



Gay Buddhist Fellowship

APRIL / MAY 2004

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

Prison Dharma

BY DON WIEPERT

In this issue, there are several articles by gay Buddhist prisoners about their dharma practice in prison. We solicited these articles, asking prisoners in particular to describe their life and practice in prison. The writers are among more than one hundred prisoners who receive the GBF newsletter.

A bit about the support they receive: Every month we receive anywhere from fifteen to twenty-five letters from men who want pen pals and indicate an interest in meditation or Buddhism. (The number of requests has grown over the past six years; at first we received only five or six requests per month.) Unfortunately, in most cases we cannot provide pen pals, as is the case nationwide for most programs that provide support to prisoners.

After our initial correspondence, five or ten ask for the newsletter and for further assistance, which is supplied by the San Francisco Prison Meditation Network, an organization supported by Tibetan, Zen, Vipassana and Yoga centers, as well as by many individual volunteers. The Prison Meditation Network is staffed by two very dedicated residents of the San Francisco Zen Center, who provide books, beads and other materials requested by prisoners. They also arrange for yoga and meditation stress management classes in Bay Area county jails and in San Quentin. There is also a strong sangha in San Quentin, guided by a senior Zen teacher. Throughout the country, there are many groups supporting Buddhist prisoners, organized by various traditions.

Over the past six years, many sitting groups and sanghas have been organized in prisons all over the country. Many have teachers, and some are informal gatherings. The support that the informal ones receive is very important to them, and very often they write that a particular newsletter article has been the basis of group dharma discussions. Individually many write to express their great appreciation for the newsletter. In several cases, the groups began with the energy of a gay prisoner, who had started with the support of a pen pal, books and the newsletter.

Although there are prison chaplains who support and assist groups, many Buddhist prisoners, gay or straight, are alone and are harassed by chaplains and staff. In Texas, Louisiana, and other states, many prisoners must keep their practice—and frequently their sexuality—a secret. A few, simply because they are gay, are in administrative segregation—in a cell for 23 hours a day. It is particularly touching, in one of the articles, how the writer describes his very private and traditional practice.

The Prison Meditation Network depends on donations of both books and funds. Books on queer dharma are not usually donated, and money for these is particularly useful. Dana for support can be sent to the Outreach Program, San Francisco Zen Center, 300 Page Street, San Francisco, California, 94102.

If you would like to volunteer to help with the GBF prisoner outreach program, please write to me at gdwiep@earthlink.net. CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Not In Kansas

BY NYINGJE DORJE

Picture yourself back in junior high, that bright, exuberant, if somewhat nerdy boy who knows HE'S DIFFERENT. He doesn't fit in, always gets picked last, even for jacks; he likes to read more than just sports magazines and comic books. Now put our friend in Sunday school, say in Eastern Europe somewhere, where he could listen to an hour-long lesson and not even get one simple word. Still with me? OK. Now add in one part glaring cop-in-the-movies-with-the-mirror-sunglasses, one part sadistic and menacing bully-in-the-back-of-the-classroom, and two parts very dry Pat Buchanan/Bill O'Reily/George W. self loathing-self-righteous-evangelical fanaticism. Are we

Prison has got to be one of the most concentrated settings for pure and resplendent Boddhisattva activity that there is! There are so many broken lives to offer healing into, so many damaged hearts to share a glow of living light with.

FEELING this picture? Good. That's where I live! Just wanted you to know the setting.

My point (and I do have one): While the Western world has made some progress in accepting diversity (read: gay, Buddhist), that equanimity hasn't reached all the way behind the walls. A mindset more suited to the 1950's prevails inside, where one of the primary activities is "fitting in." As an out gay Buddhist, I don't accomplish this too well.

