

Racial Diversity in Buddhism in the U.S.

When we speak of Buddhism in the United States, we are speaking of a cultural movement that has brought to this continent ancient Indian, East and Southeast Asian, and Tibetan spiritual teachings and practices. For the first time in history, these teachings have arrived in a land that is racially heterogeneous. At the same time, they are taking root in a society that was founded, by a white majority, on the unwholesome seeds of colonialism, genocide and slavery. In this meeting, the values of community, interdependence, and collaboration come face-to-face with the values of the pursuit of individualism, self-interest and competition. Deep bow meets handshake.¹

With these words, Hilda Guitierrez Baldoquin, the editor of *Dharma, Color, and Culture: New Voices in Western Buddhism*, describes the historical and current diversity of Buddhism in America. One of the challenges facing American Buddhism is the need to fully recognize the experiences of Asian immigrants in the U.S., Asian Americans, European Americans, African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, as well as all other people of color who practice Buddhism. People from each of these backgrounds are helping shape the face of American Buddhism.

Buddhist centers across the country are starting to host people of color retreats and meditation groups. These efforts are led by Buddhist Teachers of color whose work to reduce the isolation people of color have felt in *sanghas* is starting to have an impact. Additionally, Buddhists of color have formed organizations to maintain their efforts. This report provides snapshots of the work American Buddhists are doing to nurture racially diverse *sanghas* (Buddhist communities)—it is not a comprehensive collection of these efforts.

Historical Snapshot

Diversity in the American Buddhist community is a part of the history of Buddhism in the U.S. and it continues to be a part of the changing face of American Buddhism. During the nineteenth century, Chinese and Japanese immigrants began to arrive on the West coast of the U.S. Drawn to California by the Gold Rush of the 1850s, one in every ten Californians was a Chinese immigrant by 1860.² As these immigrants put down roots in America, they also established their religious traditions. By the end of the nineteenth century, there were four hundred Chinese Buddhist temples in the Western U.S.³ At the same time, the arrival of Japanese immigrants to the Hawaiian Islands prompted the growth of Japanese Buddhism on the islands.

¹ Baldoquin, Hilda Gutierrez, ed. *Dharma, Color, and Culture: New Voices in Western Buddhism*. Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2004: 18.

² Fields, Rick. *How the Swans Came to the Lake*. Boston: Shambhala, 1992: 70.

³ The Pluralism Project. *World Religions in Boston: Buddhism*. Accessed 17 August 2006. <<http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~pluralism/98wrb/indexa.htm>>

Developing along almost parallel tracks, the transcendentalists of the East Coast, and particularly of Boston, were discovering the Eastern spirituality of China and Japan. Many Anglo-Americans made trips East and brought back art, Buddhist ideas and a growing intellectual interest in Buddhism during the Victorian era of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Soon, the Eastern influence was being felt so strongly that Harvard University established courses on Buddhism that were taught throughout the first half of the twentieth century and established a professorship of Buddhist studies in 1959. For further descriptions of this development in the Boston area, visit *World Religions in Boston: Buddhism* online.

The 1960s and 1970s saw a continuation of this parallel development. The Immigration Act of 1965 meant that immigrants from across South and Southeast Asia not only moved their families to the U.S., but also transplanted their Buddhist practices. More and more temples were established across the country, offering services in languages from Asia. At the same time, interest in Buddhism took off in the 1960s and 70s—this was broadly (though not exclusively) a movement within White America wherein the Beats, hippies and feminists incorporated Buddhism into a counter-cultural mindset. Over the course of the next three decades, these parallel streams of Buddhism have persisted.

In 1998, a Buddhist scholar, Jan Nattier, challenged this general picture of parallel Buddhisms. Her essay, in the collection *Faces of Buddhism*, attempts to pin down who is a Buddhist. Naming the two streams of Buddhism in America as “Buddhism of Asian Americans” and “Buddhism of European/White Americans,”⁴ she finds these categories unable to answer questions like: Where do Latinos and African Americans fit into this? Or a second generation woman from China who attends a *sangha* with a dominantly white population? How does the man from Trinidad teaching Tibetan Buddhism in Oakland fit into these two categories?

Attempting to create a fuller typology, Nattier suggests divisions that reflect the ways in which religions travel to new places: Import, Export and as Baggage. “Import” refers to Buddhism being sought out by Americans like Henry Olcott and Ralph Waldo Emerson during the nineteenth century or the Beats of the 1950s. Nattier puts centers like the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts in this category. “Export Buddhism” is when Buddhism is sold by Buddhist missionaries. The Nichiren Buddhists—Soka Gakkai International’s proselytizing and evangelization of the 1950s and 1960s is a prime example of this type of Buddhism. Thirdly, “Baggage Buddhism” is the Buddhist practices and traditions that immigrants bring with them. The establishment of places like the Thousand Buddha Temple in Quincy, Massachusetts is one such example. Nattier’s efforts exemplify the struggle to understand questions of racial diversity in American Buddhism.

⁴ Nattier, Jan. “Who is a Buddhist? Charting the Landscape of Buddhist America” in Prebish, Charles and Kenneth Tanaka, ed. *The Faces of Buddhism in America*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998; 183-195: 188.

