



Gay Buddhist Fellowship

FEBRUARY / MARCH 2003 NEWSLETTER

The gay buddhist
fellowship supports
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gay men's community.
It is a forum that
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traditions to address
the spiritual concerns
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GBF's mission includes
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environment that is
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Becoming a Contemplative Artist: Developing Skillfulness in Practice

BY DONALD ROTHBERG

Donald Rothberg has practiced Insight Meditation since 1976 and has written and taught widely on socially engaged Buddhism and transpersonal studies. He is on the faculty of the Saybrook Graduate School, where he has developed a program in Socially Engaged Spirituality. He has been an organizer, educator, and board member for the Buddhist Peace Fellowship (BPF), particularly working as a mentor for its Buddhist Alliance for Social Engagement (BASE) since its inception in 1995. He is also a meditation teacher, working with two small groups in the East Bay, where he is helping to develop a new dharma center. He spoke to GBF on December 15, 2002.

I want to talk today not so much about being a formal artist as about being an artist in one's life. Another way we could talk about this theme is to ask, "How can we maximize our learning and be most skillful in our daily lives in terms of practice? How can we be most skillful in the moment? What adjustments can we make to learn more?" I want us to look at our relation to practice as something like becoming an artist, developing skill in artistry.

Now, an assumption here is that we actually can learn. And we know from looking around us that growing older doesn't necessarily bring learning. Would that it would, or would that it did so necessarily. But learning is something that is simply independent of the fact of aging, and we know that often the opposite is the case, that people as they get older become more rigid, or become closed down or more dogmatic. It's actually very sad because there's something about the centrality of learning to being human that is so crucial. So the question is really how can we really keep learning. The Buddha was a teacher who proclaimed the possibility of learning and development. And this was contrary to some of the schools, the philosophies, the spiritual approaches of his time, which said, for example, that we are determined, that we're completely conditioned, in the language of ancient India, by past karma, and that we really can't learn, that we can't really do much more than act out the fate we've been given. That philosophy is often present nowadays, in some kind of determinism, whether it's the determinism of simply acting out the genetic potential, or whether it's acting out the complex web of drama that was set up when we were three years old—reproducing new situations in order to recreate the childhood matrix. There are people who make that kind of claim. But the Buddha said, "No, it's really possible to learn." Yes, there's karma, yes, there is conditioning from the past, but there's also the possibility of some degree of learning, which means some degree of freedom from the past. That may feel obvious sometimes to us, but it's really important to know that it's a basis for practice—the fact that we can see the conditioning and know it well enough that we gradually let go of the patterns and conditioning that bind us and move towards those that free us.

Another dimension of this notion of becoming a contemplative artist is that meditation is not solely a technique. It's not simply the application of certain spiritual techniques, but rather it has something to do with an ability to be fresh in the moment, wise, spontaneous

and in some sense unaware of what one's going to do as an artist. As a technician, one follows a certain rote formula and knows what one is going to do. That's not to say that technique is not very important in meditation, but we can ask ourselves—and this is perhaps one aspect of being skillful—to what extent are our meditation and our spiritual practice becoming too much like a technique, too much something that we simply do every day in a certain way. There are people whose approach to meditation is to “just do the technique, just follow the technique.” And if our definition of the word “technique” is the usual, limited one, we lose the sense of being an artist.

In the Buddhist teaching I think there were a lot of ways that this notion of becoming something like an artist was portrayed. Often the Buddha said that being a skilled meditator was like being a musician. There are a lot of places where the Buddha says, “Yes, first you learn the basic notes [this is going back to musical system of ancient India] and the way to play the notes, and then gradually you learn how to enter into the themes that characterize the successful musician.” Becoming a meditator is like being a musician—musical metaphors are used to describe the development of our concentration in practice. We often meet the metaphor of the guitar player who has the strings tuned not too tightly, not too lightly.

And so I think this notion of practice as art is a wonderful one to follow. We can ask what it means to be a great artist. I want to talk about five aspects of being an artist and point to what these aspects mean in terms of being a contemplative artist. First of all, I want to talk about how being an artist means to be grounded in a particular set of intentions, which really define a tradition and a community. So, first is the groundedness in community. Secondly, one develops the basic repertoire, and gradually, comes, thirdly, to be able to approach life more freshly. This permits one, fourthly, to be able more and more to be skillful with difficult situations, to be really able to work in a more spontaneous way with what's difficult. And finally, I think as the culmination of being a contemplative artist, one comes to be what I would call a “master of paradoxical balance.” I'll talk about that when I get to it, but one learns to be a master of working with the creative tension between various kinds of opposites. In doing so, one is able to have moments of great balance. These are the moments when magic happens, when one opens to the sacred. So that's the direction I want to go, and I want to explore each of those ideas, really asking the questions, “How can each of us be more skillful in becoming that artist? Where are we? What do we need to do? What adjustments can we make in our own practice?” That's where I want to go.

