



Gay Buddhist Fellowship

AUGUST / SEPTEMBER 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.

Right Effort

BY KEVIN GRIFFIN

Kevin Griffin is the author of *One Breath at a Time: Buddhism and Twelve Step and A Burning Desire: Dharma, God and the Path of Recovery*. A long time-time Buddhist practitioner and twelve-step participant, he is a leader in the mindful recovery movement and one of the founders of the Buddhist Recovery Network. He spoke at GBF on April 3, 2011.

I thought I would talk this morning about Right Effort. I teach in a lot of different settings. I'm in recovery, so I work in some treatment centers, but I also teach in Buddhist centers and wellness places. I teach at elementary schools. I teach mindfulness. I'm actually doing that right now.

The questions that come up about practice all seem to be ultimately about effort. Lately, it has become clearer to me that what's behind most questions about effort is, "How can I control my experience? I want it to be a certain way. How can I make it that way?" So people will say, "I'm falling asleep; how can I wake up, you know, be more alert when I meditate?" "My mind is wandering all the time; I have all these thoughts. How can I stop my thoughts? My knees are hurting; my back is hurting. How can I make that pain go away in my meditation?" All of these questions are fundamentally about trying to control our experience. The problem with that is that we can't control our experience. So much of the time I think people come to meditation in order to get some kind of a fix.

Of course, I'm coming out of a recovery world, as well, so this is more obvious in that world. But I think it's true of most people who come to meditation. We come here wanting to get something. Naturally enough, we're not going to show up and sit around meditating—or whatever we're doing when we're sitting still silently—without expecting some results. But the practice of meditation isn't a mechanical process. And we want it to be that way.

And, of course, we're a culture that is all about getting results. I do something, and I get paid for it. I work, and I get it. I practice, and I learn this thing. And that's a very materialistic approach to life and to meditation. Again, meditation is not a materialistic activity. It's the opposite of that. And again, I think our culture is not oriented to that. So, even though we come to this with this attitude, "Oh, I want to develop my spiritual life," there's still a part of us that's saying, "Well, how do I do it? And what am I going to get?"

Stephen Batchelor is one of my favorite Buddhist writers and teachers, and he talks a little bit about this cultural attitude. He says, "Meditation is widely per-

ceived as a kind of specialized activity. It is regarded as a means of calming and concentrating the mind, as a panacea for anxiety, agitation, and tension. Symptomatic of the prevailing obsession with calculation, it is considered as a technique, as a systematic application of a preconceived series of ideas. But although guidelines can be given, ultimately there

In the twelve-step world, we talk about just showing up. “Just show up. Don’t drink and use; just show up.” And this is much like what I think we do in meditation. There are certainly meditation techniques, and I’ve used many of them. But how we use them is the critical question—and what we expect to happen.

A deva addressed the Buddha and said, “How, dear sir, did you cross the flood?” By this he meant, “How did you become enlightened?” or “How did you cross over the flood of samsara, the pain of life, and let go into freedom?” The Buddha said very simply, “By not halting, friend, and by not straining, I crossed the flood.”

is no ‘how’ to meditation. Certain exercises and skills may be more conducive to meditation than others. But in the end, a meditative attitude is not something we can ever acquire.”

Wow. So, what are we supposed to do? We’re kind of left in this quandary. So, I’ve been doing this practice for a long time, and I have been looking for answers for a long time. One of the clues that I got is from one of the Buddhist suttas. It’s an ancient text and in that time, 2500 years ago, 500 years B.C., when the Buddha lived in Northern India, the culture was very different. It was a culture where there was a belief that there were gods. The reason I mention this is that in this quote there’s a god who is asking the Buddha for advice—very different from our orientation of what a god might do. But this is the mythology of Buddhism.

In any case, this god—called a deva, or a kind of an angel—addressed the Buddha, and said, “How, dear sir, did you cross the flood?” By this he meant, “How did you become enlightened?” or “How did you cross over the flood of *samsara*, the pain of life, and let go into freedom?”

The Buddha said very simply, “By not halting, friend, and by not straining, I crossed the flood.”

“But how is it, dear sir, that by not halting and by not straining you crossed the flood?”