And I'm not really trying to, either. Herd mentality is what has kept too many of us silent for too many years, myself included. I didn't really come out until I came in. How's that for a gay Buddhist koan! In my life prior to prison, I tried desperately to blend in—even to the point of marrying (a woman), buying a house, not quite setting up white picket fences—but almost. After coming inside to prison, I had a long, heart-splitting look at what I had done to all the people in my life as a result of my self-serving, double-faced, and double-tongued living. I ruined a lot of worlds, not just my own. Right there is the true value of prison, which doesn't necessarily need to take years. (I've been at this for 14 of them by now); what it does require is a complete break with time. And that doesn't take any time at all!

And here I am. A few years ago, the book *The Wisdom of No Escape* fell into my hands. I had no idea where it

came from, who had it and passed it along, but I found it waiting for me one morning. A totally appropriate title for a guy locked up forever, or so it seemed. The author is Ven. Pema Chodron, whom I'd never heard of at the time. The book cover said she was a student of Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, and I'd read several of his books and really resonated with them, so I started to read. And I fell in love! With Buddhism, yes, Tibetan in particular, and with Pema—most definitely! Her warm and enfolding love of dharma reached right up off the pages and took up residence in my heart, where it continues to nurture and flow outward into the world that I am here to be a benefit for.

Last year, after corresponding with folks at the Shambhala Prison Community in Boulder, Colorado, the Liberation Prison Project in San Francisco, the Zen Center on Page Street, and a few other sources, through whose generosity I was able to read (study, pore over, devour) three more books by Ms. Pema and listen to hours and hours of tapes of her dharma talks, I realized it was time to take the refuge vows—somehow. The prison I am presently located in is, quite aptly so, just a couple of miles inside Colorado, west of the Kansas state line, as in "I'm not in Kansas anymore . . ." Buddhism is something they do other places, as far as the locals are concerned, and that includes the local-based staff that work here.

After further correspondence with the Shambhala folks in Boulder, realizing that a drive out here could be possible but would likely not happen for a while, I was given the opportunity to take the vows over the telephone, with Ven. Pema Chodron as my preceptor!

And so I have come to be NYINGJE CORJE, at your service. And so my years in prison have simply let me be a "monk without a monastery." Prison, contrary to popular belief, can be a very social situation—except, of course, when you're in solitary, which I was about 18 months ago—for just two weeks. But what a great time that was for extended meditation! Otherwise, I find myself seeking out every chance I can for quiet—like right now, when most everyone in the housing unit is outside at rec. Prison has got to be one of the most concentrated settings for pure and resplendent Boddhisattva activity that there is! There are so many broken lives to offer healing into, so many damaged hearts to share a glow of living light with. All I can say is, "May all beings be happy and find the root of happiness." That is the Triple Jewel. And as gay Buddhists, we do know how to wear our jewels for the benefit of all! Peace to you all, dharma brothers.

If you would like to correspond, please use my prison drag name: Raymond Mickelic, P.O. Box 2000-63138, Burlington, CO 80807.

Seeking Change

BY DAVEY HUDSON

I just got back from an anger management class, and boy am I mad! Other inmates and I had expressed feelings of frustration and anger from the struggle to effect change in a system in which we have no control, no power, and no respect. The class leaders' response was that if our efforts were not productive and only leading to anger, we needed to give up the struggle and move on to something else. To us, that sounded too much like quitting—something that does not sit well with most of us. We left feeling frustrated and unheard.

Prison is a concentrated microcosm of life. As males and as Americans (including African- and Mexican-Americans), we are socialized to stand up and fight for what is right. This country was founded in part by people that fled persecution and who fought for freedom under the banner "Don't Tread on Me!" A quick look at our media or our current military exploits will confirm that that spirit is very much alive today. Strength and aggression are valued as "good"; non-action and passivity are "bad."

The facility I'm at is for inmates who have committed to giving up their past violent lifestyles. Many have struggled hard with this change, having an earnest desire to improve their, and their families', lives. They've received little or no assistance from the prisons. It took me almost two years to get into an anger management class!