Despite the difficulty in finding appropriate terms, the many factions of Buddhism in the U.S. combine to create the picture painted in the introduction to Buddhism in America in The Pluralism Project's *World Religions in Boston*:

On a Wednesday night at the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center, more than 100 people, mostly professionals in their thirties and forties, sit in utter stillness for an hour, straight-backed, eyes closed, on rows of green mats and cushions, facing a golden image of the Buddha. At the end of the hour, they will rise at the bell and walk quietly down the stairs to gather in the carpeted basement meditation room for a "*dharma* talk" on some aspect of the teachings of the Buddha. In Revere, in the modest second-floor apartment of a family of Buddhist immigrants from Cambodia, a young woman lights a stick of incense and places it reverently on the altar in the alcove of the living room, which has been set aside as a prayer room. On the altar are images of the Buddha and photos of parents and grandparents, now deceased. In a former church converted into the Korean Shim Gum Do Buddhist temple on Chestnut Hill Avenue in Brighton, a Korean-American teacher in a loose-fitting gray robe challenges his students with traditional Zen sword-practice. At Harvard University, over fifty members of the Harvard Buddhist Community gather in a large wood-paneled common room to observe the Enlightenment Day of the Buddha, chanting their prayers in Vietnamese, Pali, Chinese, Tibetan, Japanese, and English. All of this is representative in one way or another of the Buddhist tradition in Boston. Today there are more than twenty Buddhist temples and centers in the immediate Boston area. They represent the many streams of the Buddhist tradition, all of which now exist in the United States.⁵

Diversity within Buddhism is, of course, not limited to the complicated relationship between Anglo-Americans and Asian-Americans. Increasingly, Buddhism is gaining a foothold in African American, Latino and other communities of color in the U.S. Statistics in this area are difficult to ascertain as many Buddhists of color practice alone and at home rather than joining formal Buddhist communities. Nonetheless, an important addition to the above picture would describe the scene in the meditation hall at the Insight Meditation Society this summer, where over ninety people of color from African American, Asian American, Latino and other backgrounds gathered for an annual People of Color retreat in Barre, Massachusetts.

Raising Awareness: The Question of Diversity on the rise within American Buddhism

By the end of the 1990s, questions of how to encourage racial diversity were bubbling up in businesses, schools and religious communities across the United States. Buddhist *sanghas* and centers were not exempt from this American trend. Some of the earliest efforts to address racial diversity emerged in magazine and journal articles by and about Buddhists of color. In 1994, *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* devoted an issue to questions of racial diversity in *sanghas*. Many of the contributions brought to light the experiences of racism by American Buddhists of color. Helen Tworkov, then-editor of the magazine, introduced the edition by laying out the magnitude of the task at hand: "the challenge faced by Buddhists is to see how the Buddha's insights apply to multiculturalism—a daunting opportunity. Applying the Buddhist path of liberation to the suffering of racism tests the commitment both to a living breathing

⁵ The Pluralism Project. *World Religions in Boston: Buddhism*: Introduction.

Buddhism and to those timeless truths that have no borders.”⁶ Contributors to this ground-breaking issue included bell hooks, who succinctly explained the challenges and importance of creating integrated *sanghas*: “when people of color are reluctant to enter predominantly White Buddhist settings it is not out of fear of some overt racist exclusion, it is usually in response to more subtle manifestations of white supremacy.”⁷ Confirming hooks’ observation, many Buddhists of color describe feeling out of place or ignored in largely European American *sanghas*. Ralph Steele, an African American Buddhist, echoes a common sentiment when he recounts the often-felt isolation that came with many years throughout the 1970s as the only person of color in the room at weeklong retreats.⁸

Following this effort to jump-start the dialogue about subtle and explicit racism in *sanghas*, in 1997, Rev. Alan Senauke (the executive director of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship from 1989 until 2001) challenged all U.S. *sanghas* to “be pro-active rather than passive on questions of diversity and inclusion.”⁹ Senauke encouraged white Buddhists to “enter the realm of not knowing...[to] ask friends of color how they experience the practice and the community...to visit Asian Buddhist temples.”¹⁰

In 1999, *Tricycle* re-visited the topic, titling the issue: “Dharma in Black America.” In one of the contributions, Charles Johnson traces the history of African Americans’ relationship with Buddhism. As early as the 1920s, Black Americans were looking into Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism and Hinduism. Jean Toomer, one of the men who helped kick off New York City’s Harlem Renaissance in 1923, studied Tibetan Buddhism in an effort to learn how to transcend dualisms. Suggesting Buddhism’s influence on him, Toomer is known especially for saying: “I am of no particular race; I am of the human race.”¹¹ As Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder, and the predominantly white Beats were exploring Zen Buddhism in the 1950s, so, too, were African American musicians, poets and activists. After Martin Luther King, Jr.’s traveled to India in 1958, he began the Buddhist practices of meditation and fasting. Johnson suggests that King’s famous explanation that humans are in an “inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny”¹² hints at his appreciation for a Buddhist worldview.

Johnson also points to the effectiveness of Soka Gakkai International (SGI) in attracting African Americans to its ranks in the 1970s. (SGI is a sect of Nichiren Buddhism which is a form of Japanese

⁶ Tworikov, Helen. “What Color is Your Mind” in *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Fall, 1994: 1.

⁷ hooks, bell. “Waking Up to Racism.” *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Fall 1994: 44.

⁸ Steele, Ralph, “Freedom from Racism.” *Turning Wheel: The Journal of Socially Engaged Buddhism*. Summer, 2003; 26-30: 26.

⁹ Senauke, Alan. “On Race & Racism.” From a talk given at Berkeley Zen Center, Berkeley, California. 23 August 1997. Buddhist Peace Fellowship website. Accessed 27 July 2006.

<<http://www.bpf.org/tsanga/senaukerace.html>>

¹⁰ Senauke.

¹¹ Quoted in Johnson, Charles. “A Sangha by Another Name.” in *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Winter 1999; 43-47+: 45.

¹² Johnson, 47.

