

FEELING AFRICAN, BEING BUDDHA



What does Buddhism have to do with Black People?

By

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She walks through the gate,

Heavy footed,

Gazing out from the darkness of skin,

Seeing no church pews,

She sits chanting,

Why have I come without knowing whose house I have entered?

Many Kalpas Ago

I removed my sandals near an open space just outside where the door used to be. Sporting dreadlocks and sweaty brown skin, I stepped inside the ruins of an ancient temple and planted my flat wide feet in the mix of dung and mud. It was 1995, Tamil Nadu, India. There in the temple that had only one wall and the sky as its ceiling, I wondered what it must have been like a thousand years ago to chant there, to sit in silence listening to cow bells and wooden wagons. I faced a crumbling limestone statue of Shakti, and despite the fact that she had no eyes, no nose, and chipped lips, I could feel the ripples of her presence throughout the centuries. Although I had been practicing Nichiren Buddhism seven years prior, I felt in that moment, in that temple, a sense that I had been introduced to Dharma or the teachings of Buddha a hundred thousand million kalpas ago.

Whether that is true or not, I do experience meeting the Dharma as something that you don't do once. It occurs as often as one is awakened to the suffering and joy of life. So, sometimes I say that I first heard the Dharma from my mother, when she said something like this at a time when I was disappointed by our church members, "You can't look at other peoples' lives and decide if you are going to pray or not." In other words, if I judge a spiritual or religious practice by its people, I would never practice because there are no perfect people. That human beings are human beings and that *other* people have very little to do with how far I go down a chosen path of compassion. On the other hand, I might say that Martin Luther King, Jr. was my first Dharma teacher.

His message of non-violence and peace sank deep into my eleven-year old heart, especially at a time when four little girls my age had been bombed to death.

Given that, I would say I didn't go out of the way of my own life to meet the Dharma, but that it met me at the door of my own suffering. And when it came knocking to take up full residence in my life, I actually ran the other way. I was afraid of something so new and different from the black church I was raised in or the Yoruba African religion that I had dabbled in. I told the Buddhist teachers that I did not have any room for chanting, sitting down after work, or altars that were Japanese. Still the teachers didn't go away, bringing me candles, incense, and books to read. I had met my match. They were more stubborn than I could ever imagine. But it wasn't their persistence that kept me still long enough to invite the Dharma in. It was the fact that I never sent the teachers away, because I recognized the innate kindness and compassion of the Buddha's words that they shared. I recognized the teachings as something I had been yearning to hear. I recognized the bodhisattvas sitting next to me...not their faces, but their sincere intentions for a world of peace.

Immediately upon accepting the path of Buddha I began to see the depth of suffering within and around me. It was almost unbearable, causing me to doubt the teachings, meaning I had taken on something that might get the best of me. But with the help of many teachers I began to see that the suffering and the joy would be the places in which I practiced the teachings. That my life would serve as the ground in which Buddhism would come alive.

Today, the Soto Zen that I practice is felt in my body. I can feel the healing that is taking place by how I see, both the world and my life, with the curiosity of a child. I

can feel the chants grace my thick lips and my southern Louisiana ancestors knowing that all is well with their daughter chanting in Pali, Sanskrit, ancient Chinese, and Japanese. It is all very natural to me. I welcome the Dharma as it has welcomed me long before I was born.

However, no matter how much I welcome the teachings as a way of life, there are many complex questions about taking on a practice that has yet to become part of the everyday lives of black people in this country.

So, far I have used the word black to describe a kind of practitioner, a kind of life. However, when I used that word it is specific to African Americans who are descendants of African slaves that were brought to the southern regions of North America. It is the only experience I can speak of with any understanding. At the same time, I am fully aware that equalizing black with African American leaves out those who consider themselves of African descent, those who claim Native American heritage, Africans from Africa that live in North America, and lineages that include bicultural experiences of both African and Chinese, Irish, Portuguese, Cuban, Haitian, Puerto Rican and so much more. Yet, I hope that using the word black or African American will feel somewhat inclusive of those in the African Diaspora despite the fact that I only know my own historical experience as an African American.

A word about “one black experience” would be helpful before I go on. Based on a historical and present experience of life, I have come to identify with others that look like me, that they have the same skin color as I do. This collective-self identity affects how experiences are expressed in my life. Throughout these pages, there is a use of first person narrative “I”, while at the same time there is a joining of black people in the

language by using the pronouns, “we” and “our.” Therefore, the language usage is a matter of perception and not meant to perpetuate a unified or standardized blackness.

