



Gay Buddhist Fellowship

FALL 2020 NEWSLETTER

Buddhist Practice in Covid-Time

By Vinny Ferraro

Vinny Ferraro has been a practitioner of Insight Meditation since the mid-90s. He is the co-founder of the Dharma Punx, and he has been the guiding teacher of a sangha in San Francisco for 15 years. He is also a nationally recognized leader in designing and implementing interventions for at risk adolescents and is a senior trainer for Mindful Schools. In 1987 he was introduced to service work and began leading groups for incarcerated populations. In 2001 he began teaching for Challenge Day, a nationally recognized social and emotional learning program, eventually becoming the director and leading workshops for over 110,000 youths on four continents. His website is vinnyferraro.org.

It's been about 10 years since I visited this sangha, so I'm glad to be back. I'll share a bit about how I've been working with practice, particularly at this time, this surreal time of COVID and lockdown. Wow. This is very Twilight Zone-y, you know? How everything could change in one moment. You wake up and everything's different. How do we practice with that? That's what I'd like to talk about this morning.

And if you get one or two things out of this, it may not be what I say, it may be just gathering like this. Because there's a value in that. You know, as we're all in our own little worlds, it's good to feel the connection. Somebody just checked in from Southeast Arizona. So I imagine the net that the dharma is holding. How many people are meditating right now and almost 50 just on this call? So I'd like to expand out when I'm meditating, I'm meditating for all beings. So that's my first intention. I'd like to be able to make that explicit as we see so many faces on this call. We're being held by the hands of the dharma and the dharma is broad around the world and back.

I can't remember who said it, but I remember there being a quote that sounded something like, "May you live in interesting times." Well, I guess we can check that off the list. We were all here when the world went all sideways. Because it's hard to believe with all the momentum of life and commerce, that it could all stop in some way. And then in these moments, what seems to be a heightened uncertainty, impermanence, is not so abstract. We talk about impermanence in our practice, but here it is, in a very real, palpable way.

And I can hear the Buddha's instructions warning us against building castles out of sand. And he advised us to develop our inner resources as a refuge. Because conditions are unreliable. So it certainly has our attention, a lot like a retreat, a lot of our comforts and desires—how I like to move around in the world—they're kind of

the gay buddhist
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the spiritual concerns of
the LGBTQIA+ community
and its allies in the
san francisco bay area,
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cultivating a social
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gone, as well as some of the distractions. So we're getting clearer on, "Well, what actually matters? What's essential?" Whatever way conditions are not ideal, that's where we practice, right?

So in a way, we've been training for this. And with that in mind, I want to explore some of the tools of our trade, because this can be really difficult. And fear, it's such an incompetent teacher. Whenever we're under the influence, and that's how I like to think about the hindrances or the defilements—fear, doubt, sloth and torpor, greed, and anger, right? These are all things that we can be under the influence of. Whenever we're under the influence, we don't have access to our best thinking. So in a way, the dharma for me is, "How do I not make things worse?" Right?

The dharma for me is, "How do I not make things worse?" Right? So we have to pay particular attention to what we're paying attention to. We always have a choice on how we're going to do this moment. That's a freedom, I would say.

Many of us are familiar with the sutta around the second arrow. That conditions, sometimes they can hurt. And so there's that first arrow that lands in us. And then sometimes the way we respond to it is so unskillful, it's like a second, third, and fourth arrow. So what is an appropriate response to the challenges that we're facing right now? And I'm going to reach back 1,800 years ago to Nagarjuna who said, "Without the discipline of the mind, what good are any other of the disciplines?" Basically, it's the software that runs the hardware. So we have to pay particular attention to what we're paying attention to.

There's a whole bunch of moments that my mind is not offering up anything helpful. Maybe you have that experience. And it's like, "Okay, what do we do now? Cool. Can you feel your feet on the floor? Can I redirect my awareness to somewhere that's maybe more worthwhile?" Because if we just stay in the dimension of thought, it's like a dog chasing its tail. It's trying to figure it out. Rumination or *papancha*. Proliferation of mind that just wants to figure out how to get out of suffering. I mean, that's where I want the dharma to be. I want the dharma to be a 'get out of suffering free' card. It's like, "Look, I'm suffering through all these sittings so I don't have to suffer every day."

