



Gay Buddhist Fellowship

DECEMBER 2011 / JANUARY 2012 NEWSLETTER

No Need to Survive: Reflections on the Heart Sutra

BY LARRY ROBINSON

Larry Robinson has been practicing meditation since 1969 and is a student of both Zen and the Vipassana traditions. He is a retired psychotherapist whose work focused on ecopsychology. He has served on the Sebastopol city council and has served two terms as mayor. His passion is the restoration of the oral tradition of poetry. He spoke at GBF on May 22, 2011. Harold Camping, a radio evangelist in the East Bay, had predicted that the rapture would occur on May 21.

It's a great pleasure to sit with you this morning. That was a delicious half hour. I notice that there are some empty cushions, and I wonder if the people who were occupying those seats have been lifted up in the rapture, and I wonder, "Does this mean we didn't make the cut and were left behind? Or are we actually in heaven?" Maybe it's the same thing, I don't know. Actually I prefer to think we really are in heaven. As Mary Oliver reminds us, "The path to heaven / doesn't lie down in flat miles. / It's in the imagination / with which you perceive / this world, / and in the gestures / with which you honor it."

So what I really want to stir the pot about is the core text in Mahayana Buddhism, the heart sutra, which is very dear to my heart, and it essentially says, "Form is emptiness and emptiness is form." There are a lot of ways to understand that, but the simplest way for me is that it's a reminder of our profound and radical interconnectedness, that all of our suffering derives from an illusion or delusion of our own separateness, that there is something essentially me or you or stone or Buddha that has an independent existence. If we believe, which we're conditioned to do, that there is some separate identity, then we have a tendency to defend that and reinforce the separateness that keeps us feeling alone and grasping for something else. Those people who really believed in the rapture and believed that Jesus was going to come and lift them out of all of their sorrows and troubles and suffering may be misguided, but there's something deeply human and understandable in their yearning for salvation. But the misunderstanding and the misguidance is the belief that that can come from separating ourselves from this messy existence, this being human, and in the process creating far more suffering for everyone else. Probably this is a gross overstatement, but I would venture to guess that the greatest harm in the world has come from organized religion or from ideology, from the belief in an ideology, which is not to say that there haven't been wonderful blessings that have come from religions. But ideology itself is an intellectual trap that separates us from direct experience of reality. And this is why we meditate. We may start out thinking that meditation will make me calmer, it will help me relax, or I'll be able to attain certain wonderful states, and it can certainly do all those things, but as you assume a meditation practice, and the essence of meditation in the Buddhist tradition is attention,

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something else beings to happen. Mary Oliver talks about that attention in this beautiful way. She says,

This morning
two mockingbirds
in the green field
were spinning and tossing
the white ribbons
of their songs
into the air.
I had nothing
better to do
than listen.
I mean this
seriously.
In Greece,
a long time ago,
an old couple
opened their door
to two strangers
who were,
it soon appeared,
not men at all,
but gods.
It is my favorite story--
how the old couple
had almost nothing to give
but their willingness
to be attentive--
but for this alone
the gods loved them
and blessed them--
when they rose
out of their mortal bodies,
like a million particles of water
from a fountain,
the light
swept into all the corners
of the cottage,
and the old couple,
shaken with understanding,
bowed down--
but still they asked for nothing
but the difficult life
which they had already.
And the gods smiled, as they vanished,
clapping their great wings.
Wherever it was
I was supposed to be
this morning--
whatever it was I said
I would be doing--
I was standing

at the edge of the field--
I was hurrying
through my own soul,
opening its dark doors--
I was leaning out;
I was listening.