In addition, there was great effort taken to write as non-dualistically, without possession, as much as possible. Given the limitations of the English language, it was difficult to give a clear and authentic message without the words, I, my, me, and you or seemingly oppositional words such as black and white. But there is awareness on my part of the tension between perceived polarities as well as the non-existence of polarities because one is reflective of the other. When we perceive of such, delusion is enlightenment. Zen Master Dōgen, founder of Soto Zen, says we are to be “ever intimate” with enlightenment *and* delusion for they are companions on the path of realization.

Given that, I have considered in this writing that being black, African American, and Buddhist are locations of practice and understanding as opposed to places of separation and suffering. An acknowledgment of the relative existence, the form (color, class and culture in particular) of life, is my way of having some ground on which to understand the teachings. However, I do recognize the absolute, the emptiness of form, as the nature within our lives. But if I attempt to be formless, without substance, then I have turned the Buddha’s teachings into a technique, or method by which to create an empty personality. One cannot take the teachings and perform them as written instructions. But what one can do is use the teachings to understand the suffering of life through understanding this form we live with. We will eventually evolve into the teachings and the separation between life, the form, and the teachings will end, one lesson at a time.

I feel as though I have been coming to write this piece for more than a decade. And it is not so much about Buddhism or being black as much as it is about the freedom to explore one's daily life, to let down a veil so that life is illuminated, and to make meaning of one's subjective understanding of the human condition. What does it mean to be a descendant of African slaves and be a student of Buddha? What is it like to be a buddha in a dark body? What teachings are difficult to embrace and which are not? What is understood about suffering? And, what about God?

Is Buddha's Teachings Relevant to Black People?

When Tina Turner sang, "What's love got to do with it," my answer was "Everything, my sister, everything." So, when I mentioned to my younger sister that I was exploring being a Zen priest she asked, "What's Buddhism got to do with black people, anyway? Although Shakyamuni Buddha's teachings came from the earth of ancient India, I knew in the moment she asked me the question, that the teachings had everything to do with me and with every other suffering living being. Of course, she wanted to know how did I come to such a strange journey, when she knew me as a devout Christian, a courageous warrior of the black civil rights movement and a dedicated Pan-Africanist. She knew me in my Afro, African headwraps, African jewelry, reading aloud poetry to her by black poets such as Langston Hughes, Nikki Giovanni, the Last Poets, Margaret Walker, and Gwendolyn Brooks. Instead of watching television on some evenings, we would actually perform the poetry for one another, sitting on our twin beds, speaking through the words of the poets about our experiences as young black women.

Later, after living with the question a bit longer I began to see that the answer was as large as an elephant and that I had only touched its tail when I attempted to answer my sister's profound question. She needed to know how would I help black people by being a Zen priest. In that moment, I couldn't find a way to convey to her that much of what I experienced in being black was much like what the Buddha taught.

When I was thirteen, I remember one evening our family sitting at the dinner table. My older and younger sisters were in their place, and me somewhere in the middle, and my parents each at one end of the table. Something was especially strange with the taste and texture of the meat we were eating. Not being big on meat as a child, I remember frowning and asking what kind of meat was it. My father proudly said in his thick Creole accent, “Possum. I caught it in the backyard.” I didn’t know what a possum was, but I stopped eating the meat because it was caught and killed in the yard I played in daily. Yet, I could see my father’s pride at bringing something to our bare table. Life was hitting us hard at the time, as my parents were aging with three teens, my mother being fifty-five years old and my father seventy-three. It wouldn’t be long before we received our first bag of food for Thanksgiving from a welfare office. It would be our last bag because we could not stand the humiliation. One other night, during the same hard times, my father cried at the table because we didn’t have enough to eat. We would never speak of those hard times again, because it was frightening to talk about being black without anything –not having.

Regardless of that period in my life as a child I never thought of myself as poor. Poor was being without food most of the time. Poor was being without a house, without shoes. If we had those things, then everything was fine. If we did not have them, someone in the neighborhood, a church member, or a relative would see that we had what we needed. As long as someone else had them, we did. This was how generosity was expressed among black people, most of whom were new arrivals from the southern region of the United States. When someone from the church shared with us, it was a generosity filled with compassion, giving because they understood or because they were

in the same circumstance. Maybe they only had one dollar but they could give sixty cents to someone just because they had a dollar. It was not giving because of being guilty of having more than the other; it was giving to be giving, without any praise. And most often there were no expectations of receiving because of what was given.

