



Gay Buddhist Fellowship

AUGUST / SEPTEMBER 2004

Effort Without Desire

BY 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. She gave the following talk at GBF on April 11, 2004.

I had in mind to speak about gratitude today, and I wanted to say that one of the great gifts of Zen practice for me has been the experience of gratitude. Then I thought, “Be careful. Don’t talk about zazen as if there’s some kind of gift.” All of our teachers have emphasized that we sit zazen just to sit zazen, not to get anything. One of the reasons is that if you think of zazen as a means of getting something, it seems like something is missing right now. The first time I ever heard Suzuki Roshi speak on the dharma, he said, “You’re perfect just as you are.” I thought, “He doesn’t know me.” But over the years he would say many things pointing in this direction: There’s nothing missing; you’re complete as you are; you have everything you need; just being alive is enough. He kept pointing in this direction, and so I think it’s very important to begin with saying that, although in fact this practice has been a very rich experience for me, I don’t sit in order to gain something. As Suzuki Roshi used to say again and again, “No gaining idea.” He would also say things like “Zen is about making your best effort on each moment forever,” or “There’s always room for improvement.” But this fundamental teaching that there’s nothing wrong with you right now is very important. Somehow many of us grew up thinking there’s something wrong with us. There’s a teacher here in California, Cheri Huber, who wrote a book that said that no matter what you’ve been taught to believe, there’s nothing wrong with you. I gave that to my daughter, and she has distributed it to dozens of friends, and it’s been a very important book in her life. And getting to realize that there was nothing wrong with me has been a very important aspect of growing up. And some of that came through practice and through the teaching of Suzuki Roshi and other teachers. Some of it came actually through psychotherapy as well. I don’t know why, but it’s so easy for us to get the notion that there’s something wrong with us. It’s so hard to let go of that notion and just appreciate this one life as it is, as a gift. As a great gift. I didn’t actually get it that this life was a gift until I had a heart attack a number of years ago, and as I was leaving the hospital, walking home, I thought, “Wow! I’m alive! I could be dead. Wow! The rest of my life is just a gift!” And I thought, “Gee, I guess it always has been. It’s too bad I hadn’t noticed that before.” So this is one of the moments in practice of which gratitude has been an extremely important realization.

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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.

But years ago, in the 1980's, I think, there was a Tibetan teacher who was teaching at Green Gulch Farm where I then lived, and he was giving us a traditional Tibetan teaching about the traditional meditations for cultivating gratitude in the Tibetan tradition. One of them is the teaching that everything that we have in our life, every-

the zendo and you take a short break and you go back to the zendo and you sit, and then everybody comes and joins you for noon services and serves you some lunch, and then they leave, and you go back into the zendo and you continue to sit. And everybody comes and joins for the evening zazen service and dinner, and then you go back to

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thing without exception, comes to us through the kindness of others, and it directs you to meditate on anything that you think is yours and think about how it came to you. Even the food we eat or the clothes we wear or the roof over our head, the necessities of life, come to us through the kindness and the labor of others, and in our tradition we begin our formal meals with the chant “Innumerable labors brought us this food. We should know how it comes to us.” A more modern translation, which I don’t like as well, is “We reflect on the effort that brought us this food and consider how it comes to us.” But this Tibetan teaching focuses on everything: everything that we have comes from the kindness of others. And through our own actions in our life, we offer gifts to others all the time. We offer the product of our efforts to share with others, continually, so that this life we have is a continual flow of giving and receiving, always.

I love the way we eat our formal meals during meditation retreats, during sesshins. We all eat in the meditation hall. We lay out some bowls and servers come and serve us, and we bow to each other all the time. It’s just a whole kind of ceremony of offering and receiving which highlights this aspect of our life.

