



# GAY BUDDHIST Fellowship

WINTER 2019 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.

## Trusting the Heart

By John Martin

*John Martin teaches vipassana, metta, and LGBTQI-themed meditation retreats. He leads an ongoing weekly Monday evening meditation group in the Castro, teaches both an advanced practitioner's program group and a dedicated practitioner's group, and is the co-guiding teacher for the LGBT-Queer sangha at the Insight Meditation Center in Redwood City. John serves on the Spirit Rock Teachers Council and the Governing Teachers Council. He has a dedicated practice while being engaged in the working world, and emphasizes practice for daily life. He completed SRMCIMSIRC, four-year teacher training in 2016. John served as a hospice volunteer for many years, first with Shanti Project, and more recently with the Zen Hospice Project.*

Great to be back with the *Sangha* again. I wanted to speak today about trusting the heart. I think another term to use might be trusting awareness. When we trust the heart and when we trust the capability of our hearts to open wide, we're opening to trust awareness too; to trust being present for whatever the experience might be. When we begin to hold all of the vicissitudes, all of the ups and downs of life, with some sense of open-heartedness, a sense of acceptance and a deep trust to be fully present in the world, then our practice of meditation leads in the direction of a greater happiness. That's what this practice is about, leading towards happiness, small ways, bigger ways, a happiness that is not so dependent on the external conditions of the world, ultimately not dependent on them at all. It's a happiness that's free of depending on having perfect health, finances or relationships, or even changing who's in the White House.

So I think this trusting of the heart is something we probably all relied upon when we came out. Most of us, maybe all of us, made a decision to be true and authentic to who we are. For many of us, that was a long time ago, perhaps. It took some courage of the heart, knowing that there might be suffering we would face, but recognizing the deep calling to be fully true to who we are. So what I am speaking to is faith. This trusting of the heart, trusting of awareness is faith. It's a real important part of my own practice, and is one of the five spiritual faculties on the path of practice. Faith in Buddhist practice is very different from faith in other religions.

I hesitate sometimes to use the word "faith." That's why I did a long lead in before actually using the word "faith," because a lot of folks associate it with doctrine or edicts, and that is not Buddhist faith at all. Buddhist faith means trusting the heart and implies a sense of letting go. It's not about hanging on to beliefs or edicts; rather it's a letting go that leads to a trusting of the heart.

So I was reflecting on periods in my own life when faith arose strongly, and maybe because I knew I'd be speaking to this group, what came forward was the way faith arose in my life before I had a meditation practice during the AIDS crisis. Especially in the early 1990's, when I lost the largest number of friends. I didn't have the practice, but there was some sense of heart connection and openness that allowed me to be fully present. Maybe this is ringing true in your own life, in your own practice, in memories of that time, for those of you who are old enough to remember, who lived through that time. I found I could be fully present in the face of that great suffering and have a heart that was fully open. And somehow I felt close to the truth. I didn't even know what the truth was, I didn't know what it meant to feel close to the truth, but it started to feel like a calling in my life—to have come close to suffering and feel a draw towards something greater.

This is what faith does. Faith allows us to come close to suffering, come close to our own direct experience, and come close to joy as well. It allows us to be fully present for our own experiences, but particularly suffering, and then to recognize that there is a possibility to be free of suffering. That's the promise of the Buddhist teachings.

When I decided to share this experience, I also connected with a memory of leading an LGBT retreat a few years ago, a five night retreat. There were a lot of younger people on the retreat and I mentioned that I was one of the lucky ones, that I felt lucky in the AIDS crisis because I only lost one third of my friends to AIDS. I know for many of you, you lost a much higher percentage than that. There was a loud gasp in the room from many people who didn't live through that experience and didn't know just how dramatic it was. I like to speak about that from time to time to remember all those folks that we lost in our hearts and our memory; to remember and honor them.

