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Gay Buddhist Fellowship

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 Bay Area, the United States, and the world. GBF's mission includes cultivating a social environment that is inclusive and caring.

The Positive Value Of the Negative Precepts

By Roger Corless

Transcribed from a Dharma talk given at the July 12, 1998 GBF sitting.

The Precepts I want to talk about are the five so-called grave Precepts. They are expressed in the negative, yet Thich Nhat Hanh calls them the Five Wonderful Precepts. In my experience of GBF over the years, there has been sort of a dancing around these Precepts. Maybe partly because this is San Francisco, where nobody can tell anyone anything. "I've got to do it my way, thank you" we say. If anybody tells us not to do something, that's exactly what we are going to do. Also, many of us come out of abusive religious or family situations as children. So when we come up against the basic Precepts of the Buddhist tradition and find that they are expressed in the negative, we think "Well, that's the end of that". We're going to do something else, and look for some other way to practice the Buddhist tradition.

I would like to reframe the Precepts so that we can see something worthwhile about them, even as, or just because, they are expressed in the negative. I don't wish to rewrite them in the positive. This is not as easy as it sounds. I've asked my students at Duke to discuss the positive value of the negative Precepts, and practically no one has got it. They were disappointed in the grade when they got their papers back, because most of them had merely rewritten the Precepts in the positive. They had difficulty seeing that there is a positive value in saying "No".

Since some of you may not be too familiar with the Precepts, I will go through them briefly. I will first chant them, but, not in English. I'm sure, as I tell my students at Duke, that the Buddha would have spoken English if he could have, but he couldn't, it hadn't been invented yet. So, we have to study them in Pali and then make an attempt to translate them into English. The Precepts are commonly recited at the beginning of traditional Buddhist services, just after reciting the Triple Refuge—something else we haven't had the tradition of doing at GBF.