So, the first aspect of grounding oneself in a tradition with a set of intentions is really important. This is one of the reasons that it's vital to stay with a practice – to be able to go deeper into a given spiritual practice, once one has a sense of resonance with a practice. And if one is a Buddhist practitioner, part of what being more skillful as an artist means is to be more in touch with the core intentions of that tradition. The tradition of Buddhist practice is to awaken. It's to be able to work through the suffering in one's life, knowing that there's a difference between pain and suffering, and to be able to work through the ways that one is not free. So in one's life, it might be to ask oneself, “How much are my own intentions, day to day, moment to moment, to do that which leads to awakening?” Another way to say that is, “How much is my

motivation in a given situation to learn, as opposed to being safe or getting what I want, or protecting myself?” Now it's possible to awaken and be safe and get one wants, but it's a question of where is the intention, to what extent is my intention about awakening? One of the ways that's framed—probably the central way in Buddhist tradition—is to talk about the four truths, and the four truths are that there is suffering, that there's a cause of suffering, that it's possible to work through suffering, and that the eight-fold path gives a practical guideline for working through suffering. In particular, it's important to remember that the first truth is about the fact of suffering, which means some kind of reactivity to experience. It should be distinguished from pain. We're each given a certain number of painful or unpleasant experiences in our life, and suffering is the reaction, the contraction, the aversion to that pain. The teaching is that it's possible to actually have pain without suffering, based on that distinction. The Buddha in the teaching used a very powerful analogy to convey that teaching. He said each of us is shot with an arrow in our life. That arrow is the amount of pain that we have in our lives. Each of us has different amounts of pain. The Buddha says that each of us has that pain and that's illimitable. However, suffering is about shooting ourselves with a second arrow because of the first arrow. That is where practice comes in. That second arrow is not necessary. It's possible to have pain and to learn not to shoot ourselves with a second arrow. Some of you who know recent work in medicine know that a lot of the exploration of the mind/body connection in medicine is about learning about that second arrow. I've heard doctors say that about 80% of what people experience as pain is actually not the original stimulus but the reaction to the original stimulus. The original stimulus might constitute 20% of what's painful; 80% is the second arrow. So the Buddha's teaching would be that we have the first arrow, but the second arrow, the arrow we call suffering, is also something that really colors our life. The second truth is that the cause of that second arrow is some kind of compulsive aversion or grasping after aspects of our experience. The third truth is that it's not necessary—it's possible to live with what's painful in a different way that doesn't involve compulsive grasping and aversion. And the fourth truth is a set of practical steps to help guide us to work with our situation—to be able to see the suffering, learn about it, and find ways to try out alternatives.

In terms of this first idea of grounding in a tradition, one of the most skillful ways that we can enhance our practice is to apply the teaching of the four truths to our own experience. In the Buddhist tradition, this is taken as a very skillful way to practice: to frame our experience in this way. I was very inspired when I was beginning my practice. I heard some teacher say that you can actually take your moments of suffering as a starting point for practice. So I wrote down this slogan: “If there's suffering, where is the attachment?” And I took that as a starting point, so whenever I would suffer, I tried to then ask the question, “Where is there attachment?” I tried to feel the compulsive basis for my suffering, and the experience of the second arrow actually was tremendous. Our usual response to suffering is some version of freak out: What defense mechanism should I summons now? Should I summon escapism and fantasy? – again, those aren't totally negative, but should I just try to imagine that this isn't happening? Should I find someone to blame for my suffering? And depending on our

preferences, that would either mean someone else or oneself – we each have our style, right? If we take that style of defense mechanism, either we blame ourselves or we blame others. So if we can take that noticing of suffering as a starting point for practice, for going deeper, it starts transforming our practice. If you can think of yourself as an artist, whenever there is suffering, it becomes a starting point for enhanced practice. And when one can do this, actual practice starts accelerating. When you can take a moment of suffering as a starting point for going deeper, for looking more carefully, for saying, ‘Oh! There’s something out of balance here, what a chance to learn,’ that’s the spirit of practice; that’s the spirit of taking one’s experience as a chance to learn rather than to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. So that kind of intention is one way to develop skill in practice, by taking the moments in our lives as learning opportunities.