Though the men have changed their behavior, the staff and administration have failed to change likewise. They still only respect strength and violence. Without the threat of force and violence, we are seen as weak and not worthy of respect, and our few privileges are gradually being taken from us. Just in the past few months, we've lost the ability to receive "care packages" of food and clothes from our families, and our visitation days have been reduced. Soon we'll lose access to the yard at night—the only time that inmates who are motivated to work and attend school during the day have time off for yard activities and exercise. At a "mainline" facility, staff know that the disrespectful treatment and loss of privileges we experience here would result in riots, work stoppage, and attacks on errant staff. Here, our attempts to live non-violently and to seek resolution of problems by peaceful means are seen as weakness and our efforts go unheard and unrewarded. I personally have been encouraged by staff to "fight like a man." I've been told, "Sometimes you gotta pop them in the face," "Take it to a back corner," and "You gotta stop turning the other cheek."

How am I, as a Buddhist, to deal with such conflicts?

The first conflict is between what I have and what I want. Many will recognize this as craving, which is identified by the Buddha in his four Noble Truths as the source of our suffering. So it's simple—get rid of craving (wanting what you don't have) and we then eliminate suffering and our frustration and anger over not getting what we want!

Simple. But it neglects another keystone of the Buddha's teaching, which is compassion: compassion for self and for others. We are reminded:

During the times of maladies, true bodhisattvas become the best holy medicine; they make beings well and happy, and bring about their liberation. During the times of famine, they become food and drink. Having first alleviated thirst and hunger, they teach the dharma to living beings.

—Vimalakirtinirdesha Sutra 8

This reminds me of a story of when the Buddha was formerly incarnated as a rabbit. Seeing a hungry beggar, he leaps into this campfire to make a meal for the poor man.

The Heart Sutra teaches that the self doesn't exist (*anatman*), that we are no more than a momentary coagulation of aggregates (*skandhas*) and that what we call suffering, joy, life, and death are just variations of these aggregates. No difference. As Seng-ts'an says, to prefer one arrangement of aggregates over another is to miss the point entirely and to lose ourselves in delusion.

Prior to leaping, he shakes his fur three times to ensure that none of the bugs living there will die with him.

The Buddha and his followers are wise to realize that often we must address the coarse physical needs before we can address the finer spiritual needs. As Siddhartha Gautama, living the austere life of an ascetic, he realized that a

frail, weak body was not the ideal vehicle to take one to Nirvana. Today, socially-engaged Buddhists peacefully struggle to improve the living conditions of others. Out of compassion, yes, but also out of the realization that this is the first step to being able to offer the greater gift of the dharma and its ultimate gift—the cessation of suffering.

It would be nice to stop here, but there are still some voices that want to be heard. Seng-ts'an, third Zen Patriarch, in his very challenging "Affirming Faith in Mind," said:

The Great Way is not difficult
for those who do not pick and choose.
When preferences are cast aside
the way stands clear and undisguised.
To flounder in dislike and like
is nothing but the mind's disease.
Both striving for the outer world
as well as the inner void
condemn us to entangled lives.
The wise do not strive after goals
but fools themselves in bondage put.

This is developed further by Hui-Neng, sixth Zen patriarch, in his writings on "no-mind" and "from the first, not a thing is." The Heart Sutra teaches that the self doesn't exist (*anatman*), that we are no more than a momentary coagulation of aggregates (*skandhas*) and that what we

Buddhism doesn't provide answers; it provides a way to find answers. Or a way to live with ourselves when answers cannot be found!

call suffering, joy, life, and death are just variations of these aggregates. No difference. As Seng-ts'an says, to prefer one arrangement of aggregates over another is to miss the point entirely and to lose ourselves in delusion.

I don't know of anyone who is so evolved, i.e., so free from delusions, that he doesn't prefer life to death, joy to suffering, or satisfaction to hunger! We are human, after all. We are conflicted between our intellectual knowledge that says, "It just doesn't matter," and our feeling/emotional knowledge that knows, "Yes, it matters very much!" Does it matter or not? "Mu!" as Joshu (Chao-Cha) answered the monk who asked, "Does a dog have Buddha-nature or not?" To ask the question is to miss the point. We can only be patient and compassionate with ourselves and our understanding in the moment.