So that listening, that attentiveness, is itself what connects us to the divine, and our beliefs and our ideologies simply get in the way of that. But the simple observation of the breath as it rises and falls teaches us of our interconnectedness. This breath that I am taking, is it somehow separate from the breath that you are taking? When we animals inhale, that inhale is the exhalation of the trees, and when the trees inhale, it's our exhale, and the molecules that are entering your body at this moment are the same molecules that we all are sharing, and those molecules are becoming part of our body, and those same molecules were part of the bodies of people living in some other part of the world. They were part of the body of the Dalai Lama, part of the body of the Buddha, part of the body of Hitler and Stalin. Whether we want to be connected or not, we are in the sheer physicality of the existence of this body. And yet there is nothing in this body that is permanent and is permanently separate and independent. There is no atom in your body that you were born with. Every atom, every molecule, every cell in our bodies have been replaced over the course of our lives, so what is it that we call the self? There's something that's recognizable. We can look at ourselves in the mirror or look at a friend or somebody else and recognize something, but we're never identical from moment to moment. We may think that it's my thoughts, but our thoughts change moment to moment. As we sit in meditation we observe our thoughts as they come and go, and we observe our emotions as they come and go, but that's not who we are either, is it? There is no permanent state. This is also what the heart sutra reminds us, that there is no independently existing thought; there is no independently existing emotion; there is no independently existing sensation or source of sensation. Everything arises and falls codependently with everything else in the universe.

Let go of fear and rest in that which is, for peace like love, comes to those who allow it. Let go of fear and rest in the stillness. Watch the breath rise and fall, watch the tides rise and fall. Watch walls rise and fall. Watch towers rise and fall. Watch empires rise and fall. Watch the breath rise and fall. Let go of fear and rest in the arms of the one who has always held you, the one who holds oceans and empires and atoms and stars. Let go of fear and watch what happens next.

And we truly don't know what happens next. We have our ideas about what happens next, and sometimes those are right, and sometimes they're not. The challenge and the beauty in this practice are to live in uncertainty, to cultivate the place of not knowing because certainty is always an illusion. And certainty is what solidifies this delusion of self that keeps us separate, but when we practice learning the uncertainty and learning to be comfortable in uncertainty, we can begin to float. Like the Ojibwe poem says, "Sometimes I go about pitying myself when all the while I am being carried across the sky on a pair of great wings."

If we can simply let ourselves rest in the not knowing, something begins to happen in the heart, and we begin to experience directly our interconnectedness with the other, and therein is the very heart of the mystery of Buddhist practice.

In the Mahayana tradition, in the Zen tradition, each time we sit, we repeat the bodhisattva vow. The bodhisattva vow is essentially,

to survive? So what if you were to practice that? Then would you have a need to grasp for anything? Or to hold back from someone else's need? And when you saw suffering in front of you, would there be any reason not to respond to ease that suffering? Because this realization leads directly to the heart of compassion. Someone asked the Dalai Lama, "What is your religion all about?" and he

Certainty is what solidifies this delusion of self that keeps us separate, but when we practice learning the uncertainty and learning to be comfortable in uncertainty, we can begin to float. Like the Ojibwe poem says, "Sometimes I go about pitying myself when all the while I am being carried across the sky on a pair of great wings." If we can simply let ourselves rest in the not knowing, something begins to happen in the heart, and we begin to experience directly our interconnectedness with the other, and therein is the very heart of the mystery of Buddhist practice.

"I vow to live and with and for all beings." The Bodhisattva is the one who has made a commitment to incarnate, take on a body deliberately, for the sake of living with and for all beings until all beings are liberated. Knowing that sentient beings are numberless, he vows to end all suffering, knowing that suffering is endless, vows to enter every dharma gate, knowing that there is no end to dharma gates. Essentially this vow is to always be here. Unlike those who pray for the rapture, the bodhisattva comes back again and again, not out of some idea of "I'm going to save them," or "I'm sacrificing my liberation and my happiness," but out of the profound realization that there is no where else to go. In fact there is no one else. There is only us, and there is only here.

The other great text in Mahayana Buddhism is the Diamond Sutra, which teaches that the us to be saved is not just the human. It says, "Whether one is born of a womb or of an egg or of the wind or of the combination of elements, if you believe that you are saving someone else, you're perpetuating the illusion, because there is no one else." It is simply us, and the joy in that realization is that everything is holy, that everything is safe.