Another aspect of being in a tradition is that we are in a community, that we have friends and mentors with whom to work, that we can let other people help us learn. So, for example, to be in a community where you have peers who can in a skillful way let you know where you’re attached is a very important part of deepening practice. In the Buddhist communities in this country, particularly in the insight traditions where I practice, I find that not enough people make use of mentors. How many people here have had some kind of spiritual mentor? It looks like about half or so. It’s really a very skillful way to approach practice. A mentor might mean just someone who’s a little more advanced than one, someone who can help give guidance. Sometimes a group of peers can be a mentor, but having or asking for some kind of guidance, or just having someone that one can give feedback to, can also be a way of becoming more skillful in practice, to increase the learning. So, this is the first aspect, then: grounding in a tradition and a community, grounding in core intentions, bringing the intentions to one’s practice, making use of community, making use of teachers and mentors to help one learn. This is a starting point.

But then as a contemplative artist one has to develop the different aspects of the repertoire. There is a repertoire to becoming a contemplative artist. There are these qualities that we need to develop, and they are mentioned in many of these lists that the Buddhists are so fond of (mostly because the tradition, as many of you know, was an oral tradition for the first 500 years – that’s why all these lists exist: it wasn’t because of some fetishism about having the six this and the eight this and the 108 this and the 52 this; it was really because the tradition was oral and these were learning guides for these first five hundred years). But in any case, we have these marvelous lists, the eight-fold path, for instance. We have these different aspects of learning: right intention, right understanding, right livelihood, right concentration and mindfulness, and so on. So we have this repertoire, and we can ask ourselves, looking at these lists, “Where do I need to develop? Is my mindfulness something I really want to focus on to be more skillful as a contemplative artist? Do I have the mindfulness of the basic repertoire down? Do I need to develop more concentration? Do I need more understanding? Do I need to focus on my intention being stronger?” I have a practice I do a lot that really helps me be more skillful: every morning I get in touch with my intention. I just sit for a few moments and ask, “What is my inten-

tion?” I do it often going to meetings. I’ll just say, “Okay, this meeting may not be the most interesting experience of my life, but can I approach it in a way that connects with my practice?” Once with a friend I made a vow to have all my actions come out of presence and kindness. I certainly don’t always do that, but the vow is important. So sometimes I take a sheet of paper and I write something like “May my actions come out of presence and kindness.” And I put it on a piece of paper on the table in front of me at a meeting; most people can’t see it, and sometimes if I don’t want people to see I just put “P and K” on the sheet of paper, and I know what it means and other don’t! It helps me with my intention. And can you imagine what it’s like to have clarity of intention before the microactions of your life? This is one way that I can be more skillful. It might also be a way to work on right livelihood. Maybe I’m in a job that is at some tension with my sense of spirituality. It might be something to look at.

Another list that’s well known is what is called the *paramis* or the *paramitas*, the ten qualities of a developed being. They are qualities that have some overlap with the eight-fold path, but they’re qualities like generosity, ethics, wisdom, patience, and so on. We can look at those lists and say, “Where do I need to develop?” And I think that developing this repertoire is something we can see ourselves doing. We can ask, “Where do I want to give attention? What one or two qualities do I want to focus on in the near future? What needs some work?” It might be that my repertoire is pretty good when I do my formal practice, but maybe I want to extend my repertoire more to daily life, that I want to bring that quality of mindfulness and intention, wisdom and so on into my daily life practice. It’s really vital to ask, “How am I with this basic repertoire? What do I need to develop?”

