

Coming Out in the Sangha: Queer Community in American Buddhism

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A feature of American society that is receiving increasing attention is the open and vocal presence of persons who identify themselves as “queer.”¹ In modern America, it is quipped, homosexuality has gone from “the love that dared not speak its name” to “the love that will not shut up.”² As Buddhism becomes a familiar part of America it interacts with the queer community, and both Buddhism and the queer community are changed.

This phenomenon is new, and has been little studied. This essay will address some of the issues involved in the interaction between Buddhism and the queer community and attempt to characterize the main changes that are occurring.

Buddhism and Homosexuality

The concern of Buddhism in sexual matters is with the danger of sexual desire in general, with only subsidiary attention being paid to the gender or orientation of the sexual partners.³

The basis of moral conduct in all lineages of Buddhism are the Five Precepts (*pañca-sīla*): to abstain from harming life, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and drinking alcohol. Since the precepts are couched in general terms, their precise meaning and application are matters of extensive commentary and, in the living situation, of discussion with the practitioner’s principal Dharma teacher. It is not possible to use the precepts as a way of proclaiming that “all Buddhists must act in such a way,” especially as there is no worldwide Buddhist legislative organization or universally recognized person who speaks for all, or even most, Buddhists.

We are left, therefore, somewhat on our own in trying to interpret the

words of the third precept (Pāli: *kāmesu micchāchārā*; Sanskrit: *kāmamīthy-ācarā*), "false conduct in regard to sensuality." Broadly, it is taken to mean any conduct that violates the established mores of a given society, so that it usually precludes adultery although it may allow concubinage. Since there were no self-identified queer communities in the cultures where traditional Buddhism developed, the precepts assume heterosexism, and homosexuality or homoeroticism is largely ignored. The commentary on the third precept by Gampopa (1079–1153), however, explicitly includes homosexuality in the list of prohibitions, albeit almost as an afterthought. His remarks are short enough and curious enough to deserve quoting in full:

Sexual misdemeanour . . . has three subdivisions: against those who are guarded (i) by the family, (ii) by a master and (iii) by religion and custom. The first is sexual misdemeanour with our mother, sister or other female relative; the second is with a woman who has been married by the ruler or any one else; while the third is of five varieties: even if she be our own wife, sexual relation with her is considered to be improper if it is practised (a) at an improper part of the body, (b) in a place or (c) at a time that is improper, (d) too often and (e) in general. Of these the first (a) is to have sexual intercourse by way of the mouth or the anus. (b) Improper place is near the retinue of a Guru, a monastery, a funeral monument (*stūpa*), or where many people have gathered. (c) Improper time means to have sexual intercourse with a woman who has taken a vow, is pregnant or nursing a child, or in daylight. (d) Improper frequency is more than five successive times. (e) General impropriety means to coerce a woman to sexual intercourse by beating. *It also means to have intercourse with a male or in a eunuch's mouth or anus.*

Of the three results of such actions, maturation means that the culprit is reborn among spirits [i.e., *pretas*]; natural outflow of the existing conditions means that even if the evil-doer is born as a human being, he will be one who gets a hostile wife; while the general result is that he will be born in a place with much dust.⁴

Gampopa gives no reason why any of these activities are on the prohibited list.⁵ We might speculate that they concern themselves with three areas: (1) sexual activity that is similar to stealing (for example, of another's wife); (2) sexual activity that causes scandal according to the expected cultural presuppositions; (3) sexual conduct that manifests addictive behavior. Because the karmic consequences include rebirth as a *preta* or in a dusty place, Gampopa appears to regard wrongful sexual activity as the expression of unbridled lust or as somehow "dirty." The lack of further explanation may indicate cultural axia: in Gampopa's time and place, such actions were "obviously" wrong.⁶

There is one lone, and rather bizarre, *sūtra* description of a special hell in which males who engage in homosexual activity are reborn:⁷ it is embedded, like a fly in amber, in Śāntideva's *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, an anthology that

has preserved other oddities, such as the prediction that one who wipes snot on a sacred text will be reborn as a book, or a man who urinates against a monastery wall will be reborn as a wall. Such statements are hardly mainstream Dharma.