Ideally, I want it to be that, and it's not. So I'm usually looking for, "What is a worthy place for my attention? What can I learn from this moment and all that it brings?" So part of the practice is the first foundation of going into your bodies, right? There's a certain kind of relief that comes with it. It's like, "Oh my god, I don't have to spin as fast as the mind? I've been trying to keep

up with that dog race!" Cool. So there's kind of a permission. You can ignore the mind. Get into your body.

What I love about the dharma is, we always have a choice on how we're going to do this moment. That's a freedom, I would say. And I have found kindness, because I didn't grow up with kindness being a leading value. So every place in my experience that I want to muscle up on, I'd be like, "All right. Enough already." Can I soften every place I want to muscle up? Because muscling up, that would've worked. That acorn would've sprouted if it was going to. So we have to put down the stick in a certain way. And that's why judgment's not so valuable in our practice.

Because we can just totally ride ourselves for not sitting enough, not getting it. I should be further along. It's like, "Hold on." When people come to me and they say—they're at the beginning of the path and they're like, "What can I expect from the practice?" I hope you get nothing. That would be killer. If there was one place in your life that you could actually put some work in and not be in that acquisition mind. There's a lot to be learned from just having some space. Not more, not better, not different, just rest in kind awareness. That would be of great benefit to your nervous system, to your heart, to your own resilience.

Kindness is a real currency I would say, for me. Internally and externally. I remember, a couple lifetimes ago, I used to go to Burning Man a lot. I went for 10 years. I had a big tea temple. We would just try to hydrate people that were dehydrated in the middle of a desert. And I would hear folks talk about it, whether they had a life changing experience or they just felt like it was a bunch of yahoos doing drugs. What I knew is that they were telling me more about themselves than the event, right? They were telling me how they saw what was happening.

When I'm meditating, I'm meditating for all beings. So that's my first intention.

With this pandemic, we see what frame of mind folks are in, as they see, as we move through the world. Paul Williams writes, "When you go out and see the empty streets, the empty stadiums, the empty train platforms, don't say that this looks like the end of the world. Rather, what you're seeing is love in action. In that negative space, is how much we care for each other, for our grandparents, for our immunocompromised brothers and sisters, for people we will never meet. So yeah, people will lose jobs over this, some people will lose their businesses. Some will lose their lives. All the more reason to take a moment, when you're out on your walk, or on your way to a shop or just watching the news, to look into the emptiness and marvel at all that love. Let it fill you and sustain you. This isn't the end of the world, it's

the most remarkable act of global solidarity we may ever witness in our lifetimes.”

I like that. I like it because again, it gives me a choice of how I want to do this moment. I was reading a professor of infectious disease and he was talking about, “Look, what’s the main danger? The main danger is not acting soon enough.” So he’s like, “I wear a mask. The reason I do is I just think about it like I already have it. I don’t have it, but I imagine that I do, so I don’t want to infect anyone else. Then it gets to be a great gift that I’m giving to every being I come into contact with, instead of the fear of ‘I hope I don’t get it, maybe that person has it.’ That fear really has a daunting effect on our immune system. We don’t want to be locked in that fear state. So if we can turn it into a gift, a way to care for each other, then it gets to be beautiful. And I’m very interested in the alchemy of turning things that are difficult into something beautiful.”

The hardest thing about my life was my thoughts about it. It’s like, “I can endure this sensation. I just can’t endure the stories.” Most of what feels unbearable is the future tripping.

I mean, that’s what we’re trying to do with these lives, right? You’ve been given this life, and it’s like, “Cool. Make something beautiful out of it. Take all the shit that you’ve been through and try to make something beautiful.” I like that practice. That’s how I’ve been holding this the last couple months. Because as we know, there’s not one truth in any given moment, right? There’s the multiplicity of truths. So how are we experiencing this moment is largely subject to what we’re under the influence of. So if we’re mired in uncertainty and doubt, if there’s self-pity or if there is anger, we’re not seeing clearly. We’re under the influence. So we have to remember that. I have to acknowledge that I’m not seeing the whole picture when I’m under the influence.

And that’s one of the reasons that *sangha* is so important. The community. Because when I’m bugging out, one of my friends can be like, “Yo, maybe pump the brakes.” You know what I mean, and take another look. And so I do a gratitude practice a lot. Because it gets me back in touch with the context of my life. So much of our experience is constructed by our hopes and fears. I mean, it’s quite an illusion. I look back on my life and there’s been a lot of difficulty. There was drug addiction and homelessness, and incarceration. A lot of violence and trauma. But I would say the hardest thing about my life was my thoughts about it. Yeah. I grew up on the East Coast, and there’s a certain kind of attitude in my family and my neighborhood. Just kind of survival. I’m hanging in there, doggy paddling. What I never really understood was the power of belief. I mean, it’s quite unmitigated. You think it sucks, wish granted. It just

sucks now. If you think, “It’s kind of, 10,000 joys and 10,000 sorrows,” that gets to be true.

