



Gay Buddhist Fellowship

JUNE / JULY 2011 NEWSLETTER

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.

Cruise-Control Complacency

BY STEVEN BULLEIT

When my own actions led to a long prison sentence, I was ripped from all that is familiar. I could no longer rely on the cozy roles I had spent years to create. The shards of prison life itself continue to act as indelible mirrors, forcing me to confront the remnants of ego and the inescapable truth of impermanence.

I've turned to meditation, studying the Shambhala tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, as my solace and path towards renewed meaning. Yet even in prison, one can be lulled into a comfort zone. It is unfortunate how it takes another crisis to startle me, to interrupt my stupor, to awaken me like cold mountain water.

Like I have for several years, last December, I chose to participate in a "retreat-from-afar" with a local abbey whose residents conduct a three-month retreat. When I received the printed text of the practice, I started a little early, "warming up," so to speak. Little did I know that an old infraction would soon come to light, sending me to "the hole" for several weeks.

In my six years of prison life, this was my first time in segregation. After the initial shock, I looked to combat the utter boredom of having my job, my activities, my books, and (gasp) my television taken away. If one feels prison life is akin to a monastic environment, the stark cells in segregation are especially so. My blanket, staving off the cold, was dropped around my shoulders and torso, envisioned as my novice robes.

Thankfully my week of practice before the hole had solidified most of the text to memory. I chose to practice the retreat ritual in the hole for about one to two hours a day, broken into smaller chunks that my knees and back could withstand.

Upon my release from segregation, I was placed in a different complex where I knew very few people. My job and activities are on restriction for six months, leaving my days empty and my ego's pedestal on shaky ground.

My ego has always been dependent on that pedestal, supported by the labels I worked so hard to secure, with this being no different in prison. In my time here, I have developed a reputation as a model inmate, an accomplished education

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tutor, and chapel musician. While I genuinely enjoy the service aspects of these roles, the praise and acclaim naturally feed my ego as well. Letters to family and friends have always revolved around the latest classes I helped with or how the choir I directed was doing. I had attached my sense of worth, my sense of how well I am rebuilding my life, to these labels.

The stripping of these labels left me floundering with a groundlessness that is still profoundly unsettling in a visceral, physical way. My workaholic manner (and perhaps some small measure of Protestant guilt) was in collusion with my pride to drive me rabidly towards constant activity. Like waking up the next morning after being laid off or standing amid the ruins of a house after a tornado, my heart cried out, “Now what?”

Before my hole shot, I had settled into a cruise-control complacency. Sure, I had practiced my meditation most days, but there was little need for grand introspection. Now I could do little else. In my desire to develop my character through spirituality, karma, burning brightly, was now handing me boundless opportunities with which to focus my practice.

At first, I set my over-analytical mind to getting back all my privileges and activities, to reset my cruise-control. Like the typical male, I am inclined towards wanting to “fix” a situation and move on, almost as if it had never happened. But that mindset denies the richness and texture of where I am right now. Crisis usually instigates the growth we eagerly seek, though we abhor the process at the moment.

Before most inmates’ arrests, the crimes that they committed are often their most closely held secret, sheltered from friends, family, and even spouses. It follows that most prison friendships are guardedly shallow, following the mantra, “I

came in alone and I’ll leave alone.” But occasionally with a select few, one can develop surprisingly deep friendships. When an inmate can discuss his or her crime, and perhaps the history that led to it, with another inmate—everyone is in prison for something so it’s easier to broach—a shared intimacy can be established. In the hindsight of my stint in segregation, I found that I had taken some of my “in-house” friendships for granted. Now my relationships have a renewed closeness even if only through letters, though we’re wistful that it took this separation to awaken ourselves to it.

Mirroring the dedication I had habituated in the hole, I am still practicing my meditation heartily, especially a purification practice from a dharma book. I find these helpful for me to empathize more with others and focus less on my own feelings of persecution or privilege.

Ironically, for a long time, my mini-library of spiritual and self-help books was tucked away under my bunk, to be read at some later unspecified date. I am now uncovering troves of material that incisively speak to my situation and how I am dealing with it. The longer I walk along this path, the more I’m convinced that we find teachings when we are ready and open to receive them.

And while my tutoring and music are still worthwhile endeavors that I will hopefully return to, I also see service in my practice itself, “to destroy this great demon of self-cherishing,” as a noted lama says. Another teaching instructs me to see how fortunate I am to be taking on this hardship, experiencing it on behalf of all sentient beings. Like so many other Buddhist teachings, this emphasizes the altruistic nature of our suffering.

So far, I’m not quite to the point of feeling so very “fortunate” for getting in trouble and reaping the consequences, but my spiritual practice has helped me to subjugate my ego

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and transform my outlook into something more manageable. Last week, I met with our prison chaplain for my first in-depth discussion about all this since leaving the hole. She said she sensed in me a warm humility and a genuine desire to see my situation as it is. I hope it sticks.