Buddhism that “emphasizes repeated recitation of the mantra *namu myoho renge kyo* which means: ‘salutation to the Lotus Sutra’ for health, happiness and enlightenment¹³). As of 1999, 50,000-150,000 Americans are SGI Buddhists and 25-30% of them are Black or Hispanic.¹⁴ Intrigued by this, Johnson asked his sister-in-law, a Nichiren Buddhist, about the appeal of SGI. In response, she pointed to the unsatisfactory nature of Black Christian churches with a White Jesus Christ. Additionally, she appreciates the SGI understanding of why suffering happens—it is not God’s will, but the responsibility of individual wills. Johnson’s sister is just one example of the reasons African Americans have been attracted to SGI. This sect of Buddhism has done, far and away, the best job at attracting a diverse population of participants. Because much research has been done about the racial and class diversity of SGI, little reference to SGI is in this report.¹⁵

Of course, racial diversity is never just a Black and White question. Paying tribute to this, *Turning Wheel: The Journal of Socially Engaged Buddhism’s* Spring, 2001 issue, entitled “Buddhism in Las Américas,” is a collection of thirteen essays by Latinos in a variety of Buddhist traditions. Guest editor Lourdes Argüelles notes the unique perspective of each contributor, but also pulls out several similarities. Many of them are “engaged in social action while struggling to heal scars left by the racism and classism endemic in both the society they and their families left behind and the one in which they now live...[Additionally], in describing their practices, some of the contributors go back to their own indigenous, *mestizo* [mixed Indian and Spanish racial heritage], and/or Latino Catholic origins and explore the ways in which their *dharma* practice has been influenced by these traditions.”¹⁶ Perhaps most exemplary of this last point is Teresa M.G. Navarro, a Buddhist born in Mexico, explaining that as she moved from Catholicism to Buddhism, “there were many years where my Buddhism and my Catholicism overlapped, and that was not a conflict for me.”¹⁷

Another reoccurring theme is the way in which their immigrant experience in the U.S. affects their Buddhism and the perspective this adds to their practice. In particular, Soto Zen priest and a woman of Afro-Cuban descent, Hilda Guitiérrez Baldoquín writes that “part of my journey in Buddhism has been connected with my journey as an immigrant. I have always felt like an ‘outsider.’ The experience of ‘looking in’ and being ‘kept out’ has been a great gift, for it has allowed me to learn how to move in and

¹³ Religion Facts website. Accessed 21 August 2006.
<<http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/sects/nichiren.htm>>

¹⁴ Johnson, 47.

¹⁵ For an introductory article on diversity in this community, see David W. Chappell’s article “Racial Diversity in the Soka Gakkai” in *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, edited by Christopher S. Queen. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001.

¹⁶ Argüelles, Lourdes. “Guest Editorial” *Turning Wheel: The Journal of Socially Engaged Buddhism*, Spring, 2001: 1+: 16.

¹⁷ Zubizarreta, Rosa. “El Latinismo y sus Bellos Colores: Voices of Latina and Latino Buddhists.” In *Turning Wheel: The Journal of Socially Engaged Buddhism*. Summer 2003; 18-25: 21.

out of multiple worlds.”¹⁸ This moving in and out of worlds continues to be a part of how Baldoquín teaches Buddhism.

In 2004, Baldoquín edited a collection of essays by people of color—*Dharma, Color, and Culture: New Voices in Western Buddhism*. This book has made an important splash in the American Buddhist community. One of the goals of the book is to remind readers—of color and white—that the Buddhist teachings cannot be limited by the skin color of practitioners or teachers. As a primer for diversity in American Buddhism, Baldoquín’s book is often paired with *Dreaming Me: from Baptist to Buddhist: One woman’s spiritual journey* by Jan Willis, an African American Tibetan Buddhist scholar-practitioner. Both shed light on the experiences of people of color in often-White Buddhist *sanghas*. Willis’ book is a memoir about her experiences growing up in the Jim Crow South and becoming both a Tibetan Buddhist and a scholar of Buddhism.

Continuing to encourage this type of dialogue, in 2003 *Turning Wheel* published a more general edition on people of color and Buddhism. Guest editor Lewis Woods introduces the issue by suggesting that “what’s practiced in these communities [White *sanghas*] is not Buddhism *per se*, but various forms of middle/upper-middle-class, European American, Baby Boomer versions of particular Asian Buddhist traditions. *All* Buddhism is culturally hyphenated Buddhism.”¹⁹ In order for American Buddhism to more accurately reflect Buddhist teaching, the community’s diversity work must increase sensitivity to all of these forms of Buddhism—crossing racial, class and ethnic boundaries.

Most recently, in an attempt to help Buddhist communities cross those boundaries, Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, an African American woman in Oakland, California, has started to address the question her sister asked: “What’s Buddhism got to do with Black people, anyway?”²⁰ Manuel’s response acknowledges that “there are many complex questions about taking on a practice [Buddhism] that has yet to become part of the everyday lives of Black people in this country.”²¹ In the summer of 2006, Manuel presented a paper entitled “What’s Buddhism have to do with Black Women?” at the Ninth Annual Sakyadhita International Conference of Buddhist Women, held in Malaysia. Her paper describes her own relationship with Buddhism and then profiles the voices of other African American women who practice: “Many pioneer African American practitioners and practitioners of African descent, have been practicing with great patience for fifteen to twenty, and some thirty years, yet the Black community has heard little from

¹⁸ Zubizarreta, 25.

¹⁹ Woods, Lewis. “From the Guest Editor.” *Turning Wheel: The Journal of Socially Engaged Buddhism*. Summer 2003; 1+ :1.

²⁰ Manuel, Zenju Earthlyn. “What’s Buddhism have to do with Black Women?” Paper presented at Ninth Annual Sakyadhita International Conference in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. June 2006. Emailed to Kate Dugan. 28 July 2006.

²¹ Manuel.

them.”²² She asked her interviewees simple questions: “What in your life brought you to the path of *dharma*? And, why have you stayed?” Manual’s paper concludes with these woman’s voices; here is an excerpt from one response:

How to live Black and female is a challenge. I am engaged and responded to in the world as a Black woman. I entered the path of *dharma* with that challenge. That challenge includes dealing with inequality, racism, sexism, and being rendered invisible. As a mother it also includes dealing with my daughter who is also Black and female. With that challenge I needed a path of freedom—a path older than God. I needed a place of no doors, no borders. ... Eventually, I saw a flyer for a retreat led by two African American *dharma* teachers that said, “Black people do you want to be free?” I answered by attending that retreat, formally beginning my commitment to practice.... Knowing that I can be free in the midst of inequality and invisibility... is reason enough to stay.²³