The Five Precepts are primarily for observant laypeople, most of whom are assumed to be heterosexual married couples. This may partly account for their vagueness—it is impossible to specify detailed conduct for many different households. Monasteries, however, are a different matter: they are controlled environments, and the legislation of the *Vinaya* is precise to, one might feel, a fault. Because the monk or nun is expected to be celibate, any sexual activity at all is condemned, and this includes, in the case of monks, intentional emission of the semen (that is, masturbation) and any form of penile penetration of a mouth (even, in the case of an especially supple monk, his own mouth) or anus as well as a vagina, "even to the extent of a sesame seed," so that any form of homosexual interaction would be regarded as illegitimate. The rules for the nun are not quite as clear, but the prohibition against sleeping in the same bed with another nun is probably intended to exclude lesbian activity.⁸

It is notable that these prohibitions against homosexuality in the *Vinaya* are not given any special (homophobic) metaphysical, philosophical, or doctrinal support. They are merely expressions of uncontrolled desire (*trṣṇā*, *upādāna*) on the part of persons who have vowed to control their desires. The only time we find homosexuality treated as a phenomenon in its own right is in the treatise (*śāstra*) discussions of the *paṇḍaka*, a word of uncertain meaning that Leonard Zwilling has suggested translating by using the English colloquialism "without balls," that is, a male who lacks, or is perceived to lack, the strength, courage or insemination ability which a male is supposed to possess. Some *paṇḍakas* might be recognized today as gay or homosexual, while others would not, but in any case the condition is not condemned in the *śāstra* but, rather, reported as a medical disorder.⁹

The few instances of homophobia that I have encountered among living Buddhist teachers in America may likewise be based on medical rather than moral considerations. S. N. Goenka, a teacher of a special form of Insight Meditation (*vipassanā*), feels that homosexuality is dangerous because it mixes what he regards as male and female energies: he is also opposed to the practice of more than one form of meditation in the same room for a similar reason—it mixes energies.¹⁰ When a gay man approached the Korean Master Süngsan for a way to "cure" his homosexuality, he was led to believe that his condition was the fruiting of karma—an explanation used in Tibetan Buddhist medical texts for certain preexisting conditions.¹¹ The explanation of the third precept authorized by the late Venerable Master Hsüan Hua says, "homosexuality . . . plants the seeds which lead to rebirth in the lower realms of existence."¹²

There was a curious phase in the history of SGI-USA (Soka Gakkai International, USA). During the days when it was called Nichiren Shōshū of America, before the split in the parent body in Japan between the clerical and lay wings,¹³ it recommended that its gay male followers participate in "human revolution" (*ningen kakumei*) by marrying a woman so as, it was hoped, to become heterosexual.¹⁴ The experiment failed: not only has it been abandoned, but SGI has announced that it will conduct same-sex marriages.¹⁵

The conclusion seems warranted that traditional Buddhism has been largely neutral on matters of sexual preference. In America, because of the prominence of a queer community, Buddhism has been asked to take a stance, and the stance has largely been positive. The stimulus for taking a position other than neutrality is usually attributed to Robert Aitken Rōshi,¹⁶ who asked Richard Baker Rōshi, in the course of a queer caucus at San Francisco Zen Center, what was being done to make Zen practice available to the gay community. Aitken Rōshi is supposed to have said, "If you are not in touch with your sexuality, you are not practicing Zen," and "You can't do zazen in the closet."¹⁷ His remarks lent encouragement to the fledgling Maitri (first called the Gay Buddhist Club and now known as the Hartford Street Zen Center) in the Castro district of San Francisco.¹⁸

Two prominent Buddhists, H. H. Dalai Lama XIV and the Thai activist Sulak Sivaraksa, have come out in favor of, or at least not opposed to, homosexuality. Sulak claims that the Buddha never mentioned homosexuality and only said that we should not use sex harmfully.¹⁹ In a similar vein, the Dalai Lama, speaking on his own authority, has stated that homosexual conduct is not a fault as long as both partners agree to it, neither is under vows of celibacy, and the activity does not harm others.²⁰

Professor Taitetsu Unno of Smith College, a scholar of Buddhism and a Jōdo Shinshū Honpa-Honganjiha minister, has performed two ceremonies of commitment between gay couples who self-identified as Buddhists, "based upon [his] understanding of the Buddhist teaching of interconnectedness, brought about by deep karmic conditions beyond rational comprehension, which should be cherished, celebrated and strengthened with the passage of time."²¹