Nanao Sakaki, who died a few years ago, was a wonderful Japanese poet, a friend of Gary Snyder's. During the Second World War, Nanao was a radar technician in the Japanese army, and was actually the one who spotted the Enola Gay, which was the US airplane that was bringing the atomic bomb to Hiroshima. He was actually the one who first spotted it on his radar screen, and he devoted his life after the war to poetry and working on nuclear disarmament. Someone once asked him, "How are we going to survive the nuclear arms race?" He just chuckled and said, "No need survive." Think about that one for a moment. "No need survive." If you could let go of the need to survive, how free would you be? Would there be anything to fear if you didn't need

said, in one word, "kindness."

Naomi Shihab Nye has a poem on kindness. She says,

Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.
What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.
How you ride and ride
thinking the bus will never stop,
the passengers eating maize and chicken
will stare out the window forever.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho
lies dead by the side of the road.
You must see how this could be you,
how he too was someone
who journeyed through the night with plans
and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day to mail letters and
purchase bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
it is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
like a shadow or a friend.

One of the great secrets of this practice is that the practice of kindness and generosity leads directly to happiness, not because it's the right thing to do or it's the ethical thing to do or that you'll get points in heaven for doing it but simply because as you practice it you find your heart opening, and what comes in is joy and happiness, and there's a way that our own sorrow, our own grief, if we allow it, will connect us to the heart of the world itself. And there is a rhythm in this giving of kindness that Mark Nepo addresses in his poem which says, "I think that each comfort that we manage, each holding in the night, each opening of a wound, each closing of a wound, each sponged fever, each pulling of a splinter or a razored word, each dear thing given to someone in greater need, each passes on the kindness that we have known, for the human sea is made of waves that mount and merge until the way the nurse rocks the child is the way that child all grown rocks the wounded

yourself, for those you love, for those that you may have some neutral relationship with, for those who you have some difficulty with, and indeed for your enemies, and sometimes it can be a very challenging practice. In politics people project whatever their shadow is onto you because you are visible, whether that's the shadow of the hero or the shadow of the demon. So almost every Tuesday night over the last twelve years I have had the experience of someone standing at the podium denouncing me for whatever imagined sin they had thought I had committed. My initial reaction was to defend myself: "No, I'm not who you think I am. I'm really a good person." But all that did was reinforce this tight holding on to me. So what I have found was that practicing *metta* allowed me to dissolve the boundaries between that person and me and soften my own heart, so I would practice "May you be happy, may you be free of suffering, may you be safe, may you be at ease." So that's what would occupy my attention rather than the injustice of how they were treating me, and I don't know what it did for them, but it certainly made my life easier. For years I have kept a picture of Dick Cheney on my altar specifically as one of the heaviest weights that I can lift in my *metta* practice, and sometimes I really am able to wish him to have a new heart. We all knew about his transplants, so I wish for him to have a new heart that will soften his stance toward the world, and sometimes I'm able to see that scared little child inside that hardened exterior,

Even though our lives' circumstances may change, our relationships may change, our bodies may change, our health may change—all of our circumstances do change—there is something, some thread that's running through everything, that is eternal. And it's not us. But if we can shift our identification from this, what we know of by our names, by the history of our bodies, by our sensations, by our familiar thoughts, to the greater than human community, a community of all beings, from which we're not going to be rescued, and we settle into that, there is that thread that carries us, and there is our ultimate safety and our ultimate freedom, and there is really nothing to fear anymore.

and how the wounded allowed to go on rocks strangers who in their pain no longer seem so strange. Eventually this rhythm of kindness becomes the way we pray and suffer by turns. And if someone could watch us from inside the lake of time, they wouldn't be able to tell if we are dying or being born."

So the practice of loving kindness in the Vipassana tradition, the Theravadan tradition, is a practice of directly opening the heart. It's called *metta*. I don't know if you know this practice here? Okay. Excellent. For those who do not, the practice is to wish happiness, safety, well-being, peace of mind, all the goodness for

and see his fear and his pain and his suffering, and realize that if he were not frightened, if he truly were happy, if he truly felt safe, he would not be doing and saying the hurtful things he's been doing and saying. So may his heart be open.