People of Color Retreats & Meditation Groups

As was true for the woman Zenju Earthlyn Manual interviewed, one of the ways American Buddhists are beginning to take steps to nurture more racially integrated *sanghas* is by offering retreats specifically for people of color—Asian Americans, African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans and any other person of color are explicitly invited to attend. Ramon Calhoun, a Buddhist of color, explained the value of these retreats when he describes the value of having other Buddhists of color at Buddhist centers: “My eyes light up when I see another Black person in the [meditation] group. I suppose this has to do with sharing a similar experience, having a different connection that does not exist with the other people.”²⁴

Spirit Rock Insight Meditation Center in Marin County, California, has been one of the frontrunners in these retreats and other forms of diversity work. Larry Yang, a member of Spirit Rock who leads retreats for people of color, notes that the Spirit Rock community had long sensed that there was an interest for some kind of retreat for people of color in Buddhist communities. In 2002, the community hosted the African American Retreat and Conference. Echoes of this conference continue to reverberate in journal articles and comments people make today. Despite this success, Spirit Rock had difficulties filling the first people of color retreats that they offered.²⁵ One reason may be that Spirit Rock is located in Marin County, an affluent and predominantly European American part of the Bay Area that is not accessible by train or bus. Mushim Ikeda-Nash, a diversity teacher at Spirit Rock, reported that “one Japanese American Buddhist I know said that he found Spirit Rock to be beautiful but somewhat ‘frightening’ because it was so white, therefore [it was] very uncomfortable for him. However, we have to start from somewhere, in my opinion, and no one group or location is going to be perfect.”²⁶

²² Manual.

²³ Manual.

²⁴ Calhoun, Ramon. “Inside a Triple Parentheses: Being a Black Buddhist in the U.S.” *Turning Wheel: The Journal of Socially Engaged Buddhism*. Summer, 2003; 39-42: 41.

²⁵ Yang, Larry. Community *Dharma* Leader, Spirit Rock Meditation Center. Personal email correspondence with Hilary Bogert. 2 May 2006.

²⁶ Ikeda-Nash, Mushim. Co-editor of *Making the Invisible Visible: Healing Racism in Our Buddhist Communities*. Personal correspondence with Hilary Bogert. April 26 2006.

In response to comments like those of Ikeda-Nash's friend, Yang notes that Spirit Rock has taken strides to make the people of color retreats more accessible. Efforts to do so include lower fees for those in difficult financial situations and finding ways to provide transportation out to the center. Still, the retreats were not filling up. In 2006, Spirit Rock went to private donors, asking them to fund fully the center's annual people of color retreat. The fundraising was successful and Yang says that the ability to offer the people of color retreat free of charge created an incredible response: "The [81] spaces of this year's 2006 retreat filled in five days...faster than most of the most popular retreats at Spirit Rock...One month in advance of the retreat (held June 3-8, 2006), there [were] seventy-seven people on the waiting list."²⁷ This type of response is evidence to many of the great interest in Buddhism by people of color. The challenge, Yang says, will be figuring out how to sustain this type of retreat structure.

The first people of color retreat in the Theravada Buddhist tradition offered on the East Coast was held in 2003 at the Garrison Institute in New York City. This retreat was co-sponsored by Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts and New York Insight in New York City. According to IMS Communications Director Gyano Gibson, the motivation for the first retreat and the four that have followed, "is to offer people of color a protected and quiet refuge in which to practice together."²⁸ Gibson reports that the response has been amazing. In 2003 and 2004, the retreat was held in New York and each retreat had approximately one hundred attendees. In 2005, the retreat moved to Barre, Massachusetts (a small town almost two hours east of Boston) and IMS and NYIMC were nervous about how many people would attend. To their surprise, the 2005 retreat hosted about 80 people (80% capacity) and 2006's retreat was full with a waiting list two weeks in advance.²⁹

Gina Sharpe, a co-founder of the NYIMC, is a regular teacher of people of color retreats in Barre and New York. Originally from Jamaica, Sharpe suggests that one of the challenges of people of color retreats is that people just do not understand it. The *sangha* doesn't get it, she said. Teachers don't get it. They think that if there is a retreat for people of color, it is segregation or somehow changes the *dharma*. Sharpe explains that people of color retreats are not about exclusion, this is about inclusion: "If you have a center where people feel unwelcome, you can say 'you're welcome, you're welcome' as much as you want; but just saying it doesn't make people feel safer. To have events specifically targeted to people of color is important."³⁰ Exemplifying this, a participant at a recent people of color retreat told Sharpe that she had heard good things about Insight Meditation retreats and had put attending one on her long list of things to do. When she saw that a people of color retreat offered, registering and making

²⁷ Yang.

²⁸ Gibson, Gyano. Communications Director, Insight Meditation Society. Personal email correspondence with Kate Dugan. 24 July 2006.

²⁹ Gibson.

³⁰ Sharpe, Gina. Co-Founder, New York Insight Meditation Center. Personal telephone interview with Kate Dugan. 3 August 2006.

the time for the retreat went to the top of her list. Sharpe notes that, “many people [of color] have been meditating at home by themselves for years without going to retreats [because the retreats are often isolating for people of color]. When they see the people of color option, they are able to feel comfortable attending.”³¹ Larry Yang, echoes these sentiments, noting that these groups are not only places for people of color to practice together, but also “to create safe spaces for communities who have experienced oppression or injury so that they can feel safe enough to have their spiritual path unfold within the *dharma*.”³²

Alicia Carroll of Dorchester, Massachusetts, understands the need for people of color retreats and meditation groups. Returning from a trip to China which piqued her interest in Buddhism, she remembers the first time she went to a meditation group at Boston Old Path Sangha. She told Vanessa Jones of the *Boston Globe*, “I was nervous going in there. Showing up and looking in—Wow, I’m the only person of color.” In response, Carroll and another woman in Dorchester have started hosting a “People of Color Meditation Sitting Group” in one of the woman’s homes. The *Boston Globe* reports that an average of ten people attend the weekly sittings on Friday evenings.³³