A communal sense of having and giving were essential to our survival. Giving was not a material gesture but rather insurance that no one would be left behind. It was expressing a sense of being interrelated. But as the Buddha taught, it was generosity, the giving of one's life to save another. It was *dana* one of six *paramitas*, based in compassion that I experienced long ago in my community.

Therefore, the teachings of Buddha being relevant to a black experience of life were not odd to me. So, if the teachings were familiar then what made the practice of Buddhism so foreign? I can only say that it was the rituals that were different than what I had experienced in church. Without the singing, praising God out loud, and talking back to the minister, it was difficult to believe that there was any religion going on inside the Buddhist environment. I had been accustomed to religious services that included a goal of soul revival. As a child I enjoyed attending revival meetings held to bring souls to Christ. In these ceremonies, which could last for weeks, the weeping and wailing I heard around me was evidence of people being touched or rejoined to spirit. I remember sitting under a huge green circus tent in the heat of summer in Los Angeles. As my family and I walked into the revival meeting, I could smell the hay used as flooring. I loved that smell, because I knew it meant we were about to be rejuvenated. The revival meeting was the time to rededicate ourselves as black people; it was a time to truly face what it meant to live a spiritual life. It was a time to become conscious of that life. Under the

sway of night lights hanging in the tent, we were brought back from soul-sleeping, from despair, from our feeling stuck and not growing as black people. In this soul revival we recalled happiness as we celebrated the act of renewal in song and baptism. In essence, we lived again. We flourished.

Would a practice steeped in the Dharma do the same? Better yet, is a Buddhist practice meant to do the same? There is no simple answer to these questions but they are important to the exploration of Buddhism in the lives of black people.

Having lived inside oppression, many black people have experiences of being dominated, alienated, and isolated through a systemic dehumanizing process. This way of living has created a longing to be rejoined with a larger humanity that has been denied or taken away. In these circumstances, there is recognition that we can resign ourselves to limitations and inferiority. Thereby, leading us on journeys of salvation and seeking enchantment, finding ways to survive.

As African Americans, we have been swimming to shore ever since the Middle Passage in which we came to be slaves in this country. The Middle Passage, for Africans who became slaves, was a journey of horrors from Africa across the Atlantic Ocean, to the New World. The shore we searched for was metaphorically the ground on which we might stand as human beings. In seeking this ground, we came across Christianity.

Initially, I focused on Christianity as a path for enchantment because it was what my parents gifted to me. But, why did they give me Christianity? When I read Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, I was mesmerized by the sermon of the character Baby Suggs. It was not a sermon about heaven, hell, and sinning, but one about the beauty of being God's people. In the novel, spirituality existed in gathering places among the trees. This

spirituality was a commitment to each other's well-being and joy. It was a sharing of freedom within community. Morrison named Baby Suggs an unchurched preacher, "uncalled, unrobed, unanointed, [letting her] great heart beat in the presence of the slave community." Baby Suggs' message was, "In this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard." Sugg's sermon of self-acceptance was a kind of spirituality that helped the people embrace their spirits despite the dehumanizing social conditions. It was a spirituality that co-existed along with efforts toward liberation.

This type of spirituality in the novel *Beloved* was born of a lived experience of slavery. Although there was a disempowerment in early Christian practices in this country, Christianity still brought to slaves something that couldn't be seen until later years. Christianity brought a spirit of dignity and a sense of being divine that the slave recognized from their African past. Despite the intent of slave masters to use the Bible to coerce slaves into compliant behavior, slaves were creative in bringing an African spirit to the teachings of the Bible. By bringing their African spirit, slaves used the Bible to resist the master and forged a path by which they survived. In essence, the conditions of slavery did not completely cut the slaves off from their ultimate source of the meaning of God, or religious and moral understanding. Through great ingenuity, slaves brought together the Christian meaning of God with the African religion.

My sister could have just as easily asked what does Christianity have to do with black people? One answer: When the slaves understood that God, as a creator of all people, was on the side of the oppressed, that Christ was a liberator, and that God was just, the slaves embraced the masters' Bible. This notion of God and justice together

made black people's Christianity a socially conscious religion as well as a promise to be a transformative and liberating one despite the fact mostly the religion was forced upon the slave.

In order to sustain a religious practice brought by slave masters, African slaves brought with them mythology, proverbs, folktales, an oral tradition that spoke of God or gods and a tribal or community sense of spirit. What black churches built as a Christian foundation in the twentieth century was derived from an African spirituality that is not an individual experience but:

- (a) a communal quest and adventure to discover a kind of wholeness that is realized in community,
- (b) a collective soul of the people
- (c) an animating and integrative power that constitutes the individual and collective experience
- (d) a spirituality inclusive within a collective historical existence, and
- (e) a spirituality of equality of and preservation of community.