So we have to really watch the attitudes of mind. Because we don’t have the bandwidth that we normally have. Because I don’t know about y’all, but I don’t have all the release valves that I’m used to having at my disposal. I can’t just go hang out with my friends. I have to remember, “Oh, that’s right, I was taking myself too seriously.” I don’t have all the ways that I’m used to re-connecting. So in a way, this time is martial law. It’s like, “Look, you don’t have the bandwidth you usually have, so maybe pay special attention to what you’re paying attention to. What are you putting in?” Am I on a diet of an hour a day of news? That has an effect on our nervous system. Is that the wisest way to spend time? I don’t know. Maybe 15 minutes is sufficient. It’s like most things, a little bit is okay. But it has diminished returns. So we have to take special care to what we’re paying attention to.

We live in a world that’s not just. And the unfairness is at an all-time high, at a time like this. We see the disparity between race, between all the different subsets of folks that are being touched by this. I think having a time every day that I get to rest in a radical acceptance of what is, even if it’s a half hour, really allows me to bring my best forth. The great Advaita Vedanta teacher Sri Nisargadatta said, “To know that you’re a prisoner of your own mind and that you live in an imaginary world of your own creation, is the dawn of wisdom.” And I find that mostly true.

You wake up and you realize that you’re locked up. You’re locked up by your own thoughts, your own experiences. Your own limiting ideas. What I like about it is that there’s a tremendous power in choosing our narrative. Viktor Frankl said, “The moment suffering finds meaning, it ceases to be suffering.” And so in my better moments, the question that arises in my heart of hearts is, “How can this be in the service of awakening?” This moment? And through this pandemic, I see how much I took for granted. I took a lot of it for granted. I took gatherings, and doing groups for a long time. Yeah, it’s cool. But I was never really grateful for it. People can be kind of annoying. Now I’m just like, “Man, I miss y’all!”

I’ve practiced a long time with anxiety as a big part of my life. So at a time like this, it’s a stressful time. How do we not go to war or judge ourselves for how we’re doing it, just because anxiety or stress arises? I’d actually be more worried if stress and anxiety wasn’t arising. You’d be pretty deluded. This is a stressful time! Kabir, the great Persian poet said, “Wherever you are is the entry point.” The ground that we’re standing on is the entry point. Always. And it’s our suffering that wakes us up. We run from it. But how do we change our relationship to it?

I use slogans a lot. They really resonate with me, and I’ve always practiced with slogans. *Right now, it’s like this* is one of the slogans that my teacher gave me. *Good*

enough is another slogan I use a lot. Am I a good enough dad? Am I a good enough teacher? Am I a good enough friend, ya know? Because I've got perfectionism, and an aversive personality. Always looking for what's wrong. Another one is *I see you, Mara*—Mara being the more negative aspects of my experience. The defilements—greed, hatred, and delusion, even the hindrances, anxiety and stress, like I was saying.

When I came to practice, I saw, even after a couple years, how personally I take these things. I hold it against myself that I am the way I am, when I come by it all so honestly. I was trying to get my needs met as a kid

Maybe mind's not offering up anything helpful. Check out the heart. Heart feels okay? Check out the body. There are all these dimensions that we can really focus our attention on and redirect awareness. I think that's a superpower.

and ended up with some bad coping mechanisms. It may have served me, to protect me as a kid growing up in a violent house. But as the Buddha said, "If you cross the river in a boat, do you drag the boat with you on dry land?" No. So sometimes we've got to let go of some of those patterns and habits. But the first part of it is to not take them personally.

It's not a judgment on my practice, or who I am. No. I'm not the origin story of anxiety in this realm. I didn't give birth to it. It passes through a lot of people. Okay. Cool. When I can stop taking it all so personally, or some conclusion about me, or my essential self, it becomes a lot more workable. It's like, "I can endure this sensation. I just can't endure the stories." But it's a question of resources. How much of my time am I spending focusing on that? Yeah. So when I find myself tight, contracted, and suffering, it's like, "What am I suffering over? And is it worth it?" What do I have influence over? And as I said earlier, it's about redirecting my attention. Maybe mind's not offering up anything helpful. Check out the heart. Heart feels okay? Check out the body. There are all these dimensions that we can really focus our attention on and redirect awareness. I think that's a superpower.