In the meantime, if I start working by serving food in the dining hall, I can offer happiness and its causes to each inmate in line. If I become a unit orderly, I can offer the benefit of sparkling clean showers as my avenue of serving others. ■

**Steven Bulleit is a prisoner in Ontario, Oregon.
You can write him at the following address:**

**Steven Bulleit
#15838245
777 Stanton Blvd.
Ontario, OR 97914**

The Clueless Buddhist

The Dharma says to sit,
Be gentle and accept what's there.
But what's inside has banished me
To a desert concrete warehouse
And men with guns keep me here.

The masters say be still,
Just being is enough.
Yet stillness cancels doing
And peels off the labels
On which my ego stakes its claim.

The teacher said with teary eyes
To hold no hopes, let go.
The ground is just illusion.
But hope's my raft, my rock, my rope.
I'll drown, I'll drift, I'll fall.

To the shrine the teacher bows
As I reprise with frail accord.
Her spacious heart so wide, I pray,
To bridge the gap
To those thus gone before.

—Steven Bulleit

The Biscuit Giver

I sat on my front porch,
the concrete cool beneath me.
I curved my shoulders forward
and drew my gaze down
while holding out the biscuit.

After the dog's incursions
into our yard, my sitting
aroused his curiosity; perhaps
the breeze carried the scent of biscuit.

He approached in stuttered stabs,
taking cautious steps only
to reassess, skitter back
and repeat—ready
for escape at any moment.

For almost an hour, I remained, solid
and unwavering. I did not demand
nor insist, but simply unfurled
my heart as a haven from mistrust.

I meditate now on my makeshift cushion
feeling more like that timid dog
than the biscuit giver. My silence
and noble pose conceal the chaos within.

So what do I seek amidst
my own stuttered steps—
for the world to comply
with my Byzantine rules?

Acclaim and affection
or strawberry ice cream
with other more tawdry and tangled wants?

Perhaps it is merely to find
an outstretched hand that calls
without command to show me
a more sane and gentle way.

—Steven Bulleit

Of Maya

It's not good when all you touch is metal
When all you meet is projection
What does one profit to break oneself?
To render oneself not functional?
What is there attractive in isolating blame?

—Christopher Bistryski

Of Dissonance

In a sea of hypocritical
Water droplets
We deny ourselves
And evaporate.

Christopher Bistryski

Impermanence

The rain is falling now
That withers leaves
I watch it breathing air
That withers men.

Christopher Bistryski

We Don't Know Why There Is Pleasure in Pain

to
mete
out
justice
in suffering
to
stop suffering
we're suffering

—Christopher Bistryski

Passing

Beyond the blessed moment,
I see darkness rise to meet me,
And who am I?
Defeat me.

—Christopher Bistryski

You can write to Christopher Bistryski at the following address:

**Christopher Bistryski
MCC – SOU, 306886
PO Box 514, [#F-231]
Monroe, WA 98272**

Amorphous

I am void
nothing
not even a thought
or a glance
I am a wisp of air
not enough to be the wind
a cloud blown
I am disintegration
without a present property
only dissolution
and I am not vibrations

if you were to run into me
you would only be running into a memory
into dust
into ashes
into ages spent
into your forgotten perceptions of what once was
because I am already gone
You have missed me.

—Gregor Herman Beyer

The Heron

Oppressing water drowning, cold as a knife,
Filling lungs with fire, relieving life,
A heron lands with hail on open shore,
Stretching, strutting, preening, creating more.

—Gregor Herman Beyer

Commitment

The salmon travels.
The river fights against him,
Salmon keep spawning.

—Gregor Herman Beyer

Where I Go

Sunshine shining on my face
Reminds me of that special place,
Alone among the trees of green serenity,
The smell of the leaves and the sound they make.
Peace and enlightenment are what I seek
As I sit here week after week.
The days go by and time has passed me by
And I don't know how or why.
I just stop what I'm doing and calmly sit.
My mind starts drifting and I escape
To this place,
My special place to go,
Something that you cannot replace.
It is a priceless artifact of my mind.
Somewhere safe that's not hard for me to find,
The warmth of the sunlight and the smell
of the leaves,
The wind on my face and the sound of the trees.
This is the place I go
To put my mind, my soul, my body at ease.
This place among the trees.
Where I go to find my peace.

—Brian Alberer

Pages of Sacred Sages

Turn the pages of great sages in holy books
Only to find that even best friends can be lying
crooks.

Stories that have suffered lives as martyrs
Of bloodshed is the way it begins.
I keep turning the pages of this book full of strife
Only find that they brought kindness and
compassion to all life.

I read on, and tears wet these ancient pages.
I cry for the sacrifice of these wise sages
As spiteful feelings build the fires of rage.
Dear awakened ones, don't let me turn
the next page.