**Faith allows us to come close to suffering, come close to our own direct experience, and come close to joy as well.**

In my own life too, in opening to that suffering during the AIDS crisis, it opened a door to my own suffering, of traumas earlier in my life, painful memories. This is part of the purification process that comes with the practice. Recalling ways we've been harmed, ways others have harmed us, and allowing a healing of the heart to come forward. I started finding a faith, a strength and a courage of the heart to open to that suffering, allowing a

healing to happen. I kept a journal at that time, and I wrote in my journal that it felt like I was going into an abyss, and beginning to recall and process all that. I also read in the journal that I had a sense that it would lead in the direction of a greater sense of happiness and well-being; that it would be beneficial in some way to be going through this purification process. Faith allows healing to happen.

**Faith in Buddhist practice is very different from faith in other religions.**

Many times we draw upon faith more than we recognize. I think any time we enter into action around a political cause or social cause we might choose to engage in, that calling is driven by some sense of faith, that trusting of the heart. What we're called to do, what we feel is right and just to speak up and take action on, we have to feel that there's something true about it. And even though we might not know what the outcome of our actions will be, we're trusting that it's the right thing to do.

I wonder if maybe that came forward for those at Stonewall 50 years ago. The folks who were present at Stonewall were facing the violence and hatred of the police. They drew upon the anger and energy that arises with anger, but also perhaps a deep trusting in the actions and rebelling against those police actions. There was a trusting that it was the right thing to do and might lead in the right direction, as it did—a revolutionary act that broke things open. And maybe all the people who came out from their apartments, came out from other bars to support that spontaneous, revolutionary act, were also coming forward in an act of faith. To speak up and act out against injustice and having some trust, perhaps, that it would lead in a direction that was positive and beneficial to those in our community.

Think of Nelson Mandela, a person of great faith, and all the years that he worked to end apartheid and stayed in prison, and remained true to his values of non-violence and reconciliation and forgiveness. Even when apartheid ended and he became head of the government, he acted from that place of forgiveness and reconciliation, with a peaceful, loving heart.

Here's a quote from a great book on faith and the Buddhist understanding written by Sharon Salzberg, from which I will quote a couple of times. Sharon says: "To offer our hearts and faith means recognizing that our hearts are worth something, that we in ourselves, and our deepest and truest nature are of value. When we live

from this knowing, our offering is complete, generous, bountiful.”

## Doubt hangs on and faith lets go.

So, I said there is a deep letting go with faith as we enter more deeply into our experience and trust the heart, trust awareness. A great quote from Alan Watts, that I think defines faith well is this: “Faith is an unreserved opening of the mind to the truth, whatever it may turn out to be. Faith has no preconceptions, it is a plunge into the unknown. Beliefs cling, but faith lets go.”

Again, you can see the difference in the Buddhist understanding of faith versus the Christian understanding of faith. The word for faith in the language of the Buddha is *Saddha*. Sharon translates that as, “to place the heart upon.” Bhikkhu Bodhi calls it a trustful confidence. I personally like the simplicity of trusting the heart, trusting awareness. I often now will look up words I use in talks on Merriam-Webster, and usually that’s helpful, but in this case, it’s not. Merriam-Webster defines faith as an unquestioning belief in God or religion. That’s not Buddhist faith.

If you were raised a Catholic, I’d encourage you to set the intention of letting go of that understanding of faith. Catholics especially are taught to understand faith as adopting a set of edicts or beliefs. Sharon also says that, “The tendency to equate faith with doctrine, and then argue terminology and concepts distracts us from what faith is actually about. Faith is not a commodity we either have or don’t have. It is an inner quality that unfolds as we learn to trust our deepest experience.” Maybe that’s what I was feeling when faith was present when I was with friends as they were dying during the AIDS crisis. Clarity and brightness, and that clarity and brightness is what can support people coming to the truth. It can support the release of the heart from all confusion. I can sometimes feel a real sense of peace come forward. I have felt this very strongly on retreat practice. The deep faith and confidence comes forward, and with that, there’s a real sense of peace and balance.