If we are moved to change our lot, or to advocate for

others, how do we best work for change? We would do well to keep near the wisdom of the Four Noble Truths. To get attached (to cling) to the outcome of a struggle, or even to cling to the struggle itself is sure to entangle us in more suffering. The Noble Eightfold Path is an excellent guide for us in our struggles. In brief, right mental activities lead to right physical activities on our path. "Right" does not denote a moralistic judgment (right or wrong) but refers to a correct or beneficial choice—a choice that leads us the right and straight way to our goal. Right choices can only be made when we perceive reality clearly and how its cause and effect are working in our lives. This discernment is developed by insight (mindfulness) meditation with a mind that is strengthened by concentration meditation.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of the process of invoking change is being aware of, and considerate of, the needs of all those involved. If a person is mistreating us or someone else, we must not only consider how to stop the abuse but also what impact our actions will have on the abuser and others connected to him. If he is harmed, he may increase his abuse on others. If he is fired, his wife and children may suffer also.

Hatred does not cease by hating but by loving
kindness

This is an eternal truth

Overcome anger by love; overcome evil by good.

Overcome the miser by giving; overcome the liar
by truth.

—Dhammapada 1:5; 17:3

Or in the words of W.H. Auden:

I and the public know
What all schoolchildren learn,
Those to whom evil is done
Do evil in return.

Buddhism doesn't provide answers; it provides a way to find answers. Or a way to live with ourselves when answers cannot be found! Buddhism acknowledges there are no absolutes. Our decisions and our path are our own.

Do not seek to follow in the footsteps of the wise.

Seek what they sought.

—Basho

You can write to Davey Hudson at T33735/E3-207, Box 5242, Corcoran, California, 93212.

Through Your Love I Love

BY TERRY L. PANCHOT

The support I receive from GBF has spanned three years of the six years I've been incarcerated. When I read the GBF newsletter, I am consciously aware that the people who put

the newsletter together, those who financially support it, and usually those who write the articles are, like myself, gay and Buddhist. This gives me a sense of community. I am not alone.

Because of GBF support, I have been able to broaden and deepen my understanding and knowledge of the way. I am a Nichiren Shu Buddhist and without the continued, reliable assistance from GBF and the San Francisco Zen Center bookstore, I can with certainty say that I would not have attained the level and degree of peace, love, forgiveness, compassion, and hope that I have in my life.

Through your love, I love. Just yesterday, an inmate I shared the dharma with for several months while we lived next to each other in the same dormitory thanked me for my practice. Words cannot describe the change in this person and his overall life. Because of the practitioners in GBF way out on the West Coast, lives are touched here in one of America's most dangerous and toughest prisons. Like a stream through the forest that carries vital water to the plants that live on its banks is the dharma. The stream may have its start in the mountains many, many miles away, but as it passes through different regions, it is contributed to and taken from as needed. The source is the eternal Buddha, likened to a pure spring. The stream is the dharma.

Dharma pure stream flows
Into dry valleys of death
Bringing light and hope

My practice is very restricted, but it is no less meaningful and full than that of one who practices on the outside. I'd like share with you the way I observe the Buddha's birthday.

I take a carved effigy of a baby Buddha (carved from soap) and place him in a bowl on an altar (usually rolls of toilet paper overlaid with a piece of cardboard and a clean towel). I gently pour scented water (the cologne ads from magazines soaked in water) over the figure of the baby Buddha, then rinse him with clean water. While performing this, I chant, "I am bathing Tathagatas for purity, wisdom, dignity, and merit. May the five-fold polluted sentient being be rid of impurities and may all attain the pure entity of Tathagatas." Then I take some of the water I used to bath the baby Buddha and sprinkle it on my head.