Don't make me the next story on these pages.
Time to close the book of sacred sages.
Please, dear awakened ones, no more pages.

—Brian Alberer

Goodnight to the World from Atlas

Goodnight to the pain that keeps me here:
Panic, anxiety, and deadly fear.

Goodnight, abuse, tension, and strife.
I have no need for struggle all of my life.

Goodnight, ignorance, greed, and anger,
All of which seem to be a doppelganger.

Goodnight, sadness, starving poor, poverty,
Stricken children who sleep in hunger on
The cold hard floor.

Darkness falls, and the timing is right,
So I flip the switch and turn out my light.
I no longer struggle with all that I mentioned.
The last thing I say before I remove
The world from my aching back:
Goodnight, dear world, time to hit the sack.

—Brian Alberer

GBF

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Save the Date!

The GBF Annual Fall Retreat

September 16th-18th, 2011

This marks our 20th annual retreat, so appropriately, our theme this year is "Gratitude" (*katannu* in Pali).

We will once again return to the beautiful retreat center at Vajrapani Institute, nestled in the Santa Cruz Mountains near Boulder Creek. Registration will open in July, and the 35 spots always fill up.

Please mark your calendars if you may wish to attend, and keep that weekend open (Friday afternoon to Sunday afternoon). More information will be coming soon.

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.

How to Reach Us

www.gaybuddhist.org

For general questions about GBF write to:

inquiry@gaybuddhist.org

To contact Program Committee with suggestions for speakers and comments:

gaybuddhist.org/programs

Mail correspondence:

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Address changes or to subscribe or unsubscribe to the newsletter:

www.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

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

June 5 John Mifsud

John Mifsud has studied insight meditation for over nine years and recently completed the East Bay Meditation Center's Commit to Dharma Program led by Larry Yang. He is currently in the Community Dharma Leaders Training Program at Spirit Rock. He is a lead facilitator of the EBMC Deep Refuge Affinity Group for Men of Color and their Euro-Descent allies. He also studied with Rodney Smith at Seattle Insight Meditation for eight years. John was also the Coordinator of the Seattle Multi-cultural Sangha and spent ten years on the Leadership Team of Seattle Dharma Buddies, a meditation group for GBT men.

June 12 Eve Decker

Eve Decker, dharma musician and founding member of the award winning Bay Area feminist folk trio Rebecca Riots, brings her music and reflections to us. In a five-star review of Eve's 2006 Buddhist-themed solo CD *Commentary on Perfections of the Heart*, *Tricycle Magazine* said, "Decker's melodies, and her luscious, inventive phrasing, give (her songs) the power of a transmission." Join Eve for a morning that will feature performances of her original dharma songs as well as sing-alongs, rounds, and more.

June 19 Carol 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.

June 26 Open Discussion

July 3 Joe Goode

Joe Goode, a GBF brother and facilitator, is a choreographer, writer, and director widely known as an innovator in the field of dance for his willingness to collide movement with spoken word, song, and visual imagery. He was awarded a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship in 2007 and the United States Artists Glover Fellowship in 2008. In 2006, Goode directed the opera *Transformations* for the San Francisco Opera Center. His play *Body Familiar*, commissioned by the Magic Theatre in 2003, was met with critical acclaim.

July 10 Panel on Prisoner Correspondence

Three years ago, in collaboration, the Gay Buddhist Fellowship, the Gay Buddhist Sangha and the San Francisco Zen Center started the first LGBT Buddhist prison correspondence network. Today about 50 LGBT people communicate with over 100 incarcerated men and women. The panel members will share their experiences corresponding with murderers, sex offenders and many who have committed terrible crimes but seek to change their lives and have found a way out of their prison walls through Buddhist practice.

July 17 Susan Moon

Susan Moon is a writer and teacher and for many years was the editor of *Turning Wheel*, the journal of socially engaged Buddhism. She is the author of *The Life and Letters of Tofu Roshi*, a humor book about an imaginary Zen master, and editor of *Not Turning Away: The Practice of Engaged Buddhism*. Her short stories and essays have been published widely. Her new book, *This Is Getting Old: Zen Thoughts on Aging with Dignity and Humor*, is forthcoming from Shambhala in June, 2010. Sue has been a Zen student since 1976, practicing in the lineage of Suzuki Roshi at Berkeley Zen Center, Tassajara Zen Mountain Monastery, Green Gulch Farm, and now with Zoketsu Norman Fischer's Everyday Zen sangha. She received "entrustment" as a lay teacher in 2005. She is the mother of two grown sons and the grandmother of Paloma.

July 24 Open Discussion

July 31 Bill Weber

Bill Weber is a senior Vipassana practitioner and a graduate from Spirit Rock's Community Dharma Leader program. He teaches beginning meditation classes and daylongs. He has studied for the past ten years with Eugene Cash, among others, and has fifteen years of extensive retreat practice. He is also a documentary filmmaker and video editor.

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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