I have heard that what is experienced in life is influenced by the time, the country and its people. My parents' vision of enchantment reflected their lives and the world they inhabited. They relied heavily on God as did the slaves for well being, but their times also afforded them the freedom to consider education and work for paid wages. In my lifetime, I have experienced great social movements, access to higher education, many therapeutic processes of healing, various forms of spirituality, and most important to me

the freedom to explore religions. Therefore, the times, the country, and the people have afforded me an opportunity to consider practicing Buddha's teachings as a way of life.

I came to Buddhism like many others with a truckload of suffering. But I also came with a sense of community and a need to be connected to practitioners as sisters and brothers. I came with a sense of dedication and commitment to serving others, to be like Harriet Tubman, to be like Sojourner Truth. However, it was the truckload of life's suffering that prevailed beyond heritage in my choosing the path of dharma.

In choosing the path of Buddha's teachings, over the years, I have grieved the communal sense of African American influenced Christianity, which was based on a shared history of dehumanization, specifically slavery. Being a Christian, in my sensibility, was being black, and therefore entering the Buddhist path once felt to be leaving the African American community. Whereas the Soto Zen in which I practice, while offering *sangha*, a Sanskrit word for community, it is a community that hardly pays attention to the impact of slavery or social hardship in relationship to the practice. So, I have asked myself what would make a Buddhist community feel like home to black people?

Even though there is no one answer I speculate that any religious practice embraced by African Americans would have teachings that attended to healing that which we suffer. The practice would be a commitment to experience, creating both an individual *and* collective experience. There would be deep rituals, music, stillness, movement, food, and lots of children and grandparents. Most important, the practice would have a quest of ending suffering, especially dehumanization; it would attend to saving all beings from hopelessness and weariness. In this way, one can see how African

Americans could easily embrace the Buddha's teachings of compassion, love, and wisdom.

A Lost Kinship

There is no dharma gate marked for black people only. However, we can acknowledge that there must be some history between the people of the African Diaspora and the teachings of Buddha. Although European literature and perspective on the history of Buddhism is extensive, little to none has been done on the kinship between Africans, African Americans, Asians and the Buddha. In my bones I know something is missing. There is awareness on my part that the Buddha's teachings impacted the lives of those who suffered oppression such as the black Tamil Indians, Dalits, and the Untouchables – held down by a caste system. Additionally, Nagarajuna, the great scholar of the Mahayana teachings, espoused the freedom of enlightenment to the dark Indians of southern ancient India. And because Buddhism spoke of liberation I assume that it did not flourish in a country that through tradition held the caste system in place. At the same time, there is awareness that when the Buddha spoke of the great rivers, the Ganges, the Yamuna, the Aciravati, the Sarabhu and the Mahi, giving up their former names and identities when they reached the great ocean, he delivered the teaching of liberation. Imagine, for the lower caste what this might have meant to their lives under the conditions of Brahmanism.

While ancient India is where Africans might have connected with the Buddha, this connection is speculative due to suppressed or lost history. However, in a book titled *A History of An African People* by Robert July, immigrants had crossed from Indonesia into Africa in the 15th century. Evidence of Indonesians living in ancient Africa is present in the Malagasy language of the Madagascar people. In addition there is more

evidence of Indonesians finding a home in Africa because there exist Malaysian plants such as the banana found in the region of southeast Africa. Also, the Chinese often visited and traded for gold and exotic animals like giraffes with the Africans in the ancient town of Malindi. It has been said that when the gold ran out, Africans traded their daughters to Chinese emperors. Surely these black woman encountered Buddha's teachings. Surely, the Indonesians and the Chinese brought with them Buddha's teachings. Therefore, considering African ancestors as part of the Buddhist movement from its beginnings is a crucial and valid historical perspective to unearth.

Despite ancient African history, for certain, in America, as early as the 1950's, the 1960's and 1970's, a few African Americans and people of African descent crossed the illusionary boundary of religious practices populated by black people, such as southern Baptist churches, African Methodist churches, Pentecostal churches or churches similar to them, to explore a practice based on Shakyamuni's Buddha's teachings. Their courage and innocence pried opened the unfamiliar dharma gate for black people to consider what the Buddha taught. Imagine going to a foreign land, a temple in your own country, without knowing the language and the customs, then deciding to stay and make the place your home. And at the same time, imagine that there is something familiar about the land that reminds you of yourself. So, you stay and the first language you learn is chanting pali and Sanskrit. You learn about the mind and body through meditation. The customs you learn is to light incense and a white candle, to ring a bell, to bow and to sit down. And there you stay for years until some of the confusion becomes clear.