You know, we're living in very interesting times. The Chinese traditionally consider for someone to be born in interesting times as a curse, but I really perceive it as a blessing. Think of all the changes that have happened in our lifetimes and how much more rapidly those changes are happening with each day that passes. Even though they may not be happening as fast as we want and

even though some of them appear to be going in the wrong direction, when we look at the bigger picture, it does seem to be moving in the direction of a greater awakening and greater freedom. And at the same time, our peril as a species, as a civilization, is increasing. But when I look at the rate of environmental destruction, sometimes I am absolutely terrified, and then I look at the rate of people waking up to what we're doing, and I see great hope. There's a group of young people who are bringing suit against the state and federal government for failure to take action on climate change, and most of these people are under the age of 18. I don't know if we're going to make it in time or not—something tells me that we are, but I don't see how we're going to do it—but what I do see is the convergence of two trajectories. One is towards the collapse of our planetary ecosystem, of everything that sustains our human lives and the lives of the more complex beings that are part of our greater family, greater community of being. And the other is a trajectory of awakening, and these two seem to be coming closer and closer. My suspicion is that they will meet at the cliff's edge, and that's the moment when as a species we'll have the opportunity to decide collectively whether this experiment of human beings is going to continue and be taken to the next level, or whether like 99% of species throughout the history of evolution we will wink out and another experiment will start. In the bigger picture, I take comfort in the fact that I'm not just human, and I'm not just mammal, and I'm not just multi-cellular, but what I am is life itself. I think that's what Nanao Sakaki meant when he said, "No need to survive." Because we are stardust, we are life, and we will continue one way or another, but the human part of me is attached to this human form and to all the beauty that has arisen in what we call the cenozoic period, the last 65 million years, all the flowering plants, all the beautiful diversity of life. It would be a shame to let that go. So I've committed my life to doing what I can to, number one, slow down the destruction. That's where my political work comes in. And number two, work toward that shift in consciousness so that we all recognize that we're in it together and that any destruction, any harm done to another being or to the earth is harm done to us. The third activity I do is to work to promote those alternative institutions and structures and ways of living that are truly sustainable on this other side of the eye of the needle that we're entering. The fourth thing is to restore what has been damaged. My forearms are kind of scarred up from last weekend rooting out blackberry bushes in a wetlands area that friends and I have been trying to restore. I think all of us are doing some combination of those four things, the working toward the shift in consciousness, the buying of time, the creation of alternatives and the restoration, whether that's in the natural world or the human world. I think each of us is called in some particular way to do this greater work, during this time of transition, and it's an exciting opportunity, exciting time to be alive and to be part of that. Often we don't know what our particular piece is, but we may still be doing it, whether we can name it or not. William Stafford has a poem that talks about that. The poem is called "The Way It Is." He says,

There's a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.

But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread.

One of the things that meditation practice does is to keep us in touch with that thread. And even though our lives' circumstances may change, our relationships may change, our bodies may change, our health may change—all of our circumstances do change—there is something, some thread that's running through everything, that is eternal. And it's not us. But if we can shift our identification from this, what we know of by our names, by the history of our bodies, by our sensations, by our familiar thoughts, to the greater than human community, a community of all beings, from which we're not going to be rescued, and we settle into that, there is that thread that carries us, and there is our ultimate safety and our ultimate freedom, and there is really nothing to fear anymore. So I'll leave you with one final poem, and then we'll open up for questions and comments and whatever you want to share.

John O'Donahue, former Jesuit priest who left us last year, wonderful poet and man of soul, says,

On the day when
the weight deadens
on your shoulders
and you stumble,
may the clay dance
to balance you.
And when your eyes
freeze behind
the grey window
and the ghost of loss
gets in to you,
may a flock of colours,
indigo, red, green,
and azure blue
come to awaken in you
a meadow of delight.