This ceremony is from the Pao Fa Zen tradition as described to me by the coordinator of my sangha, "The Spirit-Filled Paper Sangha." We call it a paper sangha because all members are incarcerated and we share our practice through the mail.

Because of the compassion I have been shown by others, I now try to show compassion to others. Thus I say, through your love, I love. Thank you. I say this to everyone who has made GBF accessible to me.

I close here in words, but my heart is open to all sentient beings.

Many deep bows,
Terry L. Panchot,

You can write to Terry Panchot at #849006, Wallace Pack Unit, 2400 Wallace Pack Road, Navasota, TX 77809

My mind is cosmic
Winds blowing across and through
The eternal void

I am not for I
Am because all is not need
Thus I cannot be.

Terry Panchot

Because of the practitioners in GBF way out on the West Coast, lives are touched here in one of America's most dangerous and toughest prisons.

A Letter from Prison

Dear Don,

I just received your letter today. As always, I was glad to hear from you and know you're doing okay.

As for myself, I'm on a continuous journey—a new path that I've never explored before. Daily my eyes are opened to the beauty and peace within.

Each night I relax and meditate. To me, it takes a little time to get to bliss, the "moments" aren't always pleasant, due to straying off the path as I am only a beginner.

Presently, I'm in prison—25 to life, third strike (possession of one gram of cocaine)—and I'm in the "hole." Meditation takes me out.

It's like the slower you drive the more you see. You can't fly over the true path; you must walk it, savor the moment, the sights and smells, and let the mind's eye develop from the corner of your inner divine being.

A Buddha To Be,
—Frank Mercer

You can write Frank Mercer at E-98419, CMF, Box 2000, Vacaville, California 95696.

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Prisoners Urgently Need Buddhist Books

The most frequent request from gay Buddhist prisoners, other than pen pals, is for books. In many prisons, they are circulated among small groups and are used in daily and group practice. All books are welcome, particularly those suitable for beginners. If you have any available, please call Don Wiepert at (510) 540-0307, or email him at GDWiepert@aol.com. Don will arrange to collect them and get them to prisoners. ■

Annual GBF Hike to Chimney Rock

Okay, guys, it's time once again for GBF's spectacular spring wildflower hike/potluck picnic at Chimney Rock in Point Reyes Park on Saturday, April 24. Chimney Rock is famous among nature lovers for its incredible springtime displays of wildflowers. Drake's Bay on one side and the Pacific Ocean on the other provide dramatic backgrounds. We might also visit the Pt. Reyes lighthouse. The hike is short (about a mile each way), but the drive up, while beautiful, isn't; be prepared for an all day excursion. This will be a potluck picnic so please bring a dish to share with others. We will be carpooling from the GBF Center (37 Bartlett St.) at 9:00 a.m. Bring warm clothing (it gets windy up there), a blanket, and sun block. Rain cancels. For more information, call Clint Seiter at (415) 386-3088. ■

May, June, July Potlucks

Mark your calendars! Enjoy an evening (or two or three) with friends from GBF.

Paul Albert is hosting a dinner at his home on Saturday, May 1st. We'll meet at 6:30 and begin dining at 7:00. The address is 60 Piedmont St, between Masonic and Ashbury, three blocks south of Haight, in San Francisco. There should be plenty of parking on Masonic and Upper Terrace. Or take the Muni, Lines 33 or 6. To avoid the catastrophic "My God! Everyone brought tofu casserole!" syndrome, Paul suggests that those with last names beginning with A-H bring main courses; I-Q: salad or veggie; R-Z: dessert. Anarchists welcome: No one will be checking ID's to make sure you followed alphabetical protocol. Drinks (sodas and juices) provided by the host.