As one develops more of this basic repertoire of the contemplative artist, one starts to manifest some of the qualities of a mature artist. One of the qualities is the third aspect I want to talk about: being able to approach experience in a fresh way. It’s being able to use that repertoire and to see what part of that repertoire is suitable for this experience. We have this contemplative repertoire – our loving kindness practice, concentration, ethical teachings, a sense of wisdom – and over time we start to accumulate a body of experience that helps us to approach situations freshly, spontaneously, with creativity and maturity. It’s very interesting that when one does this, much of the repertoire actually starts becoming more internalized and intuitive, so that we don’t have to work so much to develop mindfulness or remember what wisdom is; it just becomes what is in one’s guts, so to speak, more and more. And it can manifest at various times. One thing that has surprised me is that three times in the last fifteen years I’ve found myself in life-threatening situations, and in those situations my sense of practice was right there. One time about fourteen years ago while driving to move to California, my transmission failed on interstate 70 driving through Kansas City at night on that part of interstate 70 that goes over the railroad district. I broke down where there was no breakdown lane, only two fast lanes, on a curve, at night. When that happened, I knew, “This is dangerous”: the fruit of years of practice letting me know this was a hairy situation. And yet I found I had a lot of equanimity and clarity, and I was not really scared. In some sense I was ready to die, which is not what I particularly expected. I’d been practicing probably twelve years

at that time, and there was something there that had some understanding and was able to see clearly and act wisely in that situation. I knew that I wanted to stay away from my car which could easily be hit, and the worst thing was that it was on an aqueduct, so right next to the lane I was broken down on was a drop of 60 feet onto concrete. What happened was that people stopped, tried to help, said they'd call the triple A. No one came for a long time, but finally a group of people came and pushed me with the car off the highway. The story didn't end there, because I ended up in a pretty difficult neighborhood for another three hours. Anyway, I eventually stayed in a motel in Kansas City for three or four days while they fixed my transmission. What was remarkable was that in that moment, the practice was there. Some of you may have stories like that. In moments that are most tense, something can come to the surface if one has been practicing.

There's a beautiful study that has been done by a man named Hubert Dreyfuss at Berkeley. He did a study of the experts in various disciplines—great scientists, musicians and engineers—and what he found was common. As one became a great expert, one forgot the details of the repertoire, but they become internalized. So often they wouldn't know the exercises that they would give to beginning musical students, but they had them so internalized that they could be deeply intuitive and creative in response.

I was thinking of *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, by Suzuki Roshi. He says, "In Japan we have a phrase which means beginner's mind. The goal of practice is always to keep our beginner's mind. Suppose you recite a sutra only once. It might be a very good recitation, but what happens if you recite it twice, or three times or four times. You might easily lose your original attitude. The same thing will happen with your meditation practice." And he goes on to say, "When your mind is empty, it's ready for anything. In the beginner's mind, there are many possibilities. In the expert's mind, there are few." Now I want to differ with the late, wonderful Suzuki Roshi and say that he was talking about a very unskillful expert because the true experts have beginner's mind. I think that was what this study was saying. If you're in any given field, and you're a true expert, you'll have the basic repertoire down. You'll be grounded in the tradition, and you'll be fresh; you'll be able to be creative in a situation. And what this leads to is the ability to be in challenging situations, to be with difficult situations and be really fresh. If I had to think of one way that I could talk about being really skillful in our meditation practice, I would say, "Where is our spiritual practice when we're challenged, when we're tested? How do we bring all the parts of our repertoire into these difficult situations?" It's actually one of the reasons for asking oneself, "Am I challenged enough in my life, in my practice?" Some of us are. Some of us are challenged more than we need to be, but some of us might say, "I'm getting a little complacent in my life and practice. I could take on some more challenges. What are they?" I was thinking of this story that a friend told me. He's a dharma heir of Thich Nhat Hanh, and Thich Nhat Hanh visited him about a year ago. My friend has been a monk for 40 years, and for the last ten years or so he's been working with kids in trouble. Thich Nhat Hanh told him, "You know, you're out there with those kids, and they don't care if you're a Buddhist or a Buddha or a monk or anything; they just see you for what you are, and I'm sure they challenge you. You're

really getting tested; your spiritual practice is really getting tested. These monks and nuns in my monastery think they're kind of enlightened, but they're not getting tested. You're getting tested." So there's a wonderful question we can ask ourselves: how can I challenge myself? Again, some of us may be overly challenged, but there's a beautiful learning theory that I like a lot which says that there are three zones: the comfort zone, the discomfort zone, and the overwhelm or panic zone. We don't learn very much in the comfort zone. We learn most in the discomfort zone, where it's kind of hard; it's a little edgy, but there's something to learn. And we don't learn much in the overwhelm zone or panic zone. Sometimes if we hang out a little bit with the overwhelm zone, it becomes the discomfort zone, so that's a little disqualification, but we can ask ourselves, "Am I too much in the comfort zone? Maybe I need to test myself and get challenged. What would that mean? How can I be more challenged?"

