TURNING WHEEL

The Journal of Socially Engaged Buddhism

BLACK DHARMA

Alice Walker, Charles Johnson, Jan Willis

and other voices of African American practitioners

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From the Guest Editor

What would Buddhism in the U.S. look like had it developed with the needs of African Americans in full view? How has racism affected the development of Buddhism in the so-called West? How have dynamics we would now recognize as racial influenced Buddhism at different times in its history? How will Buddhism begin to change when it truly interacts with African American culture? I hope we're finally ready to take on these questions, and I'm happy that *Turning Wheel* is playing a significant role in making this happen.

A number of commentators have brought attention to the impact that feminism is having on Buddhism in the modern world. Others are doing the same with democracy, grassroots political engagement, and environmental awareness. The impact on Buddhism of capitalism, classism, and racism is slowly beginning to receive attention as well. How Buddhists will respond to these forces is an urgent question if Buddhism is to develop as a truly liberating force in today's society. It's also a challenging one, given Buddhism's high-caste origins and its long history of institutional complicity with class-based, oppressive hierarchies (as distinguished from empowering hierarchies, which are essential to any path of transformation).

One thing that gets in the way is the difficulty many of us have in seeing the dependently arisen, i.e., historically and socially contingent, nature of Buddhism. As has been well documented, contemporary convert Buddhism in the U.S. has developed in response to the needs of a very specific subset of the U.S. population, into whose language specific forms of Asian Buddhism were translated at a particular time in history. What's practiced in these communities 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.

I got my first glimpse of what a Buddhism translated into the vernacular of Black folks might sound like at the African American Retreat and Conference held at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in August of 2002. The full roster of Black Buddhist leaders and the crowded Dharma hall were a resounding challenge to the all-too-common skepticism concerning African American interest in Buddhism. A highlight for me was simply sitting on a bench before the retreat began and watching one Black person after another arrive. The mere sight of so many Black people at a Dharma event brought waves of hope mixed with grief as I let the possibility that things might be changing begin to settle in and mourned the fact that it has taken so long and will take so much longer.

This issue of *TW* represents a continuation of the work that many have been doing for years (see *TW,* Spring '93, Fall '00, and Spring '01; *Tricycle,* Fall '94; and resources listed on page 42 of this issue). Building on those foundations and the momentum of the August retreat, we here further the conversation about Buddhism, African Americans, and racism by assembling a collection—albeit imperfectly diverse—of voices and images, all of which point in their own ways towards forms of Buddhism that take seriously the needs and the gifts of Black folks.

A writer friend of mine points out that, for a people whose voices still do not command the attention and respect they deserve, the therapeutic value of silence may not be as great as it is for others. May this issue, therefore, serve also to encourage African Americans—and others by example—to continue the effort to find our voices within a tradition that seemingly places so much emphasis on silence. ❖ *—Lewis Woods*

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TURNING WHEEL
The Journal of Socially Engaged Buddhism

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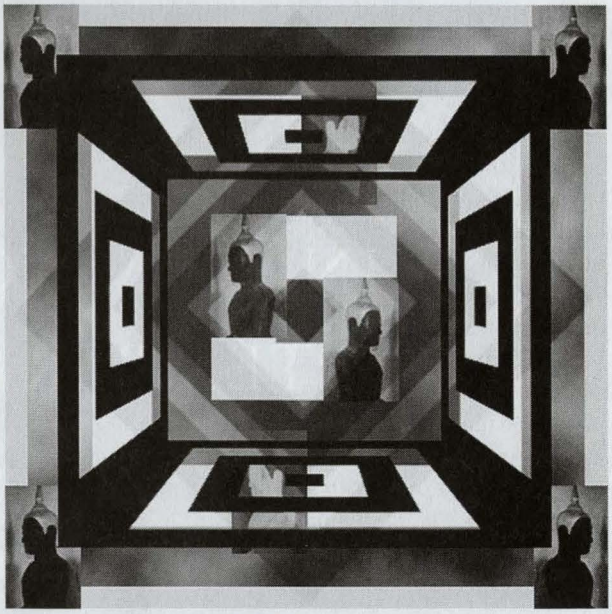

Image at right: *Buddha's Corners,* photo collage by April Chartrand. Chartrand is a fiberalchemist, artist, poet, and community activist in Oakland, California.

