *do* notice pleasant and unpleasant, don't we? And our noticing is not passive, is it? There is a habitual reactivity that happens for us, in us, as we are bombarded,

moment by moment, by pleasant, unpleasant, pleasant, unpleasant...

When we have a pleasant experience, maybe a beautiful sight, or a sound, or smell... I recently got a little rescue dog. So every morning and evening I've been walking him in Golden Gate Park. And it's stunning. Glorious. Beautiful sights, sounds, smells—all so pleasant.

Pleasant experience can also be internal. You may have a pleasant sensation, a pleasant thought, a pleasant fantasy. And all of those pleasant things, whether they are internal or external, create an automatic set of reactions: I like it; I want it; I grasp it. That's how it goes. Pleasant, like, want, grasp. If we pay attention, we can also notice that as soon as we get to "grasp," we lose contact with the direct experience, and it's not pleasant anymore.

Habitually, that's how it goes. It's kind of simple, and you can check it out in your own experience. What begins as pleasant can turn into something completely unpleasant. Like, one chocolate chip cookie is good. But it's not enough. So we have another and another, until...bleh. The tenth cookie is no longer pleasant any more, right?

This process can be very subtle. As you start to pay attention to this process, you may begin to notice how, even though you think you're in charge, your psychophysical system is constantly turning and tuning itself; looking for and seeking after pleasant experience. And the flip side is also true: we are constantly avoiding unpleasant experience, right? Unpleasant, don't like, don't want, get away.

So: liking, wanting, grasping; not liking, not wanting, avoiding, rejecting. On and on like that. Our fundamental delusion as human beings is that we think, if we can just get all of the good stuff, and get rid of all of the bad stuff (meaning unpleasant, stuff), then we'll be happy! But that's not how it works. Because moment by moment, there will always be more pleasant and more unpleasant.

If we follow this strategy to its end you can see for yourself how it turns out. You know this in your own experience. I know this in my own experience. We don't get happy. We get tired, exhausted, right? Because what are we doing? We're going "Rrrrr, rrrrr, rrrrr, rrrrr." We're spinning. There's a gross or subtle reverberation, of want, don't want, want, don't want, grasp, push away, grasp, push away... happening all the time. And then we wonder: "Why am I so worn out?"

So that's not a great strategy. Not a strategy for finding true happiness.

I have a colleague who used to call this way of moving through the world: "looking for the island where it all works out." You may have that, too, just as I did as a young woman, imagining, "If I get married, it will all work out." For you it may show up as: "If I just have the right partner, if I just get the right job, if I have the right house, if I have the right shoes, if I have the right haircut..." whatever, then it will all work out.

If you don't have "it" yet, then you can keep imagining you'll get it. And then you'll be happy. If you get it, then you'll have the disenchantment of "I got what I wanted and it's great! But I'm still not happy." There's no true or lasting happiness in getting, because pleasant experiences don't last. That's the nature of experience. Experiences are coming and going all the time. Which is why—if our strategy is grasping and aversion—we are so tired! There's not a "click," done, arrived. There is no there there.

Many of us imagine that if we are awake, if we get enlightened, if we practice meditation, that somehow we'll just get to flip a switch and be on happiness cruise control. Zooming through life, with nothing bothering me anymore. But that's not what waking up means. Waking up means being here for all of it—the good, the bad, the boring. It's not about being numbed out.

Some of us have a fantasy, I've had this for a long time, that if I just (fill in the blank)... then there'll be some thunderbolt experience. *Whoosh!* Suddenly everything will be different. And there are stories of people who wake up this way. But many of them lose their minds. Because a waking-up experience is a radical shift in perspective. It's a radical re-orientation. And if that happens in a thunderbolt, whoosh, kind of way, it can be very disorienting and unsettling. Again, you all have probably had your own experiences of being disoriented and unsettled, of having things turned upside-down, right? And it's usually not very pleasant. It can be a good thing in the end. It's like having the cards shuffled, as it were, the deck thrown up in the air and landing again. That might be a good thing. But usually we don't like the process of it.

So there is complexity here.

Let me read you something that came to me this morning while I was walking in the park. This is the positive side of what we are seeking in our practice. It's a quote from Annie Dillard, who is one of my favorite writers. I'm going to adapt what she says a bit to fit what we are talking about:

"Why do we practice, if not in hope of beauty laid bare? Life heightened, and its deepest mystery probed? Why do we practice, if not in hope that we will magnify and dramatize our days, we'll illuminate and inspire ourselves

with wisdom, courage, and the possibility of meaningfulness? And this will press upon our minds the deepest mysteries, so we might feel again majesty and power. What do we ever know that is higher than that power, which, from time to time, seizes our lives and reveals us startlingly to ourselves as creatures set down here, bewildered? Why does death catch us so by surprise, and why love? We still and always want waking.”

“We still and always want waking.” So beautiful! She is pointing us to what’s possible for us as human beings. To have our life itself laid bare; to open ourselves to beauty, to illumination, to mystery.

