



*Newsletter
May 2000*

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.

Practice and Paradox

A Dharma Talk given by Darlene Cohen, March 12, 2000

This morning I'd like to talk about my favorite thing about Zen practice, or my favorite thing right now—you know, it switches all the time. My favorite thing right now is how practice, not just Zen practice, embraces paradox. That's the moment-to-moment intermingling of things that supposedly don't go together. Seeing contradictory notions as just two parts of the very same thing.

Why do I like paradox so much? It's because when you encounter paradox, things that are logical and rational are subverted. Paradox slips underneath all the things that are in their place that are neat and orderly, all the ideological socks that are arranged according to color and style, and put in the drawer in different compartments.

Paradox subverts all this neatness and presents you with life as it usually is—very messy and gushy, ideas flowing in and out of each other without any warning. Just knowing that this unruly realm exists, when I'm walking my linear plank, ready to trip at any moment and be engulfed by this unruliness, makes me relax a little and just let things be how they are.

From this perspective, I think it's funny that we see consistency as a good thing. We try to be consistent. We try to get our ideas in order so they don't contradict each other. I question the value of this exercise.

I spent many years of my life trying to be consistent, to be the same way in this situation as I was in that situation. I tried to develop a consistent self, because people seemed so alarmed when you're not consistent. I remember my college roommate complaining to me that sometimes I was superneat, and sometimes I was very messy, and therefore she didn't know how to conduct herself. She said I was inconsistent. This bothered her a lot, because she didn't know how to play off it. She used herself as a paragon of virtue in this matter, saying she was always messy. (Laughter.) I just conceded the point.

Then when I was in a radical political group in my twenties, I was expected to have clear, solid, immutable opinions. But in some circumstances I was against the death penalty; and sometimes, I wasn't. Sometimes I thought we should kill the pigs, and other times I thought just thinking that way was counter-productive.

Try as I would, I couldn't squeeze all of my selves into one single self that when confronted with different moments in time, was always consistent, always the same. Life just seemed too complex to me. But since other people always pointed this out as a huge character flaw, I thought for a long time that it was, too.