Many pioneer followers of Buddha of African descent have been practicing in America with great patience from fifteen to twenty, and some thirty years, yet the black

community has heard little from them, despite the fact there are several publications authored by black practitioners. What has caused the gap between black people and Buddhism? One answer is that there are historical and social factors that impeded the opportunities for black people to engage with Buddhism when it arrived to the United States.

First, immigrants from various parts of Asia brought the culture of Buddhism they were raised with to the West long before North Americans came into contact with Buddha's teachings. These immigrants had little, if any, contact with African Americans. At the same time, Sharon Smith, professor at Goldsmith's College, University of London, states that Buddhism was introduced in the West around 150 years ago as a result of upper and middle class Westerners who came into contact with Buddhism through the colonization of the East. Smith states that many of them became Buddhist sympathizers, despite the fact that Buddhism was criticized in Western societies, particularly by evangelical churches. Later, around the 1890s, black people were more likely to participate in an evangelical type church and thereby be subjected to the criticism of Buddhism making it a practice to avoid.

In addition, Smith states that Buddhism arrived in America at a time when black people were suffering the effects of the Jim Crow laws (systematic dehumanization based on skin color), including new theories of Darwinism that said blacks were scientifically inferior. It was a time when black people were seen as beastly animals. Obviously, these were not the best conditions by which the seeds of Buddha's teachings would be sown in the black community.

Buddhism's next wave of attention in America, according to Smith was during the 1950's Beat Era and the 1960's counterculture movement. At the time, there were many movements toward changing mainstream traditions and social thought. As a consequence, many of the activists and artists of the 1950's and 1960's were attracted to Eastern spirituality including Buddhism as a way of transforming their lives. However, while sex, drugs, rock-and-roll, and anti-Vietnam War demonstrations were taking place among those of the counterculture movement, few black people were looking to the East for enlightenment. What was important to many, but not all, black people at the time was the Civil Rights Movement. Instead of participating in the larger counterculture movement, black people had their own counterculture activities based in efforts toward being seen as human beings and not the beasts they were perceived to be a decade prior. Therefore, only a small number of us, including some renowned folks such as scholar and author bell hooks, artist Romare Bearden, and many others of the African American cultural arts community found their feet planted on Buddha's path during that time.

Smith states that eventually, in the 1970's and 1980's the numbers of Americans practicing Buddhism began to grow but still few black people were interested in the issues of the newly converted and social engaged Buddhists, who were interested in human rights, ecology, and peace, whereas black communities were more interested in issues that derived from having been dehumanized, such as the criminal justice system, community safety, education, employment, and healthcare.

Who was going to address the suffering of dehumanization and speak of Buddha? The Sōkai Gakkai International (SGI) movement, a lay organization steeped in Nichiren Daishonin Buddhism, led by the widows and widowers of World War II Japan, offered

the kind of hope and determination of the early black churches. In addition, the practice offered a way to change one's deep-rooted karma, which might include the horror of the oppression suffered by black people. Also, the leaders and teachers of the Sōka Gakkai had no problem with walking the streets of the black community, or any other community of color for that matter, to share the practice. It was their way of actualizing the nature of a bodhisattva, or spiritual warrior, by helping communities in despair. The meetings were held in the neighborhood, perhaps in your own neighbor's house. There was food, chanting, singing, and lots of children and grandparents. The leaders listened to the pain and suffering of its members. As a result, many African Americans, including myself in 1988, came to chant Nam-Myōhō-Renge-Kyō. Still, today, the Sōka Gakkai has the largest numbers of black people practicing Buddhism, which is not to be misinterpreted that there is no racism or xenophobia occurring within that community; to the contrary.

While SGI was flourishing in communities of color, pioneer black Dharma teachers and scholars actively invited African Americans and other people of color by opening the Dharma gate as wide as possible.