Another quality of faith is that it allows us to see our inner goodness, because if we open our heart, if we trust our hearts, we see the perfect purity of our own hearts. We begin to let go around self-judgment and doubt in ourselves when we see our own inner goodness. It’s interesting to note that the very opposite of faith is doubt. Doubt can manifest when we judge ourselves harshly, we think we’re not good enough, when we think maybe this practice isn’t for us, that we’re not doing it right. Especially when we’ve got the harsh self-judgments, we can recognize it as doubt, and even label

it: “doubt,” still being present for the direct experience. What does this self-judging feel like in the body? What does self-hatred feel like in the body? That’s the call of practice.

But at the same time, to know it as doubt allows us to see that experience as not being who we are, to see it as impersonal. And to allow us to not get stuck around that doubt. Doubt hangs on and faith lets go. I love that understanding because it really supports seeing that doubt is not helpful in our lives at all. What I’ve found most of all in practice is this trust in our own goodness, to trust in my own heart’s goodness. That’s a part of breaking through that doubt.

I’m really open to see that we’re much more than who we think we are. We can have such a limited sense around this self-judgment. There’s a beautiful quote from Walt Whitman on this about seeing our own inner goodness and opening up to something much larger. Walt Whitman said, “I am larger than I thought. I did not know I held so much goodness.” I think all of us begin to open to that with practice, to be open to our own inner goodness. And we open our greater courage in the heart, our greater trust in the heart, not only in letting go, to be fully present, but also letting go to let the words we speak, our actions in the world, come from this goodness in our heart, rather than a place of thinking.

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I think I mentioned, maybe last time, a quote I love to draw from Thich Nhat Hanh, the essence of which is, “Wisdom never arises from thinking.” Wisdom arises from awareness and trust in the heart. This is where wisdom arises. Some of the most powerful experiences I’ve had with this were in the hospice work. I recognize at least one person from Zen Hospice. Did anyone else do Zen Hospice work? I know Lee did. Any Shanti volunteers over the years? I was a Shanti volunteer too. It was powerful. I was a Shanti volunteer in the 90’s for five years, and then seven years of Zen Hospice work. I think, Lee, you and I did the training together in 2007. I did that for seven years and it was powerful for me to see, it was really important for me in my whole practice to enter into that volunteer work, most of which was simply to be present. It’s presence you’re offering. Presence: a great gift.

And to begin to have these experiences where the words I would speak and the actions of my body were not coming out of a thinking process whatsoever. There’s actually no me in the equation, that I would reach out and touch someone’s hands, stroke their head, maybe

express appreciation for their beauty, their heart, and it didn't come from a thinking process, from a self. No me in the equation. I started to learn to trust the heart more and let go of the idea that I could figure things out. There was a deeper kind of faith that was arising.

## Wisdom arises from awareness and trust in the heart.

I'll share a couple of brief experiences that really strengthened this faith and also supported the letting go of such a strong sense of self. I had an experience when I walked into a room in the Zen Hospice Center and the woman was very close to death. Her son was with her, and he was probably in his mid 20's. He'd been so loyal to her. Every day, he was there and just before she had entered the Hospice Center, she had been homeless for several years. This young man and his mother had lost contact and so he was reuniting with her, and was very loyal in being there.

I walked in and recognized that she was very near the end, unable to speak, and her son was at the foot of the bed, watching a football game. He was doing the best he could, just to be there. I asked him if I could sit down, and I sat down next to his mother and I felt the impulse to say to him, "You should be sitting here next to your mother; she wants you here. She wants to feel your touch." And I didn't say it, and she died shortly after that, as I was there. I felt such a heartbreak afterwards, that that feeling was so in my heart, to ask him to come and sit down next to his mother. And it wasn't the end of the world that that didn't happen. But it was so clearly in my heart and I let the thought process get in the way, to say: "Who am I to say such a thing?" I resolved not to do that. To trust, even if it meant saying things that might be under the view of "Who am I to say such a thing?"