At least for me, having struggled with anxiety a lot, I would just try to hate it out of existence. Just push it away. No, I'm not feeling that. No, no, no, no, no, no. But that didn't work. Now I take a much broader view. How big is the space that's experiencing it? And usually I just feel it in my belly or my chest, sometimes around my neck, a little contraction, tightness, fluttery. But my feet are hardly ever bothered. So you titrate your awareness. Like, "Oh, my feet are fine right now." Okay, well, locate your awareness there. Feel the fundamental okayness. Are you okay? I actually am. Like I said, we can usually bear the sensations, but the endless stories that

we can get caught up in, they *are* endless. They're just like an echo chamber.

If you find yourself caught in that loop, redirect your awareness somewhere that feels more nourishing. This habit that we're in, of letting go, right? That's the practice. Okay, what do I have to let go of in order to be free? Most of what feels unbearable is the future tripping. Like, "Oh my god, what's going to happen next month? And how long? And how are we going to come back?" It's just sitting with uncertainty. I don't like to not know. Not knowing in my house was very dangerous. So you had to know if my father was carrying a paper bag when he came in. Because I knew there would be a bottle of alcohol and he would be louder and more violent. So you're tracking. Do I hear the crinkle of a bag? You're just noticing, very, very sharp awareness.

So we let go. We just did a 30 minute practice period. Probably we let go over 100 times. Are you in the practice of letting go? As it turns out, that is a very valuable practice. When I'm taking myself seriously, I'm mad that my partner said some shit to me, and it's just like, "Oh, are you in the habit of letting go? Because if you're not, you're going to suffer a lot longer." A lot of people don't feel nourished by practice. They take it so personally; they're trying so hard to be good at this. So I'll sit with them and I'll ask them to explain what happens. "Awareness just won't stay. Every time I practice, I just can't get even five breaths in a row."

Okay. Okay. Why is that a problem? After this many years of practice, I feel I should be progressing more. So that's the story that's sponsoring the suffering. How about if you just put your awareness on the part of you that wakes up out of the dream? Because that's happening a whole bunch of times. Every time you sit, awareness wanders in and you're like, "Oh, that's right, I was meditating." And you come back. That moment, that's what we're practicing. It's not me that's leaving, I'm not making some decision. It's like, "Look, I'm not producing these thoughts and watching them." I'm more identified with the seeing than what's being seen. And in that way, practice feels hella nourishing.

It's like, "Wow, look at how many times I let go." And every time I let go, every time I woke up, that moment of wakefulness or mindfulness, I tasted freedom. It's like, "Wow." I don't remember leaving, but I remember coming back. And if we focus on that part of the equation, practice can be very nourishing. I'm going to try to connect with the part of me that is not struggling.

But I keep coming back to this fundamental okayness that's right here, right now. The folks at the Greater Good Science Lab, they put up a bunch of lists to focus on during the lockdown. Move your body, be creative. The last one on the list caught my attention. And it was, "What expectation of normal did you let go of today?"

So hundreds of times, in one practice, letting go, touching peace.

I'm lucky. I live in the country now. I live in the mountains. So I can connect with a boundless awareness, right outside my door as I look at the sky. And I try to not fill up this space, you know? I have a little bit of space here and there, and I try to not fill it up and try to really understand what nourishes me. It's not an hour on Facebook. It's not Netflix. I mean, I still do those things, because I think there is a value in being taken into another story. So I don't judge those things. I don't have a hard line that I just don't do them. But I don't fool myself into thinking that they're nourishing. So we

I keep coming back to this fundamental okayness that's right here, right now.

have to find what nourishes us. Oh, a walk in nature. Cool. Music. That could be cooking some healthy food. Beautiful. Connecting with someone. As odd as this Zoom platform is, I find it oddly satisfying. It's like I feel like I can't remember what my friends look like, or their laugh or their smile. And then we do this, and I'm like, "Oh that's right, I love you, man. I remember you."