But my first real experience of gratitude in practice came when I was preparing to enter the monastery at Tassajara, and in the Japanese tradition for preparing to enter a monastery, you go and you sit. At Tassajara we sit for five days. You go to the zendo with everyone in the morning, and then after breakfast when they leave, you go back to

the zendo and sit. So you’re sitting all day. Most of us have not sat that much, and it’s very difficult, and in September when the fall practice period begins, you’re too hot, and in January when the winter practice period begins, you’re too cold. And so physically it’s very demanding. But in the midst of this, at some point you have to give up complaining in your mind because you can’t stand it anymore. By the 4th day I began being aware of the sounds of other people, friends of mine, actually—because I’d gone down there for short times in the summer—working, very hard, and then I began to realize that somebody was working in the kitchen to prepare these meals, and somebody was serving them, and I began to feel grateful to all these people who were working so I could sit. I had wanted to go there for a long time before I was actually able to go – I had teenagers at home still when I first began to practice and I couldn’t just quit my job and go. So when I finally got there, I was really glad to be there, so it seemed like everybody was doing all this work so that I could sit. And then I thought that Suzuki Roshi came here to America to teach so that I could sit, and then somehow this feeling of gratitude just came rushing back through the whole lineage like falling dominos. Everyone from Suzuki Roshi all the way back to the Buddha—if any one of them hadn’t kept his practice alive, I wouldn’t have the opportunity to sit today. So instead of being miserable and tired and tired of flies and hot and sticky and knees hurting, my actual final experience was this overwhelming gratitude for everyone over all of the generations who’d made it possible for me

to practice the buddhadharma. And that has been one of the greatest gifts of practice. So this Tibetan practice of really meditating on the fact that since all of us have had innumerable rebirths, everyone, all beings, have been your mother in some life, and you've been the mother of everyone else in some life, so we should have gratitude to everyone as we do to the mother of this life. And when he said that, at Green Gulch in 1984, there was this kind of uncomfortable tittering, giggling. He looked truly perplexed, and I began to feel overwhelming embarrassment for our whole culture because for him, the mother of this life was the obvious object of gratitude, because after all, where did our life come from? We owe this life to the mother of this life. But no, in our culture, since Freud, the mother of this life is the source of all of our problems. And so it was really embarrassing for me to realize that somehow we have forgotten gratitude and instead of appreciating the source of our life, we find fault with whatever it is that we didn't get that we wanted when we were younger. And of course, we didn't get all that we wanted when we were young. Our parents didn't give us unconditional love, which every child should have. But guess what? Their parents didn't give it to them, and they didn't do it because they didn't know how because their parents didn't give it to them. I said to my therapist at one point, "Well, if every child deserves unconditional love, why don't we get it?" And she said, "Well, it goes all the way back to Adam and Eve. Even they didn't get unconditional love."

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean—
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and
down—
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated
eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her
face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
With your one wild and precious life?
What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious
life?

The Zen teacher Kobun Chino Roshi, who came over from Japan to help Suzuki Roshi start the monastery at Tassajara, said, speaking of the precepts, "The precepts are not to improve yourself. They're not to reach the highest image

Everything that we have comes from the kindness of others. And through our own actions in our life, we offer gifts to others all the time. We offer the product of our efforts to share with others, continually, so that this life we have is a continual flow of giving and receiving, always.

But for me, this gift of gratitude has been a great delight, and so I wish it for all my friends. After the Buddha made his first turning of the wheel of the dharma, he spoke to his friends with whom he had practiced asceticism. Before he accepted the rice and milk and sat down under the Bodhi tree, the first thing he said was, "Friends, there is dukkha." Dukkha is usually translated as suffering; a more precise translation, I think, is unsatisfactoriness. Where there is unsatisfactoriness, there is dissatisfaction. The opposite of dissatisfaction is gratitude. So when we cultivate gratitude, there is a great deal of alleviation of dukkha.

I want to read a poem that I was reminded of a day or two ago. I remembered how much I appreciated it. It's a Mary Oliver poem called "Summer Day."

of your life. The precepts are Buddha's mind itself." He said, "We don't use the precepts that way. The precepts are Buddha's mind itself." He said, "Zazen is the first formulation of Buddha appearing in the world." And he said, "When you recognize how rare and how precious your life is, and how it is completely your responsibility how you manifest it, how you live it—that's such a big responsibility, and naturally such a person sits down for a while; it's not an intended action; it's a natural action." And Dogen Zenji says of zazen, "Give up practice based on intellectual understanding, pursuing words or following after speech. And learn the backwards step that turns your life inward to illumine the self. Body and mind and ourselves will drop away and our original face will be manifest." →

So “give up practice based on intellectual understanding, pursuing words or following after speech. And learn the backwards step that turns your life inward to illumine the self.”