So a few weeks later, I had an experience with a woman I had grown close to over three or four months. She'd been there for a long time, which was somewhat unusual at the Center. This woman had not seen her daughter in six months and she was ready to reconcile. So she had asked me to come in on a Saturday—not my usual day to be there—when she was planning to reconcile with her daughter. I was kind of surprised that she asked me to do that but I honored the request. When I arrived, the woman was there, but her daughter had not yet arrived, and she was also starting to pass. She was unable to speak, but was clearly still aware. She was doing a lot of moving around in the bed. When her daughter came, her daughter was asking, "Why is she moving, what does she want?" And I started speaking, "She's saying she loves you, she's saying she wants to forgive and heal." I have doubted myself with, "Who am I to say

those words on behalf of this woman?" But it was so clearly from presence, from the heart, and I'd been invited to be there by her. How could I not trust the heart?

It was very moving for me, because it wasn't me that was speaking. It was just allowing it to happen, allowing it to unfold. That experience, and experiences like that have deeply supported my meditation practice, and my retreat practice. Learning to just trust the unfolding experience, to let go, to let the truth reveal itself and to not let one's thinking mind get in the way of the process is such an integral part of practice.

I'll share some reflections on ways to strengthen faith, ways we can draw upon faith, and build our own faith. Being in *Sangha* like this can really support faith, can support this trusting confidence in the heart. I know, for myself, maybe for many of you, you experience this: kind of a deeper meditation, usually when you're in *Sangha* like this, than perhaps you typically have when you're doing a home meditation. There's a power of *Sangha* that supports the strengthening of this heart quality and opening to our own heart's goodness. We see each other in *Sangha*. We see each other's goodness. Even in conversation afterwards, we see each other's goodness. In effect, we're holding up the mirror for other *Sangha* members and seeing each other's goodness so we can see it ourselves that way.

Sometimes it's the loved ones we have in our lives who know our goodness, who don't believe false, harsh judgments we think about ourselves, who would never say to us: "you're not good enough." Our good friends who see through that. We can draw upon the way they see us as a way to let go of doubt, see our own inner goodness and let go more deeply to trust the heart. To

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trust our own direct experience. To really enter more fully into suffering. This is the call of practice. This is what faith does: it allows us to open more deeply to suffering but also have the confidence that it will lead in the direction of freedom. So it connects right there to the noble truth of suffering and the end of suffering—that peace is possible. It allows us to see the truth that peace is possible in any moment, when we're not clinging, when we're not needing things to be different than they are, when we're not trying to hold on, to make something permanent that we like, or pushing away something we don't like. When we're just in the middle of things as they are, peace is possible in any moment.

We begin to realize that the greatest cause of the suffering in our lives is that hanging on, the clinging. In any moment, we can let go.

When we're just in the middle of things as they are, peace is possible in any moment. We begin to realize that the greatest cause of the suffering in our lives is that hanging on, the clinging. In any moment, we can let go.

I drew great faith, I still do, from my grandparents, from my mother's parents who lived to be 95 years old. They had very long lives. They outlived almost all of their friends—the friends from their generation, certainly. They outlived my mother by 15 years. My mother was their only child. Often, you hear about parents who lose an adult child really shutting down. They kept fully engaging in the world. They grieved, but their hearts remained open. They had such a deep trust in the order of things. I never spoke to them about their faith. But their trust in the order of things, their ability to remain open hearted in the face of that great suffering, it carried me as a young man, having experienced my mother's death in that hard time. And I could also draw upon the inspiration of their faith as I entered into the meditation practice and started to see the depths of suffering in my life, in a very strong and powerful way. Drawing upon the faith of others can be a great source of strength.

I've drawn great faith from the Buddha at times. Bowing to the Buddha, bowing to the altar. The beauty of the Buddha offering the teachings from 2,600 years ago, that we're all practicing with through different lineages. All tracing back to when the Buddha fully realized enlightenment and chose to share his teachings that we're still practicing with today. I draw great faith from taking refuge in the *Buddha*, and the *Dharma*, and *Sangha*. The three refuges.