The *sangha* Carroll first attended is in the Zen Buddhist tradition of Master Thich Nhat Hahn and the Order of Interbeing. The Boston Old Path Sangha has been hosting diversity programs for four years. In April of 2006, they held a retreat/training entitled “Race, Privilege, and Oppression.” Soto Zen Priest and Teacher Hilda Guitierrez Baldoquin flew in from California to teach the retreat/training with Zen Buddhist Cooper Thompson.³⁴ Participants spent four days in a retreat/training which was “customized through the *dharma* to deepen our ability to skillfully address issues of race, privilege and oppression—incorporating sitting, walking and working meditation practice.”³⁵ The event’s aim was to give participants concrete strategies for recognizing their own prejudices, identifying institutional racism and oppression and to change “dysfunctional intra-racial and inter-racial behavior.”³⁶

Also in the Boston area, the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center recently held their first “Friday Evening Practice for People of Color,” an event that has become a regularly-scheduled monthly practice group. The evening includes a half-hour of sitting and a half-hour discussion.

³¹ Sharpe.

³² Yang.

³³ Jones, Vanessa. “The Way of Oneness” *Boston Globe* online. 19 April 2006. Accessed April 2006. <http://www.boston.com/news/globe/living/articles/2006/04/19/the_way_of_oneness?mode=PF%2020>

³⁴ Jones.

³⁵ Boston Old Path Sangha website. Accessed 9 August 2006. <<http://www.bostonoldpath.org/practice/events.html>>

³⁶ Boston Old Path Sangha website.

The success of these efforts is starting to be seen as more people of color feel welcome to attend a variety of Buddhist center activities—Sharpe has seen some increase in the number of people of color at other events planned at New York Insight. She and Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield recently offered a retreat where eleven of the ninety participants were people of color. In the past, they have only had one or two. Sharpe also co-taught a retreat at Spirit Rock that was advertised explicitly as inclusive and 25% of the participants were people of color.³⁷

A reoccurring question posed in response to retreats and meditation groups explicitly for people of color is: When will we stop needing these separate activities? Sharpe answers, “Well, racism isn’t going to end in our lifetime. So, why would the retreats stop? When do we stop doing women’s retreats? Or retreats for young people? None of these should ever stop.”³⁸ Rather, she notes, people of color retreats ought to continue to become an important part of the life of American Buddhist centers.

People of Color Teachers

An important element in the success of people of color retreats and meditation groups is that the teachers also be people of color. Rachel Bagby, one of the teachers of the people of color retreats held this summer in Barre, Massachusetts, told *Insight Newsletter* that “the liberating practices rooted in the Buddha’s teachings only become accessible for some people of color when offered through the experience of teachers with similar backgrounds, life stories and skin tones....Teachers of color...can be living, breathing proof that practicing these teachings helps us deal skillfully with the personal and collective suffering of ‘ism’ schisms.”³⁹ The ability for teachers of color to connect with the participants at a people of color retreat is key. Illustrating this, Gina Sharpe tells a story of a White teacher who gave a *dharma* talk that included a reference to “our” ancestors coming to the U.S. on the Mayflower: “That story was offensive as it did not take into account the deep pain of the experience of ancestors being forced into slavery. It just does not translate to people of color’s experience.”⁴⁰ Shifting the way the *dharma* is taught, without changing the essence of the *dharma*, to be more culturally appropriate and inclusive is one of the many tools teachers of color are using to create more inviting Buddhist centers. Their *dharma talks* explicitly include cultural references that many people of color can relate to and they incorporate quotes by people of color that tend to be lacking at the other retreats. These sorts of things start to counter-act the isolation many people of color feel at other retreats.

³⁷ Sharpe.

³⁸ Sharpe.

³⁹ “People of Color Retreat.” *Insight Newsletter*. Summer 2005. Accessed 27 July 2006.
<http://www.dharma.org/ims/news/archive/poc_news.htm>

⁴⁰ Sharpe.

The perspective each teacher offers is shaped by and affected by their own experiences and particular Buddhist lineage. A few snapshots of the way teachers of color view their role as teachers and as Buddhists of color follow here.

Eighty-year old José Luis Reissig has been teaching the *dharma* for over thirty years. Originally from Argentina, Reissig encountered Buddhism while on sabbatical in Bangalore. Since then, he has been involved in the Vipassana tradition in various ways, including as a teacher in New York. In particular, Reissig enjoys the opportunity to teach in Spanish: “I like—I love to teach in Spanish,” Reissig said. “Teaching in Spanish connects with a part of myself that vibrates differently. It connects with a deeper history of myself.”⁴¹ Because of this, Reissig has offered retreats in Spanish at NYIMC. Twenty people attended the first retreat and ten attended a second retreat. Despite this slow start, Reissig is hopeful that, at some point, these will take off. He notes that the *sangha* must take root and then grow in the U.S.: “Just one [people of color] retreat is not the answer. The retreat must be a platform for expansion.”

On the other side of the country, Viveka Chen is a second-generation Chinese American who is an ordained teacher in the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO is an international Buddhist network of public centers, communities, ethical businesses, and social projects⁴²). She teaches meditation at the San Francisco Buddhist Center and co-facilitates that center’s weekly People of Color Meditation Group.⁴³ Right after college, Chen encountered FWBO and liked what she found—the teachings resonated with her. Yet, she was disappointed by the lack of people of color at the center and in her new *sangha*. In an essay she wrote for a collection of essays by young Buddhists, *The Buddha’s Apprentices: More Voices of Young Buddhists*, she explains that “the lack of diversity in *sanghas* creates a real and sometimes insurmountable barrier for those trying to get established on the Buddhist path.”⁴⁴ The role of people of color retreats is clear for Chen: “Sometimes people of color want to leave behind ‘otherness’ and *just be*. That’s one reason people of color settings can feel so nourishing. I benefit greatly from the sense of relaxation, shared struggle, and mutual encouragement.”⁴⁵ As a teacher and the chairwoman of the San Francisco Buddhist Center, Chen is committed to making meditation and the *dharma* accessible to people of color.