And then lastly, as we become a mature contemplative artist, we become a master of paradoxical balance. We learn how to work with opposites in our practice. For instance, in our meditation practice, we learn something about the balance between concentrating too hard and not concentrating enough, something about concentration, focus and flexibility. We have to learn something about the balance between effort and lack of effort, being too effortful and being too laid back. There are these wonderful sets of opposites that we can look at our lives in terms of. There's the set of opposites about knowing and not knowing. Something about practice demands this repertoire, which is in some ways a repertoire of knowing: "I know how to meditate. I know how to focus. I know basic teachings." But it's clear that we also have to balance this knowing with a not knowing that lets us be fresh for new situations. And sometimes it's very skillful to ask ourselves, "How do I need to balance? Do I need to go more towards knowing or not knowing?"

I want to tell a story. There was a time in the independence struggle of India—it was 1931—when Gandhi and the movement as a whole did not know what to do. There were people at the time who wanted to shift away from the nonviolence that was characteristic of the movement. Some of them wanted to resume techniques that had kind of worked but not so well. And Gandhi said, "I don't know what to do." People said, "You're the leader. You're supposed to know what to do." And he said, "No, I don't know what to do. I'm going to go meditate for a while." He meditated for six weeks, resisting people's pressure to tell them what to do. He meditated for six weeks, not knowing at all where he was going. Out of those six weeks of meditation came the idea for the salt march of 1931, a pivotal act in the movement. Gandhi led a march that covered some 250 miles to the sea and deliberately went against the British monopoly on the making of salt. And that came out of this profound willingness to trust the not knowing.

There are other balances. One I love a lot is the balance between power and vulnerability. How do we balance that? I think of Jesus as the figure that epitomizes that kind of balance. In the working with these sets of balances, we start to be more accessible to what we might call the magical or the sacred. In many traditions, it's said that when we become masters of these balances, openings occur. *In the Tao Te Ching*, CONTINUED ON PAGE 6

Drugs, Alcohol and the Dharma

Dear Dharma Daddy:

My friend A invited me to a very small New Year's Eve party, to which he also invited a man named B. While I like B as a person, I have found it very uncomfortable to be around him because he is usually high, or in the process of getting high, on pot or alcohol, and is extremely hyper. I declined the invitation. A challenged me, saying that I was contradicting the Buddhist teachings of non-judgment by criticizing B's drug use. A seems to feel that, as Buddhists, we should be able to get along with just about anyone, and that includes spending social time with them. What is the Buddhist teaching on this matter?

— **A Sober Practitioner**
SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA

DEAR SOBER:

Hey, dude, this is California, where we can do anything—smoke dope, work in the soup kitchen, shoot folks at MacDonald's, volunteer for Habitat for Humanity, vote Democrat—whatever floats your boat, right? Wrong! Buddhism is tolerant and compassionate, but its teachings on moral conduct are explicit and clear. You are right, and your friend A is wrong. Here's why.

In his first teaching, or first sermon, the Sutra Turning the Wheel of Dharma, the Buddha summarized his insights about how to end suffering in the Eightfold Path. Later this was condensed into the Triple Practice of right conduct (*shila*), meditation (*samadhi*), and understanding (*prajña*). All three elements are to be kept in balance. Right Conduct is spelled out in the Five Precepts. These are usually called the Five Grave Precepts because they are fundamental to any serious practice of the Dharma, but Thich Nhat Hanh calls them the Five Wonderful Precepts because, although they are couched in the negative, they lead to freedom. The Precepts are: not to harm beings, not to steal, not to misuse sex, not to lie or slander, and not to consume intoxicants.

The Fifth Precept is at issue here. Literally translated from the Pali it means something like "I undertake the rule of training not to consume fermented liquor which destabilizes the mind and causes stupefaction." Buddha means Woken Up. The rest of us are asleep. "We live in a dream and die drunk," as a Chinese saying has it. If we drink alcohol, even a little, we get sleepier, and if we drink a lot, anything might happen. There are many cautionary tales of someone breaking the fifth precept and ending up breaking all the others. If we are so stressed out that we need a drink, Buddhism recommends that we try meditation instead of a drink. Meditation will go to the root of the problem and help us deal effectively with it rather than numbing us out and making the problem worse. The words of the precept refer only to alcohol, but most Dharma teachers interpret it to include any mind-altering drug which is not prescribed by a competent medical practitioner. The only effective way to transform the mind is by using the mind itself. All drugs have one very bad side effect: they wear off. The effects of meditation stay with us.