“When I came to a standstill, then I sank. But when I struggled, then I got swept away. It is in this way, friend, that by not halting and by not straining I crossed the flood.”

For me, this is a key teaching: “by not halting and by not straining.” I have to keep showing up. Persistence. But if when I’m showing up I’m trying to make something happen, I get swept away. My mind just gets agitated. If I stop, I sink.

When I first started to practice, I did the Vipassana practice called “noting.” In that practice, you make a mental note each time. You make a mental note of your breath: in, out, in, out. And then each time you notice your mind is wandering, you note, “Thinking. Thinking.” If there’s a noise, you note, “Hearing. Hearing.” If there’s a feeling in your body, you note sensation or feeling. And around thought you can start to get more and more meticulous, noting the type of thoughts. Is it a thought of desire or aversion? Is it a thought of planning or remembering? A lot of times I have music going through my head. I’m a musician and that probably isn’t the only reason. We all listen to a lot of music. You sit down, the albums start to play. So I’d note, “Songs. Songs.” This was a good technique for starting to see what I call the landscape of my mind: the stuff that my mind was made up of, the stuff that showed up. But, behind my noting, there was a desire for all that stuff to stop.

My approach to noting was, “If I note this thought, then it should go away. Then it shouldn’t cause me a problem any more.” So we could say that the correct intention or the right effort in that kind of practice would be simply to practice with mindfulness, to make an effort to just be awake to what’s happening. But *my* effort was really an effort of aversion. It was trying to push away what was happening.

And what I found on a long retreat was that after a while that feeling of aversion to what was going on started to turn back on the practice itself. And I started to get averse to the noting. I started to struggle and I was trying so hard that I wasn’t meditating anymore. I was just in this constant fight with what was going on. “I don’t like it; make it go away. Stop! Come on, I’m noting you; why didn’t you stop?” And at a certain point I

gave up. I was on a three-month retreat and I said, “I just can’t do this anymore.” And I stopped noting. And I could say that in a sense I stopped meditating, in the sense of trying to do something, or trying to apply a systematic technique.

And that was when I actually started to meditate for the first time, when I just thought, “Forget it.” Of course, I’d been sitting for a few weeks, so all the things that happened from that, the cultivation of silence, had ripened to a point where when I stopped trying, I just fell into a natural state of mindfulness.

That was a shock to me. I didn’t understand what had happened. I was grateful. I was enjoying it. But it took me really quite some time—and when I say “time,” I mean some years—to be able to really have an understanding of what had actually happened, and why that had happened. And it comes back to this idea of not halting—because I didn’t leave the retreat. That’s the little thing that would have just destroyed that practice. I would have gotten no benefit from that, if I had thought that the problem was the retreat, or even the practice that I was doing. But I had a faith that the practice—the greater context of the practice, just being on a silent retreat—was valuable. I just didn’t know how to make it work for me.

So I kept showing up. I kept sitting down on my cushion and trying to follow my breath and trying to be aware. But I had stopped striving. I had stopped struggling, and straining, as the Buddha says. I was just showing up. I had not halted.

So I came to see that in some sense it’s not what I do when I’m

bother me that my mind’s wandering, and it bothers you. And you’re trying to figure out how to stop that, and how to deal with it, and I’ve given up. Because I know there are these ways which, at least before I was a teacher, I would project on the teacher and think, “Oh, well, *their* mind must be so quiet, still and peaceful, because look at them sitting up there, and they’re the teacher.” Maybe that’s true of some other teachers. I don’t know. I can’t get inside anybody’s mind. But from what I’ve heard, from the range of practitioners, we all just have human minds, and they all act in these ways.

So when we stop creating this, there’s the problem of having a mind and body that we all have. And then when we try to control it, we create another problem. The Buddha talks about the second dart. There’s the dart of life; it’s painful sometimes. And then there’s the, “Oh, I’ve got to get rid of this! Why do I have this dart? How can I change this?” When I drop that second one, I simplify and really limit the amount of suffering that I experience. And, in fact, even that first dart becomes less painful because I’m not trying to fix it or judge it. There’s a sense of acceptance. And with acceptance there’s a lot of freedom.