Two gay men, one Buddhist and one Catholic, were married in a ceremony in Boulder, Colorado, solemnized by a PLWA (person living with AIDS) Catholic priest (who acted, however, without the knowledge of his ordinary) and a Buddhist minister, and supervised by the minister of the Unitarian Church in which the wedding was held. The Buddhist minister was Dr. Judith Simmer-Brown, a well-known teacher at the Naropa Institute. The Buddhist partner had gone for premarital counseling to Dzigar Kongtrul, Rinpoche, who, on discovering that the partners were both men, "skillfully addressed some issues specific to gay couples."²²

Buddhist groups in the San Francisco Bay area that I have interviewed on the question of queer practitioners were either neutral or openly accepting. Homophobia seemed to be unusual and needed a special search to be uncovered. As Michael Ferri of the Seattle Gay Buddhist Fellowship has written, "this [is] definitely not the Church of Rome."²³

Oppression and Coming Out

There is some evidence that, in certain cultures at certain times, homosexual conduct was ignored, permitted, or even encouraged,²⁴ and it has been argued that outright oppression of homosexuals in the West began only around the eleventh and twelfth centuries.²⁵

Nevertheless, whenever or wherever homophobia began, modern America is predominantly so. Homophobia can be explicit, as in the laws of those states that prohibit homosexual conduct between consenting adults, or it can be implicit in the "heterosexual assumption" of most of society. In various ways, the authority structure tells us that we are monstrosities: the Christian Church tells us we are sinful,²⁶ the law threatens to punish us, our parents may disinherit us, our friends may desert us, and society at large does its best to ignore our existence.²⁷

Faced with this opposition we may, on the one hand, try to stuff our feelings or deny them, and we will almost certainly develop self-hatred by internalizing society's homophobia. On the other hand, we may decide to "come out," especially when we realize there are others of us out there, more especially when it begins to seem that there are so many of us that America as we know it could not function if all queers disappeared.

Coming out is a bit like growing up. There is a birth which is followed by a process. One sequence has been suggested by Rob Eichberg,²⁸ another by Craig O'Neill and Kathleen Ritter.²⁹ The models are complementary, in that Eichberg focuses on coming out as a public (or, as he calls it, a political) act of benefit to the entire queer community, while O'Neill and Ritter concentrate on a more private form of coming out, a process of realizing what we have lost by growing up queer and how we can integrate that sense of loss into our adult lives.

Eichberg proposes that there are nine stages, or levels of consciousness, to coming out, each level building on, and being built into, the other, beginning with "Powerless/Depressed" and ending with "Power/Empower."³⁰ O'Neill and Ritter suggest an eightfold scheme, beginning with "Initial Awareness" and ending with "Transforming Loss." Despite their ideological differences—Eichberg was a Reform Jew with Buddhist leanings and adopted a religion-neutral, psychotherapeutic stance, while O'Neill and Ritter are explicitly Roman Catholic and therefore assume monotheism as the norm—the models describe broadly similar movements from an

initial state of fear, imprisonment, and reliance on others for self-validation toward a goal of love, freedom, and reliance on an inner spring of spiritual strength.

The resonance of this movement with the Buddhist path is apparent.

Oppression, AIDS, and Spirituality

When many people come out, as Calvin Coolidge might have said, queers become visible. Although homosexual activity is as old as humanity, gayness (or queerness) as a personal and public phenomenon appears to be new. Gay, says Boswell, "refers to persons who are conscious of erotic inclination towards their own gender as a distinguishing characteristic [and] 'gay sexuality' refers only to eroticism associated with a conscious preference."³¹ Persons who today self-identify as queer often live in, or at least identify with, self-identified queer communities, and they live, or more or less consciously reject, so-called gay (or queer) lifestyles. Queers have developed a sense of belonging to each other just by reason of being queers—words such as *family* and *tribe* are commonplace—despite differences in age, race, class, intelligence, and lifestyle.³²

The queer community, having formed as a reaction to explicit and implicit homophobic oppression—just as, and just where (the San Francisco Bay area) it was smelling some sort of freedom—was hit by the AIDS crisis. At first, it seemed to affect only gay males, but it soon became clear that it was an illness that could strike anybody. Lesbians, although statistically less prone to AIDS, have been shown to be, for some reason, more liable to develop breast cancer. What this amounts to is a perception, both by itself and by outsiders, that the queer community is a diseased community in some way that the larger community of Americans is not, and this has led, in turn, to an intensification of the feeling of a queer family or tribe.