When the canvas frays
in the currach of thought
and a stain of ocean
blackens beneath you,
may there come across the waters
a path of yellow moonlight
to bring you safely home.

May the nourishment of the earth be yours,
may the clarity of light be yours,
may the fluency of the ocean be yours,
may the protection of the ancestors be yours.
And so may a slow
wind work these words
of love around you,
an invisible cloak
to mind your life.

Thank you very much.

GBF

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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

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 31/2 blocks. **PARKING:** on street (meters free on Sundays) or in adjacent New Mission Bartlett Garage. The Center is handicapped accessible.

December 4 Mushim Ikeda-Nash

Mushim Ikeda-Nash is a meditation teacher, community peace activist, writer, diversity consultant, and mother of a 21-year-old son. She has done both monastic and lay Zen Buddhist practice over the past twenty years, in the U.S., Canada, Mexico, and South Korea. Her poetry, fiction, and essays have been published widely in journals and anthologies, such as the *Shambhala Sun* and *Innovative Buddhist Women: Swimming Against the Stream*. Mushim was co-editor of *Making the Invisible Visible: Healing Racism in Our Buddhist Communities*. Her work has been featured in two documentary films, *Between the Lines: Asian American Women Poets* and *Acting on Faith: Women and the New Religious Activism in America*, a recent documentary presenting portraits of three women activists of minority faiths in the U.S. A longtime volunteer in the Oakland public schools, Mushim is also a core teacher and center coordinator for the East Bay Meditation Center in downtown Oakland.

December 11 Jeff White

Jeff White started practicing Vipassana meditation about eleven years ago after attending a men's retreat at Spirit Rock just after the death of his father. Last year, Jeff completed the Dedicated Practitioners Program and is part of the San Francisco Insight sangha. Last December, Jeff traveled to India and participated in a Buddhist pilgrimage. In his meditation practice, he's most drawn to its integration into day-to-day living, working, and playing. Jeff likes to ride his bike and has been dabbling recently in triathlons. He was in the Peace Corps in Bolivia and Chile in the 90s. Jeff studied urban planning in graduate school and currently works in affordable housing finance and project management in San Francisco.

December 18 Steve Tierney

Steven Tierney, Ed.D., is a professor and the program director in the Community Mental Health Program at the California Institute of Integral Studies. Steven has worked in community mental health since 1980, specializing in issues of adolescent and transition age youth, specifically addiction and HIV. Dr. Tierney is a member of the Public Health Commission for the City and County of San Francisco. He has presented nationally and led retreats on mindfulness and mental health and on "keeping the community in community mental health." He also teaches basic counseling skills at the American College of Traditional Chinese Medicine. Steven practices Buddhism at the San Francisco Zen Center.

December 25 Open Discussion

January 1 Open Discussion

January 8 Will Kabat-Zinn

Will Kabat-Zinn has practised Vipassana meditation intensively in the US and Burma. He teaches regularly at Spirit Rock, the California Institute for Integral Studies, and the Insight Meditation Community of San Francisco. He has taught meditation and awareness practices to incarcerated youth since 2001. While in teacher training with Jack Kornfield, Will is also an MFT intern in private practice in San Francisco and Oakland, seeing individuals and couples for psychotherapy.

January 15 Tom Moon

Tom Moon has been a practitioner of Vipassana meditation for fifteen years, and his spiritual home is Spirit Rock Meditation Center. He is a psychotherapist in San Francisco, working primarily with gay men. His chief professional commitment is in exploring the interface between Buddhist practice and psychotherapy.

January 22 Open Discussion

January 29 Alzak Amlani

Alzak Amlani has been practicing Buddhism for 20 years and in the last ten years has been a student of the Diamond Approach. He is a practicing psychologist and teaches in the Integral Counseling Program at the California Institute of Integral Studies, where his work focuses on integrating spiritual approaches and multiculturalism into psychotherapy. He is of Indian origin and grew up in Uganda, East Africa.

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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