Also in California, Angel Kyodo Williams is a young African American woman and an ordained Zen priest. She taught people of color retreats at Spirit Rock Meditation Center and then decided to commit more fully to the needs of people of color. She and three other Buddhists of color formed the New Dharma

⁴¹ Reissig, Jose Luis. Buddhist Teacher. Personal Telephone Interview with Kate Dugan. 24 July 2006.

⁴² San Francisco Buddhist Center website. Accessed 15 August 2006.
<<http://www.sfbuddhistcenter.org/POCmeditation.htm>>

⁴³ San Francisco Buddhist Center website.

⁴⁴ Chen, Viveka. “The Dharma of Identity.” in Sumi Loundon, ed. *The Buddha’s Apprentices: More Voices of Young Buddhists*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2006; 49-53: 52.

⁴⁵ Chen, 52.

Meditation Center for Urban Peace in Oakland, California in 2003. In addition to its commitment to being attentive to the spiritual and daily needs of people of color, the center is a training center for engaging individual, community and social transformation as spiritual practice. There, she serves as a teacher and spiritual director.

In an interview with Jenny Kinscy at *BeliefNet* Williams recounts being at the San Francisco Zen Center and knowing that the teachings she found there were what she wanted her life to be about. Yet, like Chen, she was disappointed by the white-ness of the *sangha* and annoyed that the *dharma* was not more accessible to people of color. At the first Buddhist retreat she attended, she was the only Black person and two Asian women were the only other people of color.⁴⁶ In response, she says, "I am actively promoting the idea that we need to open the doors widely to people of color in this country in order for there to be such a thing as American Buddhism."⁴⁷ Williams suggests that this can be the mark of American Buddhism—*sanghas* in this country have the "capacity to formulate a practice of *dharma* that transcends boundaries of race, class, gender and sexuality...[N]ever has Buddhism been practiced in such a widely diverse culture. We have the rare opportunity to actualize a *Buddhadharma* that truly incorporates diversity and recognizes our basic equality."⁴⁸

Williams made a splash in both Buddhist and African American communities when she published *Being Black: Zen and the Art of Living with Fearlessness and Grace* in 2000. *Library Journal* called her: "the most vocal and most intriguing African-American Buddhist in America."⁴⁹ This book has given voice to the relationship between African Americans and Buddhism. Williams suggests that "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."⁵⁰ Zen teachings, she goes on to say, offer real direction for how to address that fear. Williams hopes that her book encourages the Buddhist community to embrace "an opportunity to do what they have failed at doing for the last 30 years—that is, reach out to people of color and make them welcome in practice settings."⁵¹

Nearby the New Dharma Center, Lama (the title for a Tibetan Buddhist teacher) Choyin Rangdröl founded the Rainbow Dharma in 2004 as a "place where people who feel that they are different can come

⁴⁶ Williams, *Being Black: Zen and the Art of Living with Fearlessness and Grace*. New York: Penguin Putnam, 2000: 30.

⁴⁷ Kinscy, Jenny. "A Revolutionary Practice." Accessed 15 August 2006.
<http://www.beliefnet.com/story/85/story_8572_1.html>

⁴⁸ Williams, 178.

⁴⁹ New Dharma website. Accessed 18 August 2006.

<<http://www.newdharma.com/users.php?mode=profile&uid=4>>

⁵⁰ Williams, 6.

⁵¹ Kinscy.

and have a sense of what it means to be free in your mind.”⁵² Rangdröl, a Buddhist teacher ordained in the Tibetan tradition and an African American with roots in Trinidad, is the author of *Buddhist Meditations for African Americans* and of *Black Buddha: Living without Fear*. For several years, Rangdröl taught at Spirit Rock and at the Zen center in the Bay area. His teachings aim to reduce the sense of separation that people of color and all people feel from one another. He hopes his center helps people feel less isolated from themselves and one another.

In a 2003 interview between Rangdröl and Buddhist practitioner Rebecca Walker, Walker asked Rangdröl how the *dharma* might need to change in order to better meet the needs of African Americans. Rangdröl was quick to note that people, not the *dharma*, need to change—to recognize how and when we are creating inclusion and exclusion, take note of who is in charge at the Buddhist centers and what the statues look like and “there needs to be an admission of the fact that African Americans have not always been welcomed into the inner sanctum of Buddhist activity. There must be a heartfelt analysis of how past intentional and unintentional exclusion is reverberating in the identity of American Buddhism.”⁵³ Rangdröl’s Rainbow Dharma was created to be a tool of intentional inclusion in American Buddhism.

This sort of institutional recognition of racism within American Buddhism is slowly coming to the surface. For example, in June 2003, the board at San Francisco Zen Center (SFZC) approved a seven part Vision and Strategic Plan, with diversity as one of the seven parts: “We commit ourselves to cultivating a practice in diversity and multiculturalism by incorporating into Zen Center’s training the dissolving of all barriers that perpetuate the suffering of separation, prejudice, and discrimination.”⁵⁴ In an attempt to realize this vision, SFZC has started holding *zazen* (meditation) sessions in Spanish.

People of Color Organizations

In addition to the retreats and meditation groups for people of color, the last decade has seen the creation of Buddhist people of color organizations. After the success of the 2002 African American Retreat and Conference at Spirit Rock, organizers formed the Interracial Buddhist Council. The founder, Lewis Woods, defines the group as a “predominantly African American meditative Buddhist community, where Black folks can go to study and practice the dharma without having to deal with racism and Eurocentric assumptions, attitudes and behaviors.”⁵⁵

⁵² Ellis John W., IV. “Centered in the Dharma: An Interview with Choyin Rangdröl.” *Turning Wheel*, Fall 2005.

⁵³ Walker, Rebecca. “Black Buddha: Bringing the Tradition Home: An Interview with Choyin Rangdröl.” *Turning Wheel*. Summer 2003; 23

⁵⁴ “Vision and Strategic Plan.” *San Francisco Zen Center* website. Accessed 12 May 2006. <<http://www.sfzc.org/Pages/Vision/plan6.htm>>

⁵⁵ Nattier, 197.