Well, that’s not the end of the story, in terms of effort, from a Buddhist viewpoint. There are other teachings. And if I have time, I’ll talk about some of the other teachings because I think it’s important to get a broad view. But one of the ways that I’ve been thinking about this is that when we talk about karma or the unfolding of each moment, why this moment is as it is, they say

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on my cushion that’s so important. It’s just important that I’m on my cushion. In some sense, that’s just how it works. Just showing up.

That’s a great relief! I have been practicing for over thirty years. Every time I meditate it is a different experience. Sometimes I can get very quiet and have a very pleasant experience. But sometimes I can’t. A lot of the time I can’t. When I felt that something was wrong, when my mind was wandering, or when I felt agitated or emotional, then the meditation became a problem. But when I stopped being bothered by that, no matter what was happening, it just wasn’t a problem.

One of the things I say in my newer book is that probably the difference between people who are sitting there watching me talk and me, in terms of how we meditate, is that it doesn’t

that there are two things, causes and conditions, which bring about this moment.

This is a little tricky, and I don’t know that I have this exactly sorted out. But one way of thinking about this, in terms of our meditation practice, is to say that the conditions of our meditation practice are that we come and we do it, that we sit still, and that we are in a relatively quiet place, and that we don’t move a lot. Those are the conditions that we set up. And then the causes are the specific practice that we do. So I’m trying to set apart the idea of a setting and the actions that we take within that setting. So that the causes of a setting would be, “OK, I’m going to follow my breath; I intentionally try to follow my breath; I make a mental note; or maybe I’m doing loving-kindness practice; I’m cultivating the *metta* in the heart, and

maybe I'm naming the object in my mind or moving my intention through my body, doing a sweeping practice." So those, I would say, are the active causes within the setting.

Typically, I think we have the sense that the causes, the actions that we are taking intentionally in our practice, are the ones that are really going to make it happen. And what I am saying is that I flip it, that I think that to just come in, sit down, be still, be quiet, that those conditions are the ones that allow the practice to really unfold. In some ways I think the formal practices that we do are just things to keep us busy, while the conditions do their work.

And this is why it seems that you can go on a meditation retreat and the first few days, no matter what you do, your mind spins out, and then, after a few days, you start to quiet down. If you track your actions, your efforts, with the results, there's no direct correlation. It's not like, "Oh, I started to feel my breath clearer and clearer and clearer, and I was following more and more breaths." It's much more like, "Blah, blah, blah, blah, shhhh!" "What just happened?" All of a sudden you're in this space. And you can't really see where the moment was when you crossed over because it's a ripening of the conditions.

You know, this is good news and bad news. The bad news is that you can't control it. As I said in the beginning, you can't control your meditation experience. The good news is that you don't have to. You're not so responsible. It's not about whether you're doing it wrong. If you just would learn that special technique that that person sitting next to you who is obviously enlightened—because of the way they look when they're meditating—then *you* can be enlightened, too! You just have to buy the new book—you know, download the latest app. Really, all you have to do is trust in the unfolding of this practice. Keep show-

"Stop! Don't say it! It's going to change." It's fine. You found a practice that's working for you right now. Don't believe in that as the solution. And I think that the reason Joseph may have stopped him was because he didn't want everyone to hear what it was, because he knew that no matter what he said, everybody would go, "Oh, I've got to try that." No matter what Joseph had said, every body would have been trying it. "Sure, I'll start standing on my head and counting to 732." Whatever the technique is. "Sure, that will work."

This is really the great challenge. How do you show up and practice without striving? It's kind of impossible. Suzuki Roshi, who founded the San Francisco Zen Center, said in his wonderful book *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* to just let the thoughts come and let them go. Very simple, right? But there's this way of getting out of your own way. As he's describing that, at a certain point he says, "This is the secret to practice." But he doesn't exactly tell you how to do it! Because, really, it isn't a technique. Non-striving isn't a technique. You can't just describe it in words, or say, "Just do this or just do that. Just don't do this; just don't do this." That's difficult to say. So, the only way we can discover this secret is for ourselves. This is why we have to explore and learn the landscape of our own minds. We watch our minds, notice our tendencies.

Some people are real strivers, and they really need to let go more. Other people are very lazy and need to strive a little bit more, need to make a little bit more effort. If I say, "This is how you should practice," what I'm really telling you is, "This is how I practice, and you should be like me." One of the mistakes I think a lot of dharma teachers make is to generalize their own personal experience. And that's what I'm doing this morning, you could say. So don't listen to me.