Opening the Gate

While still practicing with SGI for more than a decade, I sat in meditation alone at the Vedanta Retreat Center in Olema, CA. I sat in the silence of over 2,000 acres of green lush land. I made this journey for personal private retreats for several years from Oakland to Olema back to Oakland. I listened to the Dharma of a Swami when he visited the center, as he touched my heart without me ever understanding the meaning of his lesson. I read Pema Chödrön's book *When Things Fall Apart* at least five times. I wanted to meet her and talk with her but I never had the opportunity. Eventually, the door to my Zen practice was opened as I sat in a people-of-color sangha at the San Francisco Zen Center led by Rev. Ryumon Guitierrez Baldoquin, an African Cuban Zen priest. She spoke of how the Buddha's teachings on liberation aligned with the needs of people who find themselves marginalized in society. I was in the right place at the right time. I agreed and felt strongly that black people have come to Buddhism because of the great suffering that has occurred in our collective lived experience and it is a suffering that is interwoven into a system of dehumanization or oppression much like the untouchables Buddha encountered in ancient India.

There is suffering and we are still finding ways to end it and embracing the path of Dharma is one of those ways. And many have walked this path in the midst of great challenges as expressed by Marlene Jones, who teaches and practices insight meditation, said she was introduced to the wisdom of Dharma in 1970. At the time she was very involved in the church. The conflict was so overwhelming she gave up sitting meditation. Twenty years later, after not fitting in at church, not finding peace, she began

to sit again in the privacy of her home. At home she felt safe, safer than she had ever been in the church environment. As much as she loved Jesus, she didn't feel protected by Christianity. However, embracing the Buddhist path was difficult being that many of the Buddhist centers were predominantly white, except for the Sōka Gakkai a Nichiren Buddhist sect. Yet, Marlene stayed and went to become a prominent teacher in the Vipassana tradition.

Another experience of difficulty with embracing Buddhism came from Sala Steinbach, a long-term Soto Zen Buddhist practitioner, who remembers when she arrived to her first Zen Center no one spoke to her. She wondered if she were wanted. Yet, this painful experience did not stop her from practicing with the notion of belonging or not belonging in this world as an African American. Sala went on to become a teacher in Soto Zen Buddhism.

Another experience of remaining in Dharma practice despite its discomforts comes from Rev. Merle Kōdō Boyd, a Soto Zen Dharma teacher of the a sangha in Lincroft, New Jersey. She said, "It was natural that a book introduced me to Zen and became my first teacher. In the South of my childhood, Jim Crow laws defined my world. There were many places we were forbidden to go, but once I could read, I discovered that any place I found in a book was open to me. For a couple of years, I sat alone in my bedroom guided by books on Zen. I felt naked in this practice of zazen, and I was reluctant to expose myself to the racial realities I anticipated facing in a formal Zen Center. I knew of no black people practicing Zen. The thought of entering a zendo knowing nothing of the etiquette and ritual was frightening enough. Being the only black person there, I felt, would draw more attention than I could stand. But the pull of practice

was strong and finally, I ventured out.” Today, after more than 20 years of dharma practice within many sanghas of the White Plum lineage of Maezumi Roshi, largely in Roshi Glassman’s line, Rev. Kōdō, says that she has felt encouraged [in these sanghas] to manifest the whole experience of her life including those formative years from before the Montgomery Bus Boycott to the 1964 Civil Rights Act. For her, back then was a powerful time and place to be a teenager and that that time no doubt influences the way in which presently she practices and transmits the dharma.

What made these black women stay? What did they do with that inner battle, that tension between feelings of being African and being Buddha?

Shambhala teacher, Acharya Gaylon Ferguson’s wrote, “That stopping the inner battle is the basis for peace and non-aggression in our world. Only when we stop the battle within ourselves can we lay the groundwork for the truly compassionate activity of helping others to overcome suffering. This is the heart of the cessation of suffering: stopping the fight within ourselves.” This core teaching of Buddha addresses the groundwork as Ferguson says in dealing with what black people often feel, the anger and rage in the midst of oppression. So, working with this teaching as a meditation, as a living question for life, is to lessen the tension between the oppression based on the color of our skin and knowing a place untouched by suffering.

In her memoir, *Dreaming Me*, Jan Willis a Tibetan Buddhist scholar, explores the pain of being an African American in a white world and how she had struggled between her Baptist upbringing with her commitment to Buddhist practice. In the special summer 2003 issue of *Turning Wheel: The Journal of Socially Engaged Buddhism* devoted to “Black Dharma,” she says, “Within Buddhism, it is very foundational to choose the path

of peace and nonviolence. For some of us [African Americans], that has been and will be a tough choice. I had a choice [during racial unrest in many cities]: will it be [taking a lead position offered with] the Black Panthers or returning to Nepal to study in a Buddhist monastery? Willis chose studying in the monastery and I suspect she did this with the same heart of action and sense of justice she had in being a Black Panther.