The AIDS crisis has also been, quite literally, sobering. For many years, the only way queers could meet was to pick each other up in a gay or lesbian bar. There was consequently a lot of drunkenness and, for those with the still mysterious predisposition for it, alcoholism. The hyper-genitalized environment favored the making of money by barkeeps and hustlers, but it did not encourage the establishment of meaningful relationships, and it certainly did not promote spirituality. In fact, because of the strident opposition of mainline Christianity to homosexuality, many queers regarded any form of spirituality as totally beyond the pale: being queer and spiritual was an oxymoron.³³

The possibility that a single sexual encounter could lead not merely to an annoying but curable sexually transmitted disease, but to a painful and protracted death at some time in the uncertain future, was a wake-up call. One of the traditionally listed stimulations to earnest Buddhist practice is

the realization, not only intellectually but existentially, of the reality of death. Every human knows that he or she will die sometime, but most of us, especially in the United States, deny it.³⁴ When old people die invisibly in nursing homes, we can pretend that death will not happen to us. But when our young and healthy friends suddenly get sick and die, and when, after some years, we find that all our friends have friends or lovers who have died of "an early frost,"³⁵ we can no longer escape the conviction that we ourselves will surely die, and maybe die quite soon. Faced with oppression, "It is no wonder that Gay men are in touch with the spiritual in this world."³⁶ Faced in addition with AIDS, the mind is further concentrated: "I believe that if I had not been gay and had not had to face this epidemic [of AIDS] that I would not have heard the dharma. The contrast between the decay and fear caused by the illness on the one hand and the vitality of the response of gay people on the other provides a powerful illustration of the Buddha's teachings. The dharma has come to me through the medium of gay life and the AIDS epidemic."³⁷

It was precisely because of the AIDS crisis in the queer community in San Francisco that Eric Kolvig, a student of *vipassanā* under Joseph Goldstein, came to California from the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts, in 1993. He felt that the entire queer community in San Francisco was going through post-traumatic stress syndrome, dealing with fear, grief, rage, and isolation, and he hoped that the Dharma could help to heal this syndrome.³⁸

The direct relationship between the realization of death and a Buddhist spirituality of detachment from selfishness leading to compassion is clearly stated by Gregg Cassin, the founder of The Healing Circle,³⁹ a support group he established in San Francisco as a response to the HIV-AIDS challenge:

In meditation I had reflected on the many deaths of friends and lovers . . . and on the power of death—not only these deaths, but the many small deaths we face in our daily lives. The message I received [from my spiritual teacher] was this: It is the dying that is bringing you new life. Die, Gregg, die daily. Die to everything you think you are or need to be—your body, your fear, your disease, all—die to it all. Let your ego be smashed.

Our suffering is the womb of compassion. . . . Like a woman giving birth, I am changed with each death. I'm never the same. I am new. I am a mother.⁴⁰

In both Theravāda and Mahāyāna texts, the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are compared to mothers. As a mother automatically thinks first of her only child rather than herself, so the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas spontaneously put the welfare of other beings first. HIV and AIDS calls out to, and arouses, our Buddha-nature.

Even apart from the HIV-AIDS issue, Buddhism is helping queers to

recognize, and dissipate, self-hatred stemming from internalized homophobia.⁴¹ Eric Kolvig claims that *vipassanā* meditation allows us to see how much we hate ourselves, and to allow that hate to dissipate in the light of wisdom (*prajñā*). "By watching our minds vigilantly, minutely, subtly, instant by instant, we can train ourselves to catch the unworthiness and shame that were lodged in us when we were too young to refute them. Like mildew or mold, these things depend on staying in darkness; they cannot survive the clear light of knowing."⁴²

At the same time as "wisdom obliterates the self-hatred of internalized homophobia by revealing what is real,"⁴³ love (*karuṇā*) liberates us from isolation, both from other queers and from the heterosexual majority. "Non-separation is love."⁴⁴ Because society marginalizes and oppresses queers, we isolate from each other, and we need a supportive community to heal our wounds. Kolvig referred to an incident in the *suttas* in which a monk with dysentery lies in his own excrement because the other monks will not take care of him. The Buddha, helped by Ānanda, bathes him and says, "Monks, you have not a mother, you have not a father who might tend you. If you, monks, do not tend one another, then who is there who will tend you? Whoever, monks, would tend me, he should tend the sick."⁴⁵ Queers are often estranged from their families, and it is in the queer community that we can find a family of choice to replace our family of origin. Many find that a spiritual community is more nurturing than a club or a bar and, having been deeply wounded by their contact with Christian homophobia, feel they have found a home in the Buddhist *sangha*.⁴⁶

Some Examples of Coming Out.

