



Gay Buddhist Fellowship

The Gay Buddhist Fellowship supports Buddhist practice in the gay mens' community. It is a forum that brings together the diverse Buddhist traditions to address the spiritual concerns of gay men in the Bay Area, the United States, and the world. GBF's mission includes cultivating a social environment that is inclusive and caring.

Looking in the Mirror

by Kevin Berrill

In July, my partner Chuck and I took part in a nine day Vipassana retreat at the Insight Meditation Society (IMS), a beautiful and friendly Buddhist retreat center in Barre, Massachusetts. I had been to IMS before, and this retreat was very similar to the others, consisting of intervals of sitting and walking meditation from dawn till bedtime. Each evening we listened to a talk given by one of three dharma teachers. We also met periodically in small groups that were facilitated by a teacher. The food was delicious and varied. Our rooms were monastically simple; mine looked up a steep hillside of ferns and fragrant pine trees. The clean, cool, dry air was a welcome relief from the oppressive heat and humidity of Washington, DC, where we live together.

As I walked the lovely grounds of IMS on that first evening, I felt relieved to be there again, and slightly nervous about how my experience of the retreat would unfold. The quiet and peace of the place offered the possibility of serenity, and I did have my serene moments. There were also plenty of moments when my mind was like a noisy theme park. At those times, I felt as if I were lost in a funhouse, wandering through a gallery of mirrors. I took a look in those mirrors and did my best to make friends with whom I saw.

Upon our arrival at IMS, we were assigned a daily "yogi job." On previous retreats, I had washed pots or run the dishwasher. When I was asked to water and tend to the plants, I thought, "Perfect!" I pictured myself a beacon of serenity, a Buddhist Martha Stewart, gliding through the place with my watering can, exquisitely mindful, full of ease and joy.

That might have been the case, were I not still caught up in some very old habits around work: a struggle with perfectionism, a tendency to over-commit my time, a difficulty pacing work, a fear of making mistakes and being criticized, and a habit of merging with what I do. So, I found myself relating to my assignment as if it were some new high-powered Washington job. Since I knew next to nothing about plants, I read carefully the laminated care instructions in each pot. Sometimes, I was so focused on the instructions, I never even stopped to notice the plants. That provoked a little judgement; and I was unnerved to discover that some plants didn't come with care instructions. Fear. The housekeeper was nowhere around; I didn't know what to do. Doubt. I wondered: Was I over watering? Was I under watering? Was I killing a plant and not knowing it? I accidentally "pruned" several healthy branches off a Wandering Jew. Would I be rebuked? Sent off to wash pots? It was soon