In the same issue of *Turning Wheel*, Venerable Chöyin Rangdrol, a Vajrayana Tibetan Buddhist teacher, is asked why he decided to bring the Dharma to African Americans. He answered, “When I discovered that it was possible to avoid becoming ensnared in the mentality of the angry black man by applying Buddhism, I felt I had found a great treasure, not just for me but also for my people. I could immediately see the potential for resonance in millions of black people’s minds. I could see how this could reverberate down to the core of the hurt so many of us carry, and that one could emerge from Buddhist study and practice healed.”

Charles Johnson, a Buddhist practitioner and scholar said, “From almost any angle that we view black American life, historically or in the post-Civil right era, we find the...presence of suffering. He says black people know America is still, for the most part, a racially separate nation and we find here in this country so many negative images of ourselves perpetuated in popular culture. Fortunately, through mindfulness and other meditation practices African Americans will experience a long-deferred peace. In fact, we will be peace embodied. In his book *Turning the Wheel: Essay on Buddhism and Writing The Dharma* he goes on to say, “[Buddhism] is a call for us to live in a state of radical freedom.”

Buddha's teachings has always been a refuge, as it was intended to be: a place to continually refresh my spirit, stay centered and at peace.

In her book *Being Black*, Rev. Angel kyōdō Williams says, "It wouldn't be a stretch to say that as black people, more than most groups in this country, we live our daily lives with the distinct taste of fear in our mouths. We have lived with it and incorporated it into the fabric of our being, so much so that on the surface we may not even be aware of it anymore. But the fear is there and it permeates every aspect of our lives proving we are not afraid, insisting we are not so different. Or acknowledging that we are different and should be accepted that way. Sometimes, in an effort to attain equal footing, we forget what is most important for us to tend to: our hearts, our spirits, going home to family and friends.

"We need a way to rise up and peek out from under the smothering blankets and stigma of racism, classism, and out-of-control individualism. But we also need a way to put into perspective our fundamental sense of separation and confusion. Our rage, our love, our dreams and disappointments, the death of our loved ones, blissful joys as well as the cruel facts of life. It's not the way of white folks we need to grasp on, it's the way of life.

"The Zen principles (expressed in William's book) can provide a framework for creating the meaningful life we want to live, without dogma and restrictions."

Alice Walker, a pan-dharma practitioner said she did not come to the study and practice of Buddhism to become a Buddhist. In fact, she says she is not a Buddhist and that the Buddha was not himself a Buddhist. He was the thing itself: an enlightened

being. Just as Jesus Christ was not a Christian, but a Christ, an enlightened being. Her challenge was not to be a follower of something but to embody it.

I resonate with bell hooks, a pioneer in the Dharma movement, who speaks to our ultimate concern in life as black people, which is our healing. I believe my sister's concern when she asked about my interest in Zen priesthood was about her need to heal from having not been loved in this world because she is a dark-skinned loving woman. In hook's book, *Sisters of the Yam*, she says to black women, "When we heal the woundedness inside us, when we attend to the inner love-seeking, love-starved child, we make ourselves ready to enter more fully into community. We can experience the totality of life because we have become fully life-affirming. Like our ancestors using our powers to the fullest, we share the secrets of healing and come to know sustained joy."

So, the Buddha's message to me is about healing the woundedness inside so that I can enter more fully into community. To follow the ancient teachings of Buddha is to be life-affirming as we return, through the practice of breathing, to that place that has not internalized hatred towards dark skin. In practice we began to peel off that layer imposed upon us that has covered our original face. In the practice of Buddha's love we eventually become aware of our presence in all of its difficult and glorious moments.

I would say to my sister today. I am exploring Zen priesthood because there is nothing left to do but to give my life to healing. And I hope then that she can see me with clear eyes and know that I am not moving away from her but closer to that part of her that is me. And perhaps, she will sit still long enough one day, breathing in and out with her pain until she arises from the burning, whole. I hope that one day she will witness how I

practice with the tension between difference and oneness, that she will see it arise from within and greet her.

Practicing with Feeling African, Being Buddha

What is practicing with the tension between difference and oneness? Before I accepted that sitting meditation was a valid response to hatred and ignorance in the world, I thought it necessary to fix things, to analyze the situation, to carry the burden of making things better for black people. I became angry at the universe, angry at God, as if either one were a person out there somewhere controlling things. When I discovered that the anger that resided in my heart was the same as the hatred by which the Earth wept, the depth of suffering in the world became clear. I had closed my heart to people who were different than me, especially those who had white skin and straight hair. I was clear that the rage within would need tending to (with loving care) in my practice of Dharma. It was clear that my journey was perfect openness of the heart.