Another way that Buddhists of color are connecting to share experiences is via the internet—using a Yahoo! Group. The group formed September 11, 1999 and as of August, 2006, had 417 members. The group is intended as a forum for Black Buddhists of any tradition, as well as Christians, Muslims and others, to discuss Buddhist teachings. Additionally, “this group will also provide an opportunity for African American practitioners of Buddhism, who oftentimes feel themselves isolated and scattered throughout the country, to come together and chat with like minded brothers and sisters.”⁵⁶ In July, 2006, there were sixty-six messages between members. According to the monthly logs of messages, this is one of the highest number of messages in one month—rivaling October, 2000’s sixty-seven.

One organization formed to meet the need of Spanish-speaking Buddhists and teachers is in a stage of reorganizing. In 2000, Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield approached José Luis Reissig with the idea for a regular gathering of Spanish-speaking *dharma* teachers. Reissig jumped on board because he loves to teach meditation in Spanish and he was interested in working with other Vipassana teachers who share that love.⁵⁷ A group of ten Vipassana teachers organized themselves into CEMVE: *Círculo para la Ensenanza de Meditación Vipassana en Español* (an Association to Promote the Teaching of Vipassana in Spanish-speaking Communities). One article in *Turning Wheel’s* Spring 2001 edition recruited all interested Spanish-speaking teachers to CEMVE.⁵⁸ The group met several times over the course of the next three years and coordinated two retreats in Spanish in New York. Today, the group functions as a loose network of Spanish-speaking teachers. Efforts like CEMVE will continue to nurture the diversity with American Buddhist communities.

People of Color Practicing Buddhism

Baldoquín concludes the introduction to her collection of essays by explaining how she views the connection between Buddhism and the experiences of people of color in the U.S.:

When people from groups who have historically found themselves socially, economically, and politically outside the margins, hear that the Buddha taught liberation, nothing more needs to be said. There is no need to proselytize or seduce. All our lives we thirst for freedom, and when we recognize the path that will lead us there, our hearts validate that recognition. To wake up is the task at hand. Not wishing that our lives are better, nor different, we wake up to the reality of our lives, just as they are.⁵⁹

While the leaders of people of color retreats and groups have an increasingly visible role in Buddhist *sanghas*, there are also more and more “everyday” people participating in these communities. Attempting

⁵⁶ Black Buddhists: Yahoo! Group description. Accessed 17 August 2006.

<<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/blackbuddhists>>

⁵⁷ Reissig.

⁵⁸ Reissig, José. “CEMVE: *Círculo para la Ensenanza de Meditación Vipassana en Español*: An Association to Promote the Teaching of Vipassana in Spanish-Speaking Communities.” *Turning Wheel*, Spring 2001: 28.

⁵⁹ Baldoquín, 18.

to describe this experience writ large is impossible. Below is an attempt to lay out just a handful of the multitude of experiences of people of color practicing American Buddhism.

Donna Lovong was born in Thailand to parents who practiced Buddhism regularly. She grew up in the U.S. and regularly attended Thai and Lao Buddhist temples, celebrated the Chinese New Year and offered required respect to monks. In an essay she contributed to *The Buddha's Apprentices*, she recounts her family's reaction to her interest in Zen Buddhism: her mom looked puzzled and asked, "Are you joining a cult?"⁶⁰ While she was initially surprised by this reaction from her Buddhist mother, Lovong notes that, in Asian Buddhism, meditation is generally reserved for ordained monks. One of American Buddhism's unique marks is that meditation is a practice done by laypeople. Her mom's worry represents, for Lovong, "the big cultural gap between my mom's Asian past and my American upbringing, and between her ethnic Buddhism and my Western Buddhism."⁶¹ Lovong encountered mindfulness, engaged Buddhism and other types of Buddhism in college. She started attending a local Zen *sangha* with mostly non-Asians. Here, she began "rediscovering the Buddha, *Dharma*, and *Sangha* in a new light, not through [her] ethnic Buddhist temple, but through Western culture and American Buddhist teachers."⁶² In her rediscovery, she has also influenced the way her family practices Buddhism; they no longer call her Zen practice a cult. In fact, Lovong's mom has asked for help in learning how to meditate herself.⁶³

Contrasting Lovong's relatively new rediscovery, Lewis Woods is a long-time Buddhist practitioner who has been a vocal proponent of *sanghas* taking steps to promote racial diversity. In 2000, Spirit Rock published a handbook on race and diversity in Buddhist communities: *Making the Invisible Visible: Healing Racism in Our Buddhist Communities*. Woods' contribution to this handbook offers a historical look at the growth of Buddhism in American, pointing out the segregation between religious communities. In particular, he notes the tradition of Black churches' sermons on "political races, police brutality or public issues—issues that affect not just members of the church but members of the larger Black community."⁶⁴ In Woods' experience, this concern is not a part of many Buddhist *sanghas*. Woods worries that:

[F]or Black folks, joining a predominantly White convert Buddhist *sangha* entails a migration of sorts—a cultural border crossing into a land that is unsupportive of Black individuals and communities...My hope...is that we will not view increasing diversity as a simple matter of assimilating African Americans and other people of color into existing centers as they are. Rather, I hope that we will seek ways to make the *Dharma* available to African American communities in an appropriate cultural and social idiom.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Lovong, Donna. "Are You Joining a Cult?" in Loundon, Sumi. *The Buddha's Apprentices: More Voices of Young Buddhists*: 108-114: 108.

⁶¹ Lovong, 108.

⁶² Lovong, 111.

⁶³ Lovong, 114.

⁶⁴ Woods, Lewis in *Making the Invisible Visible: Healing Racism in Our Buddhist Communities*. Spirit Rock Insight Meditation Center website. Accessed 17 August 2006.

<<http://www.spiritrock.org/display.asp?pageid=318&catid=2&scatid=31>>

⁶⁵ Woods.