I always love the conversation that follows here. I think I'll open it up for comments and questions. Would anyone want to share their experiences of faith, or questions they have about faith, or difficulties they have with the word faith? Whatever it might be.

## QUESTION

So, on the topic of doubt, I was thinking that in some sense doubt is the “near enemy” of extremism, and that faith can be a kind of extremism. Does that fit into the discussion?

## ANSWER

It's really confusing, because religions can use the word faith, but it's a really tightly held view about religious edicts and doctrines—it's doctrinaire. But in a certain sense, I don't want to let those folks possess that word, “faith,” or possess what that word is really about. Real faith is about letting go in the way Alan Watts describes it. It's this sense of unreserved opening of the mind to the truth. That's faith. And so when I see people acting and speaking from that doctrinaire attitude, I see confusion, and I see hatred that underlies it. It's not love that's underlying that, it's not an opening to the truth, it's a closing up.

## QUESTION

Thank you for a wonderful talk. There were times when you were speaking so fully from your heart that the room was totally still and completely tender. Did your grandparents have faith?

## ANSWER

They never talked about it but it sure felt like faith to me because they trusted in the order of things without needing to understand. There was no: “Why did our daughter die? Why is this happening?” A lot of equanimity, a lot of spaciousness, and a lot of love.

## COMMENT

Two examples in my own life where faith is literally letting go, for me. Putting a letter in the mailbox. I always think of that as having a type of faith. And checking a piece of luggage at the airport. That's an act of faith for me as well.

## RESPONSE

I guess I've lost faith in the airlines, I never check bags any more.

It's always a great pleasure to be with this *Sangha*.

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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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[www.gaybuddhist.org](http://www.gaybuddhist.org)

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# Sunday Speakers

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## December 1 - Open Discussion (11/28 Thanksgiving Holiday Weekend)

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### December 8 - Daigan Gaiter

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

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### December 15 - 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 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 <http://www.heathersundberg.com>.

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## December 22 - Open Discussion (Christmas)

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## December 29 - Open Discussion (New Year's)

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### January 5 - Amanda Reim

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.

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### January 12 - Dale Borglum

Dale Borglum is the founder and Executive Director of The Living/Dying Project. He is a pioneer in the conscious dying movement and has worked directly with thousands of people with life-threatening 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. Dale has a BS from UC Berkeley and a PhD from Stanford University. He is the co-author of *Journey of Awakening: A Meditator's Guidebook* and has taught meditation for the past 35 years.

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### January 19 - Bill Scheinman

Bill Scheinman has been teaching mindfulness since 2001 and leads corporate mindfulness workshops throughout the Bay Area as well as classes in mindfulness-based stress reduction. He is a senior facilitator with the Potential Project, teaches online mindfulness classes with eMindful, and works with individuals as a mindfulness coach. He is a graduate of Spirit Rock's Community Dharma Leaders program and is a former president of the Board of the San Francisco Insight Meditation Community. He is the author of the mindfulness guide, *Moment By Moment*, and he blogs about mindfulness and dharma on his website, [www.stressreductionatwork.com](http://www.stressreductionatwork.com).

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## January 26 - Open Discussion

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### February 2 - 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 <https://www.dorothy-hunt.org>.

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### February 9 - Suzannah Stason - Qigong

Suzannah Stason, L.Ac, has been teaching Qigong in the Bay Area since 2010 and is a licensed acupuncturist in San Francisco and Berkeley. She loves bringing qigong to the public and has a passion for self-healing, meditation, and awakening practices. For more information, go to her website at <http://www.suzannahstason.com/>.

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### February 16 - Dave Richo

Dave Richo, Ph.D, MFT, is a psychologist, teacher, and writer in Santa Barbara and San Francisco who emphasizes Jungian, transpersonal, and spiritual perspectives in his work. He is the author of *How to Be an Adult in Relationships*. For more information, visit [www.davericho.com](http://www.davericho.com)

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## February 23 - 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