In August 1994 I conducted interviews with various persons who self-identified as being to a greater or lesser extent "out" in the *sangha*, and they referred me to other persons, groups, and informational material. The resulting data is evocative rather than scientific, since the sample was restricted in quantity and geographical extent to those persons I was able to contact during my brief fieldwork in the San Francisco area.⁴⁷

Undoubtedly the most colorful figure to surface was Issan Dorsey, whose life is something of a modern, and Buddhist, version of Augustine of Hippo's journey from hedonist to spiritual teacher. Issan died in 1990, but I met many people who remembered him, and there is a biography of him.⁴⁸ Beginning his life as Tommy Dorsey in a hard-working family in Santa Barbara, he early began to feel that he was different. Growing up at just the right (or wrong!) time, he threw himself into the life of a drag queen in New York, Chicago, and San Francisco, with its attendant drugs, alcohol abuse, and promiscuity. Through the hippie scene in San Francisco, and especially his friendship with a man named Grant Dailey, whom

Issan called "my psychedelic guru,"⁴⁹ he came in contact with spirituality, and his life began to change course: "'Grant was one of the main people in my life. He introduced me to everything that even resembled Zen practice. Before that, I just had been a crazy drag-queen junkie, but there was this complete metamorphosis that happened to me when I lived with Grant.'"⁵⁰

The somewhat free-floating monism of Grant became more recognizably Buddhist for Issan on his visits to the *zazen* sessions held by Shunryū Suzuki Rōshi, founder of the San Francisco Zen Center. His conversion was not immediate, in fact he seemed to give Suzuki Rōshi quite a rocky ride, but eventually Issan found himself living and working at Tassajara, the retreat house of Zen Center whose bucolic isolation is legendary, and he became more and more identified with Zen as a lifestyle. Back in San Francisco, he joined the Gay Buddhist Club (unofficially renaming it the Posture Queens), which had formed in the predominantly queer Castro district. The Gay Buddhist Club became the Hartford Street Zen Center, and Issan was its abbot from 1989 until a few months before his death. Today, the center functions as a quiet, spiritual, and healing place in the cruisy, boozy Castro, without even a sign on its door to proclaim its presence to casual passersby.⁵¹

Philip Whalen (Zenshin Ryūfu), the resident teacher at Hartford Street Zen Center (HSZC), said that the attraction of Buddhism is that it frees us, in William Blake's terms, from "mind-forged manacles," especially the "poisonous Puritanism" of ordinary American religion which asks, "How can we be pure?" and answers, "No smoking, no drinking, no fucking." Queers come to Hartford Street rather than the San Francisco Zen Center on Page Street, he said, because the HSZC charter says it is for gays and lesbians, and so they feel more comfortable there. At other places, he felt, it was "don't ask, don't tell," just like the military.⁵²

Do queers at the Page Street Zen Center feel subtly oppressed? John Grimes, a long-time resident of Zen Center and former guest master, doesn't think so.⁵³ He came to Zen Center from Tassajara in 1986 as, quite openly, the spouse of another man. As it turned out, his spouse lost interest in Zen and moved away, while John gained interest in Zen, and stayed. He has never experienced any homophobia at Zen Center, even though Mrs. Suzuki (the wife of the founder) was bothered by homosexuality when she first found out about it. She had never heard of it in Japan and, thinking it to be an American phenomenon, wanted to return to Japan to escape it.⁵⁴ She came to accept it, however, calling gays "soft men" and seeming to like them.⁵⁵ In all, John said he had no interest in, or need for, the Hartford Street Zen Center or the Gay Buddhist Fellowship (see later) and has even felt uncomfortable at them.