I am in an exploration of finding what is nourishing for me. Because I need things that are nourishing right now. And I consciously do my best to orient toward gratitude. Because that gets to be a part of this truth too, along with everything else that my mind is ready to go toward. In the midst of all of it, I have a lot to be grateful for. A lot. Yeah. Yeah. And if you have some energy, right? How are we being in service to this world? If I'm done tripping on I, me, and mine, and how I'm going to get through this, is there some space, as Ryokan said, "If only my monk's robes were wide enough to gather up all the suffering people in this floating world."

There are so many beautiful acts of courage and generosity right now. I really wonder, how can we keep it going? When this thing ends, you know? How do we keep remembering how much we impact each other? The anthropologist Margaret Mead was asked by a student what she considered to be the first sign of civilization in a culture. And the student expected Mead to talk about fish hooks or clay pots, or grinding stones. But Mead said that the first sign of civilization in ancient culture was a femur, the thighbone, that had been broken and then healed. She explained that in the animal kingdom, if you break your leg, you die. You can't run from danger. You can't get to the river for a drink. You can't hunt for food. You are meat for prowling beasts. So no animal survives a broken leg long enough for the bone to heal. But the broken femur bone that has healed, is evidence that someone has taken the time to stay with the one who fell, and bound up the wound, and has car-

ried that person to safety. And has tended that person through recovery.

So helping someone else through difficulty, is where civilization starts. Yeah. So what are we doing to get outside of our own self-absorption? How many ways am I being generous with this time? What do I have to offer? Because I feel like we all have something to offer. Yeah.

So I'd like to end with a reading from Mathew Horrocks, a German futurist. So he wrote, "After a period of bewilderment and fear, an inner strength arises. The world ends, but with the experience that we're still here.

A kind of new being arises from inside us. Because in the middle of civilization's shut down, we run through forests or parks, or across our most empty spaces. This is not an apocalypse. This is about a new beginning. This is how it turns out. Change begins as a

changed pattern of expectations, perceptions, and world connections. And sometimes it's precisely the break with routines; the familiar that releases our sense of the future again. The idea and certainty that everything could be completely different, and maybe even better. So every deep crisis leaves a story. A narrative that points far into the future. And one of the strongest images left by the coronavirus is of the Italians making music on their balconies. The second image was sent to us by satellite images that suddenly showed the industrial areas of China and Italy free of smog. So in 2020, human CO₂ emissions will drop for the first time. That very fact will do something to us. And if the virus can do that, then possibly we can do that."

Maybe the virus is just a messenger from the future. The drastic message is human civilization has become too dense. Too fast. And overheated. It's racing too fast in a direction in which there is no future. But it can reinvent itself. System reset. Cool down. Music on the balconies. This is how the future works. Yeah. I like that.

Any benefit that came from us sitting together, sharing, practicing, let us dedicate it to all beings in all directions. Particularly beings that are struggling right now, feeling like no one is pulling for them. Let's hold them in our hearts. May all beings be well. May all beings feel safe. And may all beings know liberation.

Be safe, take care, y'all. See you in another dream.

Thank you, everyone.

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All in-person Programs at GBF on Bartlett Street will be postponed indefinitely and are being offered online using Zoom Meetings. Visit our website at www.gaybuddhist.org for the Zoom link and password.

Sunday Sittings

10:30 am to 12:00 pm

Every Sunday at 10:30 am we meditate together for 30 minutes, followed by a talk or discussion till 12:00 pm. Everyone is then welcome to stay and socialize until 12:30 pm.

Wednesday Night Live

7:30 pm to 9:00 pm

Similar to the Sunday format, without a formal dharma talk, we host a wide range of discussions which can include creative spiritual inspirations, pitfalls on the path, and applications of practice in everyday life. You are welcome to attend the Meditation (7:30 pm to 8:00 pm) only, and/or the Discussion (8:00 pm to 9:00 pm).

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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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 6 - Eve Decker

Eve Decker has been practicing Insight Meditation since 1991, and has taught groups, daylongs, and short retreats since 2006, particularly at Spirit Rock, the East Bay Meditation Center and elsewhere in the Bay Area. She is a graduate of UC Berkeley and of Spirit Rock's Path of Engagement and Community Dharma Leader training programs, and has been trained in the Hakomi approach to body-based psychotherapy. Eve is also a singer/songwriter who has combined the power of music and dharma practice. Her most recent CDs are "In: Chants of Mindfulness & Compassion," and "Awakening Joy - The Music."