So it is very clear that your friend B is not acting according to accepted Buddhist principles by getting high or drunk. But how should we deal with people who are acting unskillfully, looking for joy but finding suffering? We can have compassion for them, but that does not mean condoning their actions. When the Buddha was asked about ethical questions, he did not reply, "Whatever!" He was very specific about what was right and what was wrong. He balanced wisdom and compassion. In his wisdom he tagged an action of body, speech, or mind as unskillful (i.e., incorrect or simply wrong), and in his compassion he explained the unskillful action as having arisen due to the fruiting of the seeds of karma. His compassion gave the person hope. "You are doing this now," he would say, "because you did so-and-so in the past. So it is not fate, or human nature; you have a choice. If you change your actions now, even a little, even just in your intention to change, in the future you will find true happiness."

The English word "judgment" can have a neutral or a loaded meaning. If I say to someone, "Smoking dope is unskillful; it seems like it will bring happiness but actually it brings suffering," I am making a judgment based on the experience of the Buddha and of countless Dharma practitioners. If I say, "You are evil because you smoke dope," I am judging the person to be inferior to me and making myself out to be virtuous, not recognizing that it is merely the fruiting of karma that differentiates us. It might have been me smoking dope.

How about being around people who break the precepts? Are we supposed to put up with it or pretend it's not happening? This depends on our own practice. Ideally, we should be so non-attached that we can vow to be reborn in the hells and endure untold suffering for the sake of teaching Dharma to others. Most of us, however, are not this skillful. Once again, the Buddha is quite clear. The most elaborate teaching on avoiding situations which might degrade our practice is found in the monastic regulations regarding celibacy. A (presumably heterosexual) monk is forbidden to get close to a woman or even a nun. He must not sit near her, touch her, speak with her in a secluded place, or even have his laundry done by a woman who is not a close relative. These rules were all made up in response to actual events which led to indiscretion and which the Buddha thus identified as dangerous.

In the Mahayana, the Bodhisattva Vows include the precept not to spend more than three nights in the house of a Hinayanist, that is, of a selfish person who does not understand the importance of Great Compassion.

If your friend A's practice is not affected by being around a person who is drunk or high, more power to him. But it seems to me that he himself is being judgmental in criticizing you for not living up to his standards. ■

Send your questions on Buddhism to Dharma Daddy, c/o GBF, or by email to tashi5@juno.com.

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Annual GBF Sangha Meeting

As part of the Gay Buddhist Fellowship's new governance plan, there will be a GBF Sangha meeting on Sunday, March 23rd.

We will begin the morning as usual with a half-hour silent meditation. The Sangha meeting will be held afterwards in the meditation hall.

This will be an opportunity for our many volunteers to be recognized and thanked for their contribution of time and effort to GBF. The meeting also serves as a time for new volunteer steering committee members to step forward and for others to withdraw. Those whose names appear as our official not-for-profit board of directors will also be thanked for their commitment and bravery.

The steering committee will give a financial report and let the Sangha know of any current volunteer needs. We will announce more details of the upcoming summer retreat.

The floor will then be open for discussion and consideration of any issues and concerns that members of the Sangha have.

Although GBF is currently storm-free, and things seem to be moving along swimmingly with most volunteers happily manning their posts, this annual spring Sangha meeting can serve now and in the future as an important democratizing safeguard. Therefore, there seems no need at the present time for official elections and ballots, but we will be asking for the members of the Sangha present on that day to approve the slate of volunteers, steering committee members and board of directors by acclamation (or perhaps with a simple "gasho"). And if there are objections raised, a vote can be taken.

As this is our first such Sangha meeting, it is unclear whether there will be time for small group discussions or not. We'll close as usual with a social time and refreshments.

Please be there. ■

Get Your Newsletter Electronically

GBF is now able to distribute newsletters electronically. If you're willing (and able) to receive your newsletter via email, you could help GBF save a substantial amount of money each month. (Our rent was just increased significantly, so we need to be cutting costs where possible.) If you'd like to begin receiving your newsletter electronically, let us know by sending an email to mailinglist@gaybuddhist.org. ■

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Lao Tse talks about this quality of exquisite balance out of which one has access to the Tao.

