



Gay Buddhist Fellowship

FEBRUARY / MARCH 2011 NEWSLETTER

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. This dharma talk first appeared in the August/September 2004 issue of this newsletter.

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

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.

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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.

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, everything 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 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 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 anyone 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."

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

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.

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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.”

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 com-
plicated 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 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

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.”

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. The 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 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 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

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.”

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 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? ■

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Your Thrift Store Donations Earn Money for GBF

GBF members can donate their quality cast-offs to the Community Thrift Store (CTS) and GBF will receive a quarterly check based on the volume of items sold. This is a great way to support our Sangha, and the community. So far this year we have received over \$800 through members' generosity. Bring your extra clothing and other items to CTS at 623 Valencia St between 10am and 5pm, any day of the week. The donation door is around the corner on Sycamore Alley (parallel to and between 17th and 18th) between Valencia and Mission. Tell the worker you are donating to GBF. Our ID number is 40. Information: (415) 861-4910.

Note to Readers

Send us poetry you have written that is related to or inspired by your Buddhist practice. We will include some of these poems in future issues of the Gay Buddhist Fellowship Newsletter. If we receive enough poems we may devote an entire newsletter to poetry.

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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

Calendar

Sunday Sittings

10:30 am to 12 noon

Every Sunday at 10:30am we meditate together for 30 minutes, followed by a talk or discussion till 12 noon. Everyone is then welcome to stay and socialize over refreshments till approximately 12:30, after which those who are interested usually go somewhere local for lunch. Our sittings are held at the San Francisco Buddhist Center, 37 Bartlett Street. (Look for the red door near 21st St between Mission and Valencia Streets). **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. The Center is handicapped accessible.

Sunday Speakers

February 6th Jim Fishman

Jim is a licensed psychotherapist in private practice here in San Francisco. He ran a therapy group for sexually compulsive gay and bisexual men Operation Concern/New Leaf in the mid-eighties through early nineties. He was co-founder of the AIDS Action Committee of Massachusetts. Jim teaches group theory and consults to group therapists. He has a daily meditation practice, and he lived in an ashram in India for two years in the late 1990's.

Jim's topic will be exploring the meanings of sexuality for gay men and the role of emptiness in men who define their behaviors as out of their control.

February 13th Baruch Golden

Baruch Golden has been a sangha member of GBF since 2002. He teaches mindfulness in elementary schools in SF and Oakland with the Mindful Schools Program. In addition, he volunteers teaching meditation and yoga in the SF Jail. He recently began volunteering up at Spirit Rock Meditation Center, teaching in their Family Program and classes for middle school students. He is currently in the Community Dharma Leaders Program, a 2 year Spirit Rock program to help develop community dharma leaders.

February 20th Dave Richo

Dave Richo, Ph.D, M.F.T., is a psychotherapist, teacher, and writer in Santa Barbara and San Francisco who emphasizes Jungian, transpersonal, and spiritual perspectives in his work. He is the author of *How to Be an Adult in Relationships* (at Books Inc or Different Light). For more information, visit www.davericho.com. Dave's topic will be "Befriending our Dark Side."

February 27th Open Discussion

March 6th Doug Von Koss

Doug is the Artistic Director of THE NOAH PROJECT, a men's ritual performance group in the San Francisco Bay Area. Through a magical blend of chant, movement, poetry and ritual, Doug weaves a spell that encompasses the ecstatic, the sacred and the wise fool. He draws from many of the world's religious traditions—Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, Zoroastrian, Christian, Jewish and Sufi—to create a glorious mosaic that is, above all else, a celebration of the human spirit.

March 13th Andrea Fella

Andrea Fella has been practicing Insight Meditation since 1996, and, under Gil Fronsdal's guidance, began teaching meditation classes in 2003. She is particularly drawn to intensive retreat practice, and has done a number of long retreats, both in the U.S. and Burma. During one long practice period in Burma, she ordained as a nun with Sayadaw U Janaka. Andrea teaches residential retreats for IMC, and the Tuesday morning and Thursday evening meditation classes. She is in the Spirit Rock teacher training program with Jack Kornfield and Joseph Goldstein.

March 20th Open Discussion

March 27th Lee Robbins, Harley Shapiro, and Carl Wolf

Our Sangha Members, Lee Robbins, Harley Shapiro and Carl Wolf will speak about their experiences at silent meditation retreats.

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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