Some established American Buddhist centers go beyond accepting

queers and actively address queer issues in special retreats. Most notable is Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre, California (near San Rafael), the western branch of the Insight Meditation Society. Spirit Rock hosts three queer Vipassana retreats a year: one for gays, led by Eric Kolvig and Robert Hall, one for lesbians, led by Arinna Weissman, and one for gays and lesbians, led by Eric and Arinna. In March 1994, Zen Mountain Center, a branch of Zen Center of Los Angeles, held a retreat for gays and lesbians led by Koren Baker and Pat Enkyo O'Hara.⁵⁶ Although Zen Mountain Monastery in Mount Tremper, New York (not to be confused with Zen Mountain Center), "has a very strong gay/lesbian presence," the status of queer practitioners there is ambiguous.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, in the fall 1991 issue of its newsletter, *Mountain Record*, *sangha* members published a section called "Practicing Out of the Closet—Sexual Minorities Appreciating the *Sangha*." The San Francisco center of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO), an ecumenical and innovative *sangha* begun by Venerable Sangharakshita, a British teacher with multiple lineage affiliations, held, apparently for the first time, "an introductory meditation course by and for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender people" on five Sunday evenings beginning on April 8, 1995.⁵⁸

Two Buddhist groups in San Francisco—the Gay Buddhist Fellowship (known as the Gay Buddhist Fraternity between its founding in 1991 until June 1, 1994) and the Dharma Sisters⁵⁹—have formed on the basis of members being queer first and practitioners of a specific lineage, or disciples of a certain teacher, second. GBF has an exclusively gay male membership,⁶⁰ while the Dharma Sisters, as would be expected, are composed of lesbian and bisexual women. Estimating the size of GBF and the Dharma Sisters is difficult since neither has a formal membership but, judging by the number of names on their respective mailing lists, GBF was, in 1995, more than double the size of the Dharma Sisters. In the summer of 1996, the Dharma Sisters ceased to function as an active group, but they revived in early 1997.

The groups are similar in that both are explicitly cross-traditional (although a sort of hybrid *vipassanā*-Zen sitting is favored, as the "lowest common denominator" of Buddhist practice) and both provide a safe place in which to be queer and spiritual-Buddhist. Members of the GBF weekly sitting group told me that they formed the group in order to combine sexuality and spirituality, to heal the wounds of a gay childhood, and to have a safe place to come and sit—where, because there was no need to fight the heterosexual assumption of straight society, the false ego (*ātman*) could be let go. The notion of "tribal intimacy" surfaced as important.⁶¹

The Dharma Sisters said that many of them are not out to their home *sanghas*, and they come to the Sisters for socializing and to experience intimacy; they can be themselves, getting on with being Buddhist without raising the lesbian issue as a big deal. There is a joyous, multicultural feel.

"Here," said Jackie Weltman, "a Jewish girl does not have to marry a nice Jewish boy."⁶² Commenting on the Dharma Sisters' retreat of June 1994, Perri Franskoviak wrote:

To create a period of time and space in which we can come together as lesbians and bisexual women practicing the dharma can be a powerful and healing force in our lives. Not only does it give us an opportunity to see the noise of our daily lives for what it is, but we support each other as we look deeply into our own true nature, discovering who we are as we open to the full range of our experiences. As sisters in the dharma we are all teachers to each other. ["We have no teacher or rōshi," commented Jackie.] This weekend gave us an opportunity to cultivate this sense of sangha, or community, more fully with each other. May this retreat be a continuing tradition for our sangha.⁶³

There were only two significant differences between the Gay Buddhist Fellowship and the Dharma Sisters that I noticed. First, GBF members were directly confronting HIV and AIDS, whereas the Sisters stated that they were only informally involved, and that feminine diseases associated with the queer community, such as breast cancer, had not become a real issue.⁶⁴ Second, the Dharma Sisters strongly identified with feminist issues and admitted to a Wiccan influence—as, for example, arranging one-day *sesshin* on the solstices and equinoxes—while, on the other hand, when I asked GBF members about "masculinist" issues, Robert Bly-style, they got a cool reception.