He also says, “To study Buddhism is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be awakened by everything. And this awakening continues endlessly.”

So going back to what I mentioned earlier, Suzuki Roshi saying that we should sit with no gaining idea, I should mention one of the great teachers in the last century in Japan, Sawaki Kodo Roshi, who was a great advocate of zazen. He actually regenerated interest in zazen as the center of Dogen Zenji’s practice. He never took a temple of his own. He went around all over Japan leading sesshins, meditation retreats, and advocating zazen. He

served me well, and I offer it to you. For me, some glimmer of it came alive one spring at Tassajara. I’d been practicing probably well over twenty years. I was leading a practice period, and I was walking along the same path each day on the way to the meditation hall to offer incense in the zendo. And I noticed alongside the path the first little green shoots coming up. And every day they’d be higher, and after a while I saw the buds on each one—these little green shoots. And then one day there were daffodils! And something about that broke up my koan—what is effort without gaining idea? Something there felt responsive to my question.

I remember, when I first had zazen instruction years ago, being told “to settle the self on the self and let the flower of the life force bloom.”

Someone once asked Suzuki Roshi, “Roshi, what’s the

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said, “Zazen is good for nothing, and until you get it through your thick skull that zazen is good for nothing, it’s really good for nothing.” So it’s not for something else. We sit zazen to sit zazen, not for something else, not for a gaining idea.

So this teaching of Suzuki Roshi of no gaining idea and making your best effort in each moment forever became a koan for me: What kind of effort do you make with no gaining idea?

My effort had always been to be good, or to look good at least, and so what does it mean to have no gaining idea? And I carried that with me for a long time. There’s a poem of Dogen Zenji’s, in which he says, “Realization neither general nor particular is effort without desire.” What is effort without desire? It’s a koan which has

most important thing?” And he said, “To find out what’s the most important thing.” And for me this poem brings up what may at this time seem the most important thing: “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

I think this question of how we live our life, how we actually live our life, not what we think about it, not what we say about it, but how we actually live, may be the most important thing. Dogen Zenji says, “To expound the dharma with this body is foremost. Its virtue returns to the ocean of reality. It is unfathomable. We just accept it with respect and gratitude.”

How can we expound the truth with this body in how we live our life day by day with all the beings with whom we share our lives? ■



GAY BUDDHIST FELLOWSHIP

Annual Fall Retreat

Friday Evening September 24

to

Sunday September 26, 2004

We are preparing for our 13th Annual Fall Retreat. We'll return again to the Vajrapani Institute in the beautiful Santa Cruz Mountains amidst redwoods and clear streams. The theme of this year's retreat is The Threefold Training — Conduct, Meditation, and Wisdom. We will use a retreat model that mixes meditation sessions with Dharma talks by Jim Wilson and Roger Corless. As in previous years, we will also enjoy excellent vegetarian meals prepared by the Vajrapani staff, Dharma discussions, and a Sangha walk in the forest. Past retreats have been much appreciated and well attended by both regular Sunday sitting participants and other men from both the Bay region and more distant homes.

(Cut or tear off above and send the bottom portion with your payment.)

REGISTRATION

Cost including food and lodging: **\$155**;

Discounted cost for early payment (by **September 1**): **\$145**.

A very limited number of private cabins are available at **\$70** extra. — First come, first registered for cabins and retreat.

Map, directions, information for shared rides and on what to bring will be sent after registration.

NAME PHONE

STREET ADDRESS CITY ZIP

EMAIL ADDRESS *(please print clearly)*

CARPOOLING

Need ride? (yes/no) _____ Can provide ride? (yes/no) _____

Want to reserve a private cabin? (yes/no) _____

Make checks payable to:

Gay Buddhist Fellowship.