Kei Matsuda will be hosting the June 5th potluck at his home in El Cerrito. He lives at 7341 Pebble Beach Dr. and offers the following directions (from San Francisco): Take I-80 East from the Bay Bridge toward Sacramento/Vallejo. Take the Potrero Avenue exit, and then turn right at the first traffic light onto Potrero (going east). Go all the way to the top of the hill on Potrero to a T-intersection at Arlington Blvd. (Caution: Steep hill.) Turn left on Arlington, and then turn right at the first stop sign onto Cutting Blvd. Turn right at the "Mira Vista Country Club Estate" monument onto Pebble Beach Drive. Number 7341 is the fourth house on the left. Note: Easy parking on the street. Again, meeting at 6:30, dinner at 7:00.

To ward off the above-mentioned potluck curse, scrupulously follow the guidelines below (or not):

Fire Signs (Aries, Leo, Sagittarius): Main Course

Earth Signs (Taurus, Virgo, Capricorn): Vegetables, Salad

Air Signs (Gemini, Libra, Aquarius): Dessert

Water Signs (Cancer, Scorpio, Pisces): Drinks

Saturday, July 10th, the potluck dinner will be at Marty Cole's home, 237 Masonic, near the corner of Turk in San Francisco. Meeting at 6:30, dining at 7:00. Marty will provide drinks. The rest of us . . . hmmm, let's see . . . okay, if the last digit of your social security number is 1, 2, or 3, bring a main course; 4,5,6: salad or veggie; 7,8,9: dessert. Zero? Surprise us! ■

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.

April / May GBF Sunday Speakers

April 4 **Open discussion**

April 11 **Blanche Hartman**

Blanche Hartman is the former co-abbess of the San Francisco Zen Center. She is a dharma heir of Mel Weitsman, and has been practicing Soto Zen since 1969.

April 18 **Furyu Nancy Shroeder**

Furyu Nancy Shroeder has been with the San Francisco Zen Center since 1976, was ordained a Buddhist priest in 1986 and is a dharma heir of Tenshin Reb Anderson. She is currently *tanto*, or head of practice, at Green Gulch Farm.

April 25 **Ji-Sing Norman Eng**

Ji-Sing Norman Eng is the facilitator of Q-Sangha and the "Minister of Buddhist Spirituality" at the Metropolitan Community Church of San Francisco. His main spiritual teacher is Thich Nhat Hanh ("Thay"), and he was ordained by Thay into the "Order of Interbeing" (Unified Buddhist Church) in 2003 with the Dharma name of "True Wonderful Happiness."

May 2 **Open discussion**

May 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*.

May 16 **Carol Osmer Newhouse**

Carol Osmer Newhouse has studied Insight Meditation for more than twenty years and has been teaching for ten. Her root teacher is Ruth Denison, who was empowered by the great meditation master U Ba Khin of Burma. She has also studied with Dr. Rina Sircar at CIIS and Dr. Thynn Thynn in Daily Life Practice. She is the founding teacher of the Lesbian Buddhist Sangha in Berkeley.

May 23 **Venerable Losang Monlam**

Venerable Losang Monlam is a monk and spiritual program coordinator for the Tse Chen Ling Center for Tibetan Buddhist Studies in San Francisco.

May 30 **Diana Elrod**

Diana Elrod an active member of Soka Gakkai International (SGI), will speak about the Nichiren tradition.

In order to maximize the amount of time for our Sunday dharma talks, the Steering Committee has decided to eliminate the five-ten minute break after the meditation period. Instead, we will now just stand and stretch in place and then continue the meeting. Of course, anyone who has to go to the bathroom may do so, but you are encouraged to go before the sitting.

Miss a Dharma Talk?

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

How to Reach Us

For 24-hour information on GBF activities or to leave a message:

415 / 974-9878

World Wide Web Site

www.gaybuddhist.org

GBF Sangha

Mail correspondence:

GBF

PMB 456

2215-R Market Street

San Francisco, California 94114

For address changes or to subscribe or unsubscribe to the Newsletter

send email to:

mailinglist@gaybuddhist.org

GBF Newsletter

Send submissions to:

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/gaybuddhistfellowship

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

GBF NEWSLETTER
PMB 456
2215-R MARKET STREET
SAN FRANCISCO CA 94114

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