So let me say a little bit more about waking up. There are many different ways in which this premise and promise of awakening is talked about in the teachings. One simple way awakening is talked about is as the absence of the three poisons: greed, hatred, and delusion. So in relation to what I was saying before about wanting and not-wanting, that reverberation goes away. There’s a stilling. It doesn’t mean we don’t want and not-want. It means that we’re not driven around by it. We can feel the wanting come up. We can feel the not-wanting come up. But we aren’t compelled to act based on it.

There’s a beautiful, old Chinese poem called the Shin Shin Ming. The translation of the title is something like, “The Mind or Heart of Great Faith.” Some of you may be familiar with the opening line of the poem, which was

Ultimately, we’re not going to get anything. Like the metaphor of melting, it’s all about letting go. It’s not like you have to let go of your house and your friends and your money. No. This is about letting go at a much more fundamental level. It’s letting go so that we can be here, now. So we can wake up. To this moment. And this moment. And this moment.

originally translated as “The Great Way, the Path, the Practice...is not difficult for those who have no preferences.” Wanting and not-wanting, wanting and not-wanting; those are our preferences, right? But there’s a wonderful re-translation that came out some years later. The same guy who translated it the first time took a second pass at it. And the second time he re-translated it to read, “The Great Way is not difficult for those who are not *attached* to their preferences.” In other words, your preferences aren’t going to go away. Pleasant and unpleasant experience is not going to go away. The question is, are you caught in it? Is it like flypaper or Velcro? Or, can you maintain a sense of freedom right in the middle of your preferences, and go, “Yeah, wanting! Feel that! Yeah, not-wanting! Feel that!” To actually have them, rather than them having you—that’s a very different experience.

Another simple, beautiful way awakening is talked about is as “seeing things as they are.” Just a clear, simple seeing. Or, as the Zen master Suzuki Roshi, who founded San Francisco Zen Center, where I first practiced, used to say: “Seeing things as it is.”

When the veils are lifted, when we are not caught in the tangled web of our assumptions and ideas and beliefs, then there is a kind of wholeness that comes. There’s a falling away of the felt sense of me-over-here and you-over-there. It’s us. We’re in it together. That’s seeing things as it is.

And what do we see?

The Theravada tradition describes three poisons: greed, hate, delusion. And we also have what are called the three characteristics, which are *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anatta*. (All good things in Buddhism come in threes!) So we see these characteristics, these universal marks of human life, which include suffering, that’s “dukkha;” “anicca,” which is impermanence, and “anatta,” which is the truth that there is no separate, solid, permanently existing self.

We see impermanence all the time. We see it, maybe we know it cognitively, but we don’t actually let ourselves feel it. Because if we feel it, we have to feel loss. And we don’t like that. But also, if we feel it, we get to feel the aliveness and beauty of what’s here. Because a frozen-in-

place, freeze-framed life is a dead life.

I often use the metaphor of ice cubes and a river to describe this. What we do, habitually, is we freeze-frame the beautiful, rushing river of life. We pin ourselves into little ice cube trays. And then we go, “This is mine. This is my cube.” Until at some point we realize, “You know, it’s kind of cold in here.” We don’t like it. So maybe we paint the walls, or we put in a skylight, or get a new carpet. But it’s *still* cold. Because you can’t really dress it up. The only way to get out of an ice cube tray is to *melt*.

There’s a beautiful term in the Theravada tradition called “stream entry.” It’s understood to be the first level of understanding, or waking up. I always think of entering the stream as entering the lineage; joining the many, many people who have woken up before you. When we

enter, we exchange our karmic lineage—our family, what we were born into—for our Dharmic lineage—the lineage of all the awakened beings with whom we are communing right now. That’s one understanding of what it means to “enter the stream.”

But I think, more viscerally, it’s more like, we *become* the stream. We un-freeze-frame ourselves. We melt. We become more fluid, more alive, more vital. We’re freed up in this way.

There’s a beautiful opening line from Ben Okri, a Nigerian writer. He wrote a book called *The Famished Road*. And the opening line of the book goes something like this. He says, “*In the beginning, there was a river. And then the river was paved over and became a road. But because the road was really a river, it was always hungry.*”

So when we box ourselves in to freeze-framed ideas of life, we’re no longer just being in it; being attentive, awake, attending to the fluid flow of pleasant and unpleasant experience around us, and as us, moment by moment. Then we feel hunger. We feel the suffering, “ouch” part of life. And we suffer, most of us feel a sense of wanting, right? We want to get out of suffering. We want to be free.

But we spend so much time looking to fill our wanting in all the wrong places. Just like the Buddha did. It’s part of the deal. We have to look and look and look and mostly not find, not find, not find. Until finally, we decide, “I’m gonna go on Sunday morning to GBF and meditate.” Of course, then we can turn our meditation into another thing we’re going to get! That’s what Chögyam Trungpa called “spiritual materialism.” We turn meditation into just another getting.