SEPTEMBER 13 - Open Discussion

SEPTEMBER 20 - Pamela Weiss

Pamela Weiss has practiced in the Zen and Theravada traditions of Buddhism for over 25 years, including several years of Zen monastic training. She completed teacher training with Jack Kornfield through Spirit Rock, leads a Wednesday evening sitting group at SF Insight, and teaches classes, workshops and retreats internationally. Pamela 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.

SEPTEMBER 27 - 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.

OCTOBER 4 - 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*, and a contributing author to *The Sacred Mirror, Listening from the Heart of Silence*, and the online journal *Undivided*. Dorothy offers satsang, retreats, and private meetings in the Bay area and elsewhere by invitation. For more information, please visit www.dorothyhunt.org.

OCTOBER 10 - Day-Long Retreat

Please join by Zoom on October 10 from 10:00 am to 4:30 pm for a day-long retreat with J.D. Doyle. The theme is Community, Kindness and Joy. There is no cost to participate but dana is encouraged for the teacher. Contact Richard Azzolini at chefazzolini@gmail.com for more information

OCTOBER 11 - 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.

OCTOBER 18 - John Martin

John Martin teaches Vipassana (Insight), Metta (Loving Kindness), and LGBTQI themed meditation retreats. He leads an on-going weekly Monday evening meditation group in the Castro, teaches both an Advanced Practitioners Program group and a

Dedicated Practitioners Group and is the co-guiding teacher for the LGBTQ+ Sangha at the Insight Meditation Center in Redwood City. John serves on both the Spirit Rock Teachers Council and the Governing Teachers Council. He has had a dedicated practice while being engaged in the working world and emphasizes practice for daily life. He completed the SRMC/IMS/IRC 4-year teacher training in 2016. John served as a hospice volunteer for many years, first with Shanti Project and more recently with Zen Hospice Project.

OCTOBER 25 - Open Discussion

NOVEMBER 1 - Sister Merry Peter & Sister Mary Media

Sister Merry Peter, SPI, is a poet, writer, and former sex-worker who found her vocation through the Radical Faeries in 1987. Her life-long activism focuses on HIV-AIDS, queer youth, civil rights and social justice. Her efforts include partnerships to provide street-level health services to sex workers, legal aid for LGBTQ+ refugees and resistance to police violence. Sister Mary Media, SPI, a long-time member of GBF, is one of the original Sisters from the Order's founding in 1979 where she currently serves as Mistress of Grants. She speaks frequently about the group's history and her vocation as a secular nun.

Two days before an election of historic consequence, the topic "Deconstructing our Illusions" will focus on our role in transformation. We will explore how our practice challenges inherited frameworks of perception such as white privilege, calls us to expand our consciousness, and impels us to act for justice and equality. Examining the life of the Buddha, we will trace how the themes of his life and journey create a path for our own exploration and transformation.

NOVEMBER 8 - 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>.

NOVEMBER 15 - Larry Robinson

Larry Robinson has been a practicing Buddhist for 47 years, mostly in the Zen and Vipassana traditions. He is a member of the Occidental Laguna Sangha in Sebastopol, studying with Bruce Fortin in the lineage of Suzuki Roshi. A long-time environmental and social justice activist, he is a retired ecopsychologist and former mayor of Sebastopol. He serves on the board of directors of the Center for Climate Protection and the board of trustees of Meridian University. His "large and foolish project" (in the words of Rumi) is to restore the soul of the world through reawakening the oral tradition of poetry. He is also the founder and producer of Rumi's Caravan.

NOVEMBER 22 - Karen Van Dine

Karen Van Dine connected with the San Francisco gay community in 1985 as a member of Radiant Light Ministries, where she served as a prayer counselor. Through the AIDS Epidemic of the 80's and 90's, Karen worked with the San Francisco Healing Circle and R.L.M., leading meditations, memorials and assisting many in conscious dying. After her time as a student at Tassajara Zen Monastery and retreats with Thich Nhat Hanh, she founded the Living Peace Meditation Community in 1993. The L.P.M.C. began in connection with the San Francisco Center for Living and later moved into its own location when the center closed. She has been the primary facilitator for the L.P.M.C. for 25 years. Three years ago, she was rather stunned to realize that she was now an elder!, so she shifted the L.P.M.C. to the Aquatic Park Senior Center where she serves as a Meditation teacher/facilitator and art teacher. At 78, she also continues her work as a visual artist, writer and public speaker. Through her many years of meditation, she has deepened her personal practice, insight, and compassion. She has a profound life long love and heart connection with the gay community.

NOVEMBER 29 - 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