Born in Mexico and raised in the U.S., Teresa M.G. Navarro took refuge in the Tibetan lineage of Buddhism. For many years, though, she practiced on her own, not sure she wanted to call herself Buddhist because she was not sure Buddhism in the U.S. fairly reflected her own identity. Over time, though, it was her Buddhism that has helped Navarro come to terms with the many aspects of her identity. In an interview with Latina Buddhist Rosa Zubizarreta, she describes the experience of being a Latino as a “blessed predicament” requiring an integration of a “complex history into our sense of identity. I’ve had to look at myself through the eyes of both the colonizer and the colonized.”⁶⁶ Her encounter with Buddhism has helped Navarro knit together these different perspectives: “Eastern philosophy, meditation and Buddhist exploration of the ultimate nature of reality have helped me to integrate seemingly irreconcilable universes.”⁶⁷

Continuing Challenges to People of Color

Amid the good work of people of color retreats, teachers, organizations and diversity trainings, challenges remain. In an essay in *Tricycle* magazine, Buddhist practitioner Michelle Clinton explained why she does not attend a local *sangha* regularly nor attends Buddhist retreats: “why I have no *sangha* has everything to do with my race, my style of communication and my social needs. In the depth of vulnerability that sitting evokes in me, I am embarrassed and sad that I find it difficult to trust middle-class White people...I can like them, enjoy their company, learn from them and teach them, but very rarely can I manifest the relaxation necessary for spiritual growth in their presence.”⁶⁸ This makes the need for people of color retreats all the more pressing.

The challenges for Buddhists of color have been complicated by the response by some White Buddhists to people of color retreats and meditation groups. Buddhist teacher Gina Sharpe notes that the formation of groups for people of color has led to feelings of exclusion among White members of certain communities. White people wonder what is going on at these retreats and meditation groups, raising concerns about their exclusion. Sharpe tells the story one participant told her at a people of color retreat of a White teacher who asked her: Why do people of color want to come [to Buddhist retreats]? Don’t they have their own churches?⁶⁹ Sharpe suggests that the root of this is that White people do not see that they need education and need to change—they tend to wonder why people of color cannot just get over it. Mushim Ikeda-Nash at Spirit Rock has also heard some resistance from White people in her diversity work and at the trainings she offers. But, as White people become more accustomed to the

⁶⁶ Zubizarreta, 22.

⁶⁷ Zubizarreta, 22.

⁶⁸ Clinton, Michelle T. “Breathing Through History: A Dark Reflection on Zen” in *Turning Wheel: The Journal of Socially Engaged Buddhism*. Summer, 2003; 34-36: 34.

⁶⁹ Sharpe.

people of color retreats and more and more understand what they are about and why they are important, they tend to become less defensive.⁷⁰

Larry Yang suggests that people of color retreats offer White people the chance to do their own diversity work—and this is increasingly on the minds of White Buddhists.⁷¹ The introduction to Spirit Rock’s handbook, *Making the Invisible Visible: Healing Racism in Our Buddhist Communities*, is several pages of Buddhists from a wide array of backgrounds writing their thoughts, questions, and comments on racial diversity in American Buddhism. One White Buddhist practitioner, Sheridan Adams, writes that she grew up believing herself to be very anti-racist, but she eventually “began to understand that as a White person living in this country, no matter WHAT my spiritual and political values are, I have a very different experience than many people of color have.”⁷² She, like Yang, believes that White Buddhists are called to do their own kind of racial diversity work—they are being asked “to listen and be open to voices of color...[We must] begin with this sense of not knowing, yet wanting—deeply wanting—to understand why so many Buddhists of color feel alienated from most western *sanghas*.”⁷³

It is this kind of mindfulness and attention that has the potential to reshape some of the hurts and mistrust within American Buddhist *sanghas*.

Conclusion

In the almost one hundred and fifty year history of Buddhism in the U.S., racial diversity has been an ever-present concern. The parallel development of Asian language-speaking temples and the dominantly White *sanghas* has left its mark on American Buddhism. Efforts to decrease its impact are underway as African Americans and Latinos and Asian Americans negotiate spaces within American Buddhism through people of color retreats, teachers and organizations. White people within Buddhist centers are working to understand racism in their own lives and communities. Combined, these efforts are attempting to reshape American Buddhism into racially diverse and integrated communities.

Further Resources

There are many resources available for Buddhist *sanghas* interested in diversity work in their communities. A few are gathered here:

- *Making the Invisible Visible: Healing Racism in Our Sanghas* available at:
<http://www.spiritrock.org/display.asp?pageid=318&catid=2&scatid=31>. Spirit Rocks’ website (www.spiritrock.org) also contains information about the People of Color Retreats and other diversity work being done in the community.

⁷⁰ Ikeda-Nash, Mushim. Personal email correspondence with Hilary Bogert. 26 April 2006.

⁷¹ Yang, Larry. Personal email correspondence with Hilary Bogert. 2 May 2006.

⁷² *Making the Invisible Visible: Healing Racism in Our Buddhist Communities*.

⁷³ *Making the Invisible Visible: Healing Racism in Our Buddhist Communities*.

- *Dharma, Color, and Culture*, edited by Hilda Gutiérrez-Baldoquín. A compilation of essays by Buddhists of color about their experiences in American Buddhism.
- *Dreaming Me: From Baptist to Buddhist, One Woman's Spiritual Journey* by Jan Willis. A memoir of an African American woman growing up in the Deep South and her journey to becoming a Baptist-Buddhist professor teaching religion at Wesleyan.
- *Being Black: Zen and the Art of Living with Fearlessness and Grace* by Angel Kyodo Williams. Draws connections the teachings of the Buddha and Buddhist practices to the Black experience.
- *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* and *Turning Wheel: The Journal of Socially Engaged Buddhism*. Both magazines have published editions about racial diversity in American Buddhism.
- Choyin Rangdröl, a Black teacher in the Tibetan Buddhist lineage, maintains the website: www.rainbowdharma.org. This site contains many useful resources pertaining to Buddhism and racial diversity and includes an online dialogue forum.