Ultimately, we’re not going to get anything. Like the metaphor of melting, it’s all about letting go. It’s not like you have to let go of your house and your friends and your money. No. This is about letting go at a much more fundamental level. It’s letting go so that we can be here, now. So we can wake up. To this moment. And this moment. And this moment.

As we practice over time, we are less caught by our basic reactivity. And we can rest, more and more, in this completely mysterious, un-nameable, unspeakable awareness. In the sheer beauty of that. Because that is who we really are. As our sense of identity begins to shift from the *content* of what we’re aware of to the awareness *itself*, there’s a deep relaxation, a deep sense of contentment, a true happiness that isn’t dependent on all the stuff floating through our life.

There’s a traditional image that describes the sky as being like awareness, with clouds, passing through the sky. Usually we’re identified with the clouds. This cloud is a gray cloud, and I don’t like it. And then this cloud is beautiful, and I do like it. Right? But, little by little, we learn just to appreciate the sky itself. Yes, there are still going to be clouds. There’s going to be rain, and fog—if you’re in San Francisco! But it’s okay. It’s okay to have experiences that you like and don’t like. That doesn’t mean you’re going to be passive. It means you have a place to lean back into; a place you can respond from in a more skillful way. Instead of being caught in a perpetual state of reactivity.

The upshot of all of this is nothing weird or woo-woo. It’s a sense of greater wholeness. We don’t have to keep trying to get and get-away-from. We can include it all. We can receive all of ourselves, all of each other. And from *that* place—of inclusivity and equanimity and spaciousness—we can also have the strength and the courage to stand up and say “No,” when standing up and saying “No” is the appropriate response. It doesn’t mean we just roll over. It means that our “Yes” or our “No” is not just reverb; that it comes from a deep sense of being grounded in what matters, and what we care about most.

And, if we look at our own lives, and if we look at the life of the Buddha, and we look at some of the other archetypes, we never do it alone. There’s an enormous amount of support that we’re receiving, all the time. And actually, I think one of the deepest kinds of waking-up we can have is to wake up to that. To recognize that we aren’t some solo hero soldier marching along trying to get somewhere, that we are always in this web of connectivity, because that’s what we’re waking up to. We’re waking up to the non-ice-cube nature of who we are. We’re waking up to the being-the-river. But you’re not the only river. Everybody is the river. Right? So we’re all water. We’re all in this together. That’s what starts to shift, right? That’s the experience of feeling more whole and more connected, rather than more isolated, more separate, more locked in. That’s what freedom feels like.

Pamela’s dedication of merit: So, taking a moment to feel your feet, planted on the earth, feeling the earth, holding and supporting you. As we bring our morning practice together, the words and the silence, to a close, we open our hearts and open our hands and generously offer any of the goodness and the insight and benefit that may have come from our gathering together and sharing in the dharma. We offer it out to all beings, in all directions. By the power and the truth of our practice together, may all beings, everywhere, be free from suffering. May all beings awaken and be free.

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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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GBF Yahoo Discussion Group

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

Sunday Speakers

September 2 - Open Discussion

September 9 - Cindy Spring

Cindy Spring is an author, social activist, and explorer of the unconventional. She authored *Wisdom Circles: A Guide to Self-Discovery and Community Building in Small Groups*, and co-authored *Sometimes My Heart Goes Numb: Love and Caregiving in a Time of AIDS* with Charles Garfield. She co-edited the anthology *Earthlight: Spiritual Wisdom for an Ecological Age* (2007). Since the mid 1990's, she has been active in local ecology in the San Francisco area and co-founded two ecology nonprofits, EarthTeam and Close to Home, as well as serving as coordinator for Earth Day 2000 for the Bay Area. Her explorations have been in the fields of spirituality, transpersonal psychology and personal growth.

September 16 - 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.

September 23 - 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.

September 30 - 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.

October 7 - 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.

October 14 - James Baraz

James Baraz has been a meditation teacher since 1978. He is creator and teacher of the Awakening Joy course (since 2003). He leads retreats, workshops and classes in U.S and abroad. He is a Co-founding Teacher of Spirit Rock Meditation Center, and co-author of *Awakening Joy*, the book based on the course (with Shoshana Alexander). He is a Guiding Teacher for One Earth Sangha, a website devoted to expressing a Buddhist response to Climate Change.

October 21 - Open Discussion

October 28 - Celebration of Sangha

Please join us to celebrate the jewel that is GBF! We'll learn more about our beloved organization and acknowledge our volunteers who make it all possible.

November 4 - To Be Announced

November 11 & 18 - Danadasa Chan The Four Foundations of Mindfulness

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. Through personal anecdotes and experiential exercises Danadasa will explore our relationship to ourselves and others, with a particular emphasis on our deeply ingrained tendency see others as different from us.

November 25 - Open Discussion

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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