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ing up. And, yeah, you'll find that there are times when different practices will work better, or you'll be drawn more to things, and you'll be able to get into different kinds of streams, energetic streams or mental streams, that are working.

I was on a retreat thirty years ago with Joseph Goldstein, one of my favorite teachers, in a big room full of a hundred people down in Yucca Valley, and someone raised their hand, about half way through the retreat, and said, "You know, I just figured out a way to stay with my breath all the time." And Joseph said,

Listen to yourself. Find out what works for you.

Just to confuse matters—because I think that's important—I want to talk about the classic teaching on the Four Great Efforts. It's true that in the Buddhist texts we find this, not contradictory, but contrasting, advice. So the Buddha just says, "By not halting and not straining." Then there's another place where he says that right effort is like tuning a stringed instrument. He didn't have a guitar, but we can imagine a guitar. You know, you don't tune it too tightly; you don't tune it too loose. It's a little bit like

the “Goldilocks practice”: not too warm, not too cold, just right. Again, this is something only we can feel into and have a sense of what’s too tight for us and what’s too loose for us. And both these ideas, the not halting and not straining, and the tun-

And you’ll find, if you get to that place, ever, that you’re able to cultivate and abandon in ways that would not be practical when the mind is dominated by the ego-striving. And this is another teaching that really points to what I think is the guiding principle

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ing—there’s a fluidity to them; there’s an intuition with them, I think. I think of them as very intuitive practices.

But the Four Greats Efforts are much more prescriptive. And this is another teaching, where the Buddha says, “This is right effort.” Martine Batchelor has a version of them, so I’ll just read them from her. The Four Great Efforts:

1. To prevent from arising negative states that have not arisen. That’s sometimes called “avoiding.”
2. To let go of negative states once they have arisen, also called “abandoning.”
3. To give rise to positive states that have not yet arisen, sometimes called “cultivating.”
4. And to sustain positive states, once they have arisen, which is called “maintaining.”

So avoiding, abandoning, cultivating, maintaining—very prescriptive. “This is what we should do. Don’t let that come up. Stay out of that. Let go of that. Cultivate this. Try to get some loving-kindness/compassion going, some mindfulness going, concentration. Maintain, stay with it, hold on to it.” This is another model.

And I’m going to just share my opinion, based on my experience, of this part of the practice. I found this practice worked when I was already very deeply quiet on a retreat, but when I’m not quiet, this becomes striving: “Oh, I really need to let go. How do I let go? Oh, I need to cultivate.” And I’m really working. Again, it becomes this systematic process. What I’ve discovered is that our typical mind in our daily meditation is dominated by ego, by our self-centered striving, our longings, our reactions to things. On retreat—and I’m sure some of you have been on silent retreat—after we get deeply settled in, the ego gets quieter. We enter into that place where there isn’t a striving, reacting mind dominating our experience. It’s still there, it still goes out, but it’s not so dominant. And at that point, it’s possible to make *great* effort without striving.

of right effort, which is that right effort is mindful effort. That you need to be mindful of the quality of your effort as you are efforting. That if you pay attention to the energy behind your effort, you will see whether it’s an effective or useful thing, or whether it’s actually holding you back.

So as we sit in practice, one of the things we can do is check back with ourselves. Essentially, I do this not with words, but feeling into the energy that I am holding, that I am generating, in this moment. As I sit, in meditating, a lot of the time I’m feeling this part of my body and feeling how I am responding to this moment. Am I grasping it? Or am I really being useful with it?

So that’s mindfulness of the effort itself. And then I can see it, “Oh, I’m not making enough effort; I’m just falling into laziness, letting my mind drift.” And I can increase it a little bit. “Oh, yeah, let me just see if I can quiet my mind with my breath a little bit.” Or I can notice, “Oh, I’m really trying to make something happen. Let me just settle back and relax a little bit.” Or I can see, “There’s not a lot of grasping right now. Let me see if I can really cultivate something positive here.” And this is the way we practice, and the way that attention to our effort is perhaps more important than attention to anything else in our practice. And I just said that and I don’t know if it’s true.