I want to finish with one story of how magic comes out of the set of balances. This is from the world of the contemplative artist as basketball player. This is a quote by Bill Russell, the great contemplative artist some of you may remember as the great Celtics center. With all his years of training and preparation, this is his description of the mastery of that balance: "Every so often a Celtics game would heat up so that it became more than a physical or even a mental game, and it would be magical. The feeling is difficult to describe, and I certainly never talked about it when I played. When it happened, I could feel my play rise to a new level. At that special level, all sorts of odd things happened. It was almost as if we were playing in slow motion. During those spells I could almost sense how the next play would develop and how the next shot would be taken. Even before the other team brought the ball in bounds I could feel it so keenly that I'd want to shout to my teammates, 'It's coming there!' except I knew everything would change if I did. My premonitions would be consistently correct, and I always felt that I knew not only all the Celtics by heart but also all the opposing players, and that they all knew me. There have been many times in my career when I've felt moved or joyful, but these were the moments when I had chills pulsing up and down my spine."

And so I think that is an expression of the maturity of what I'm calling the contemplative artist who's grounded in tradition, has mastered a repertoire, has a freshness to experience, can be with challenging situations, and has an ability to be skillfully with opposites. I'd like to end by inviting each of us to just sit for a moment or two quietly and ask ourselves, "How can I be more skillful in my own practice?" Just think about one or two things. I mentioned 10 or 20, but what are the one or two aspects that will help your practice become more skillful? Take a moment or two to let those be present. ■

Calendar

San Francisco / Bay Area Events

Sunday Sittings

10:30 am to 12 noon

Every Sunday followed by a talk or discussion, at the San Francisco Buddhist Center, 37 Bartlett Street (near 21st St between Mission and Valencia).

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 (75¢ first hour, then \$1 per hour, \$5 max). The Center is handicapped accessible.

February / March GBF Sunday Speakers

February 2 **Jim Wilson**

Jim Wilson, the former abbot of the Chogye Zen Center in New York, has studied in the Chogye, Fuke, and Soto traditions of Zen. In addition to speaking at GBF on the first Sunday of every month, he leads two weekly sutra salons here in the Bay Area.

February 9 **Roger Corless**

Roger Corless is Professor of Religion, Emeritus, at Duke University. Having retired to the Bay area, he contributes to the GBF Newsletter under the nom de plume Dharma Daddy. He is the author of several books, including the widely praised *Vision of Buddhism: The Space Under the Tree*.

February 16 **Open Discussion**

February 23 **Eugene Cash**

Eugene Cash has practiced meditation since 1981. He leads weekly sitting groups in San Francisco and meditation retreats nationwide. His teaching is influenced by many streams of the vipassana tradition as well as the Zen school of Buddhism. He is also a teacher in training in the Ridhwan School with A.H. Almaas. As a psychotherapist he has worked extensively with those who are ill, the dying, and the bereaved.

March 2 **Jim Wilson**

March 9 **Sean Hargins**

Sean is a Ph.D. candidate at the California Institute of Integral Studies, where he is focusing his research on environmental philosophy, intersubjectivity, and Himalayan Buddhist traditions. He just recently spent five months in Bhutan, one of the last Buddhist nations, doing research on the intersection of environmental science, culture, and spirituality.

March 16 **Cathleen Williams**

Cathleen Williams has been in and about the San Francisco Zen Center for 20 years or so, practicing both as a lay student and as a priest. Currently she works for the Zen Center and also keeps up studies in psychotherapy, her other profession.

March 23 **Annual Sangha Meeting**

March 30 **Open Discussion**

Miss a Dharma Talk?

You can listen to it on the Internet. Audio files of dharma talks are available at the GBF website.

How to Reach Us

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editor@gaybuddhist.org

GBF Yahoo Discussion Group

There is now a GBF discussion group for the general membership (and others) on Yahoo!

Join the discussion at:
www.groups.yahoo.com/group/gay-buddhistfellowship.

Steering Committee Meeting

The next Steering Committee Meeting will be March 2, 2003, following the Sunday sitting, at the San Francisco Buddhist Center.

Roommate Wanted

Gay Buddhist Fellow is looking for a roommate to share a 3-bedroom apartment. Available soon is a 156 sq. ft. master bedroom, a garage, and half an office space (location up the hill from Castro—15 min. walk to Castro station).
Contact Rolf: 415-522-1130

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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, and live believing in the equality of all that lives.

—GBF dedication of merit