Mail retreat forms and check to:

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For further information: 510-237-5091 or email Kei Matsuda at sfbaykayaker@hotmail.com

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August Potluck

Paul Shepard will host our next potluck on August 28th, at 6:30 p.m. His address is 771 Kingston Ave. #308, Oakland.

Driving Directions:

From Berkeley or Oakland, take MacArthur Boulevard and turn north onto Piedmont Avenue. Turn east at the Piedmont Theatre onto Linda. (You can't turn any other way there.) Take the second right, Monte Cresta, a long curving block, until it ends at Kingston Avenue. Paul's building is on the corner of Kingston and Monte Cresta.

From San Francisco, take 980 to the Harrison/Oakland exit. Bear left onto the Oakland off-ramp. Turn left onto Oakland Avenue and drive in the middle lane a few blocks to the first stop sign. Turn left onto Monte Vista, and then turn right at the first stop sign onto Kingston, down one block. Paul's building is on the corner of Kingston and Monte Cresta.

Parking can be tight. It's best to cruise Kingston Avenue for spots.

Paul's name is on the building directory. Hit #370 on the front door keypad to ring him.

Paul will supply sodas and dessert, so please RSVP. (510) 547-4575.

Help Needed With Gay Prisoner Outreach

BY DON WIEPERT

"Prison Dharma," the recent issue about the practice of gay Buddhists in prison, received many favorable comments, from the Fellowship, folks in the larger Buddhist community, and from many inmates. The articles were culled from my contacts with gay prisoners over the past six years. During this time, the mail has grown from a monthly average of twelve to forty pieces. The work and results are extensive:

- In cooperation with the San Francisco Zen Center, many prisoners have received books and other materials.
- The prison mailing list for the newsletter was recently revised, but over 60 men replied that they still wish to receive it, and 20 or so have been added since then. In responding to the request about prisoner interest, many men and women wrote about how important the newsletter is to them, both as a dharma contact and message from the outside.
- We also have contact with several prison sitting groups facilitated by gay men who rely on books and materials supplied by the Zen Center and other Bay Area Buddhist communities.
- Advocacy is also sometimes required, to help with problems with indifferent staff, mailing rooms, and general prejudice

I now find that I cannot continue to do this task alone, because of changes in my life and other personal demands on my time and practice. I am requesting that several members assist in the work. The work could easily be organized as a collective activity, since the work breaks down into separate tasks. These include retrieving mail, answering pen pal requests and newsletter requests, updating the mailing list, and corresponding with prisoners about dharma issues and other problems.

I can be contacted by e-mail at gdwiepert@earthlink.net or by phone at 415-503-0524.

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.

August / September GBF Sunday Speakers

August 1 **No Speaker**

August 8 **No Speaker**

August 15 **Jim Wilson**

Jim Wilson, the former abbot of the Chogyo Zen Center in New York, has studied in the Chogyo, Fuke, and Soto traditions of Zen. He leads a weekly sutra salon in Sebastopol.

August 22 **Ji Sing**

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."

August 29 **Larry Yang**

Larry Yang is a Spirit Rock Community Dharma Leader and leads meditation retreats tailored for men, people of color, the LGBTQ communities, and people in recovery from addiction. He co-leads a meditation group for the LGBTQ community in San Francisco and is a psychotherapist and a consultant in cultural competency.

September 5 **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*.

September 12 **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.

September 19 **Jay Kumar**

Jay Kumar is an accomplished scholar and instructor of Ancient Languages and Cultures, having studied Sanskrit for 10 years as well as being proficient in several ancient and modern languages. He received his B.A. at Northwestern University and his M.A. at Columbia University, and he will soon complete his Ph.D. at UCLA in Sanskrit and Healing Traditions of Ancient India. He currently conducts both private and group instruction in Sanskrit, Latin, Ancient Greek, French, and Italian in the Bay Area. He also offers private consultations and workshops in the Integrative Vedic Sciences of Ayurveda, Yoga Philosophy, and Jyotish Astrology.

September 26 **No Speaker (retreat weekend)**

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

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www.gaybuddhist.org

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For address changes or to subscribe or unsubscribe to the Newsletter send email to:

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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

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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