Any person who aspires towards love and peace makes great efforts at openness of the heart. Yet openness of the heart can be especially difficult if there is a sense that others' hearts are closed to you. As a young dark child I experienced the difficulty of racial prejudice and still today as I practice in Buddhist communities there is a tension of feeling African and being Buddha, or more specifically a tension between difference and oneness.

In the *Sandokai*, a teaching by Zen master Sekito Kisen, he poetically speaks to the difficult question of how the oneness of things and the multiplicity of things coexist. He eloquently wrote, “trunk and branches share the essence; revered and common, each has its speech.” The one trunk shares the essence of being a tree, yet the trunk has its oneness and relationship with multiple roots and the branches are multiple while having a

relationship with the one trunk. ‘Each has its own speech,’ speaks of its multiplicity in the oneness creating what is called harmony.

Yet, how do we practice oneness in the presence of harmful discrimination based on non-acceptance of differences centered on race, class, or sexual orientation?

In sitting meditation this question is not conscious but rather resides in the pit of my belly, with no words. It has lived there so long the rawness it has caused can be felt when I am sitting in silence. At first there is a tendency to hold my stomach in and suppress the pain. There is a tendency to say it is not there or I don’t feel anything. But when I breathe deeply, there it is. If I keep breathing the pain lessens. So, I have made a practice of breathing, sitting in a relaxed posture of alertness, feeling myself healing with just being aware, witnessing the mind with no words. And as the healing continued in each breath, after sitting hours, days, months, and years, I could actually feel (what was once only intellectualized) that oneness was not one thing but a union of *all* things within this life. And it was not a union that becomes one glob or melting away of difference, but rather a union in which still you can distinguish one from the other. In the *Jewel Mirror Samadhi*, Ch’an Master Dongshan Liangjie describes this experience when he wrote, “Filling a silver bowl with snow, hiding a heron in the moonlight – Taken as similar they’re not the same; when you mix them, you know where they are.” Nothing is lost.

So, with understanding we can see that the distinction in the union, the difference in the harmony, the African in the Buddha, is not distinction for the purpose of harmful discrimination or domination but rather an experience of how multiplicity is within oneness. Systemic oppression, the separations created between humans, is experienced

in this country as a result of not understanding that difference is within oneness.

Multiplicity is mistaken for each one, each thing as separate or that multiplicity is not within the realm of harmony. With the condition of separation one may think he or she can hate another without hating oneself. It is impossible to truly love while hating.

I have said that I love black people. But in sitting meditation I have come to see that it is not always love that I feel but rather some sort of favoritism or preference that I have with people that appear to be like me. I saw that if I truly loved it would not stop at the borders of my own preferences. When I speak of preferences and discrimination I am not dismissing our need in this country to end the suffering caused by one group dominating another, suppressing life in a group of people. I am not saying that merely with the realization of love through sitting meditation we can end a long history of oppression. If only life were one-dimensional.

In America's multicultural society and within communities of dharma practitioners, we must learn to walk the path of compassion and wisdom with personal honesty and unbound intimacy. We have to make companions of difference and oneness, seem them as harmony itself. We cannot take the teaching of harmony to serve our happiness because difference within community can be experienced as difficult and messy at times. Harmony is also difficult and messy. When one takes refuge in sangha we are dedicating ourselves to practicing Buddha's teachings of oneness *within* our inherent differences. We practice this for the rest of our lives.

When I practice with the tension of feeling African and being Buddha I am settling my breath on the oneness that is filled with all of what is. I practice compassion when the wounding arises from racism and other harmful human conditions. I say this is

not mine, it belongs to no one, and I recognize that the causes of racism, not the racists, have formed the tears on my face. So, I respond to the tears first which leads to awareness of the conditioning that has taken place over many generations. I breathe in and out. I do not cry for myself but for the suffering in the world. And that is being Buddha, feeling African.

In the end the teachings of Buddha go beyond Buddha, beyond the beauty of things as they appear. So, my practice surpasses anything and everything that I can imagine or speak of. It surpasses the darkness shaped of the lightness within each breath. There is no way to point to it and say there it is. Yet, just the same I find myself cuddling up to the sense of it just when the lion's roar is too loud.