A gay Buddhist teacher who is striking off somewhat on his own is Tundra Wind, who has a center in Monte Rio, California. He received Sōtō transmission through Jiyu Kennett Rōshi via Zen no Etsu, practiced Chogyo in Korea, was abbot of Sūngsan's group in New York City, and has studied Fukeshū. He regards his triple transmission as a strength that gives him permission to innovate,⁶⁵ and he is moving away from Zenlike practice to tantra. Learning that, according to Tibetan tradition, Tārā has made a vow always, until her enlightenment, to be reborn in the body of a woman so as to relate to the oppression of women, Tundra composed twenty-four vows beginning with "I will always take rebirth in the body of a gay man," so as to be available to oppressed gays.⁶⁶ Extending the tantric imagery into gay sexuality, he has "often wondered if Avalokiteshvara and Manjushri⁶⁷ in sexual embrace would make an effective tantric representation of the union of wisdom and compassion for gay males."⁶⁸ Tundra and his students discuss their novel ideas in the irregularly published *Zen Wind* magazine which "uses e-prime, a form of english [sic] that does not use the verb 'to be' . . . because it consistently reflects the meaning of dependent origination"⁶⁹ [and] uses capital letters only at the beginnings of sentences, after a colon if what follows the colon constitutes a full sentence, in titles, and for names of individuals."⁷⁰

Conclusions

The motives and characteristics of queer Buddhist groups are summed up well in the mission statement of the Seattle Gay Buddhist Fellowship:

The Seattle Gay Buddhist Fellowship exists to provide support for Gay [note the initial capital] men in the Dharma.

We aim to create:

- a safe environment in which we can be ourselves as Gay men.
- a fellowship in which members of various Buddhist paths can meet, meditate together, exchange ideas, discover similarities and differences of belief, and mutually support each other's practices.
- a community in which to meet social and psychological needs.
- a practice of compassion through social action.
- a place of exploration for Gay men who wish to investigate whether or not a Buddhist practice meets their spiritual needs.

In the Fellowship, a diversity of approaches to the practice of Buddhism are [sic] recognized, respected and welcomed. We do not exist to proselytize, convert one another or establish one particular Buddhist path.

All Gay men with an interest in Buddhist practice are invited to join us.⁷¹

In general, we see that American Buddhism is producing groups of practitioners who are mostly laypeople and who typically belong to other lineages and groups with recognized monastic teachers, but who gather to practice as self-identified gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered persons. The queer community takes on the role traditionally filled by cultural bonding (for example, as Cambodian or Thai Buddhists), lineage bonding (for example, as Gelugpa or Shin), or common devotion to a specific Dharma teacher (for example, Ajahn Chah or Venerable Master Hsüan Hua). The motivation is to heal, by mutual support and by the generation of wisdom and compassion, the childhood wounds of internalized homophobia and the adult wounds of the AIDS pandemic. This is a Buddhism that meets us, as queer Americans, where we live, and where we die, and leads us to liberation. As such, it is an authentic expression of the Dharma.

Resources

The resource list on page 39 of the fall 1992 issue of *Turning Wheel* (c/o Buddhist Peace Fellowship, P.O. Box 4650, Berkeley, CA 94704; telephone 510/525-8596) is useful, but many of the addresses are by now out of date. Of more enduring value is the special section on gay, lesbian, and bisexual Buddhism (pages 16-39).

For the San Francisco Bay area, an updated list appears in the Spirituality section of the classified ads of the *San Francisco Bay Times*.

The Gay Buddhist Fellowship can be contacted by mail at 2261 Market Street, #422, San Francisco, CA 94114; and by phone (24-hour information line) at 415/974-9878; Web page: [http://www.planetaria.net/home/abaki/directory %20 pages/directory/html](http://www.planetaria.net/home/abaki/directory%20pages/directory/html)

Jackie Weltman, formerly of the Dharma Sisters, is now at Harvard and can be contacted via E-mail at <jaxers@well.com>

Spirit Rock Meditation Center can be contacted by mail at P.O. Box 909, Woodacre, CA 94973; by phone at 415/488-0164; and by fax at 415/488-0170.

Hartford Street Zen Center can be contacted by mail at 57 Hartford Street, San Francisco, CA 94114; and by phone at 415/863-2507; Web page: <http://members.aol.com/HSCZ/>

The San Francisco Buddhist Center (FWBO) can be contacted by mail at 37 Bartlett Street, San Francisco, CA 94110; and by phone at 415/282-2018; Web page: <http://www.bluelotus.com/sfbc/sfbc/html>

The Buddhist AIDS Project can be contacted by mail at 555 John Muir Drive, #803, San Francisco, CA 94132; and by phone at 415/522-7473; Web page: <http://www.wenet.net/~bap/>

Maitri can be contacted by mail at 401 DuBoce Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94117; by phone at 415/863-8508; and by fax at 415/863-0227; Web page: <http://www.wenet.net/~maitri/>

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