The last thing I’ll say is that my goal, as a teacher, is not to give you some information, but rather to empower you, inspire you, to explore for yourself, find out what’s true for *you*, find out what works in *your* practice. Not for you to emulate me or someone else, but for you to find out what your practice is. It’s the same thing that I do with people in recovery: to find out what *your* program is. This is what’s important. We can’t be someone else. We can’t practice someone else’s practice. We have to find out what works for us. It’s what’s so hard about this. It would be much easier to go to the church down the street where they’ll tell you exactly what to do. “This is right, this is wrong. Done. End of story.” It’s just not the way it is in meditation. ■

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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:

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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

August 7th Heather Sundberg

Heather Sundberg began teaching meditation in 1999 primarily to youth and families. She has completed the four-year Spirit Rock/Insight Meditation Society teacher training and continues to be mentored by Jack Kornfield. She is also a graduate of the Spirit Rock Community Dharma Leaders program (CDL2). She held the position of Spirit Rock Family Program teacher and manager from 2001-2010. Currently she teaches classes, daylongs, and retreats throughout California, especially at Spirit Rock, and through the Mountain Stream Meditation Center community. She brings to her teaching a passion for the depth of retreat practice, combined with a playful creativity for integrating the teachings into daily life.

August 14th Open Discussion

August 21st Jennifer Berezan

Jennifer Berezan is a unique blend of singer/songwriter, teacher, and activist. Over the course of eight albums, she has developed and explored recurring themes with a rare wisdom. Her lifelong involvement in environmental, women's, and other justice movements, as well as an interest in Buddhism and earth-based spirituality, is at the heart of her writing. She teaches at the California Institute of Integral Studies in the Department of Philosophy and Religion. Her on-going class (since 1997) is entitled "The Healing Ecstasy of Sound" and explores music as a spiritual practice from a wide range of cross cultural, traditional and contemporary perspectives.

August 28th Bill Scheinman

Bill Scheinman has been practicing meditation since 1994 and has been teaching it since 2001. He is the author of the book

Moment By Moment: Using Mindfulness to Reduce Stress and Cultivate Freedom in Daily Life. A graduate of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction teacher training practicum, he teaches 8-week MBSR classes in San Francisco and Berkeley, as well as workplace courses and daylongs on mindfulness and stress reduction. He's a grad of the Dedicated Practitioner's Program at Spirit Rock Meditation Center and is a member of the board of the San Francisco Insight Meditation Community.

September 4th Jana Drakka

"Gengetsu Junsei" received Dharma Transmission in the Soto Zen Buddhist Lineage from Zenkei Blanche Hartman, the first woman in this lineage. Jana's nonprofit organization, Jana Drakka's Community Services, provides a wide range of services including support groups, workshops, classes and talks. Jana's community work is based in Harm Reduction Principles—a way to meet everyone with complete acceptance—and allows for a client-centered modality. Among her many activities, Jana leads a meditation group at Glide Memorial Church on Monday evenings, facilitates an ongoing peer support group for case managers at Tenderloin Housing Clinic, where she runs a mindfulness group and a grief/stress support group and gives one-on-one counseling to staff and clients.

September 11th Suvanna Cullen

Ordained in 2001 into the Western Buddhist Order, Suvanna-prabha (or Suvanna for short) is director of the San Francisco Buddhist Center and a writer. She teaches classes and retreats at the SFBC, workplace wellness and mindfulness based stress reduction at local businesses, and occasional meditation classes at the San Francisco county jail. Her humorous advice column, "Ask Auntie Suvanna," was featured in *Dharma Life*, a British Buddhist magazine. Other writings have appeared in *What Book?! Buddha Poems from Beat to Hip-hop* (1998) and *Challenging Times: Stories of Buddhist Practice When Things Get Tough* (2007).

September 18th Open Discussion / GBF Retreat

September 25th David Lewis

David Lewis has been a member of the Gay Buddhist Fellowship for 5 years. He has a degree in Comparative Religious Studies and has been a dharma practitioner for 40 years, first in the Vajrayana tradition and more recently in the Vipassana tradition. He is a graduate of the Spirit Rock Meditation Center's Dedicated Practitioners Program and shares the dharma at several sanghas in the Bay Area.

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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