Cover art: *Black Tara* by artist and environmental activist Mayumi Oda, courtesy Sala Steinbach. Mayumi Oda lives on a farm in Hawai'i.

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Letters

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Does Activism Work?

A question in the spirit of "Don't Waste Time" (by Hilda Ryumon Gutiérrez Baldoquín) and "What You Can Do for Peace in Iraq" in the Spring 2003 issue of *Turning Wheel:* How can we be most skillful in our Buddha-aimed social action work? Does protesting work, or do we just *feel* that it works and think logically that it does?

Recent research, presented by Daniel Goleman in his book *Destructive Emotions,* shows strong objective evidence for the efficacy of meditation. I wish we had research to show how effective our activist means are. How might we best act to counter things like the oppression of Iraq? How might we best be skillful, peaceful warriors?

I have not heard many well-known, influential Buddhist teachers outspokenly advocating public protest and other forms of activism in regard to Iraq. Am I guessing correctly that their—and Buddha's—emphasis is on advocating cultivation of one's Buddhanature, which traditionally tends to involve a relatively inward focus?

I'm seeking right action. But when your leaders aren't present and there is no solid evidence for what constitutes the most helpful kinds of action, it's difficult to know if what I feel is "monkey-mind" confusion or efficacious doubt.

—Charles Horowitz, Oakland, California

BPF member Chris Wilson responds:

Beginning with the Buddha himself, who is said to have stopped a war by sitting down between the opposing armies, Buddhists throughout history have protested war. In our times, we have the examples of Thich Nhat Hanh, nominated by Martin Luther King Jr. for the Nobel Peace Prize for his peace work in Vietnam; Robert Aitken Roshi, a BPF founder; vipassana teachers Jack Kornfield and Sylvia Boorstein; and Zen teachers Blanche Hartman, Paul Haller, Mel Weitsman, Alan Senauke, and Taigen Dan Leighton, who have led meditation vigils, been arrested for nonviolent civil disobedience, and addressed thousands at large rallies to protest the war in Iraq.

For us, all wars are as senseless and self-destructive as someone mutilating their own face; Buddhism reminds us that war is the same kind of self-mutilation. It is quite natural to try to stop others from harming themselves, and it is also natural that Buddhist activism is done in a distinctly Buddhist way. At recent antiwar rallies in the Bay Area, hundreds of Buddhists meditated quietly in a central area, offering an important counterpoint to the often angry rhetoric of the speakers, and many non-Buddhists joined us. Trained BPF nonviolence monitors intervened to help defuse shouting matches between protestors and counterdemonstrators.

Ongoing public meditation vigils have a powerful effect—onlookers are inspired by the meditators' quiet dignity, and meditators report that dedicating their practice to victims of war helps them transform their anger into a more compassionate state of mind, so that they can make more appropriate and balanced responses during the continuing crisis. In terms of what good such protest might accomplish, it offers a model of being peace in a time of war, an alternative to the cycle of anger and recrimination.

None of this makes protesting a *duty* for all Buddhists. For some, activism will seem natural; for others, it will not. We must read our own hearts on this matter.

Changing Our Minds

I was encouraged by Hilda Baldoquín's article, "Don't Waste Time," and grateful to be reminded that I increase my own suffering when I hold on to my identity as a victim of oppression. Her article renewed my desire to practice meditation and deep spiritual inquiry. But I wonder if she goes too far. She says, "We can see that our mind's ignorance creates the conditions that perpetuate oppression. And from within this awareness we can then see and experience our ability to move from woundedness to wholeness with each breath. We can be free right now!"

How does this fit with socially engaged Buddhist practice? If I just let go of my mind's ignorance and realize I'm free right now, who is going to struggle to change the systems of structural violence in our society that oppress people of color and that deliberately keep poor people poor?

—Janella Jones, Susanville, California

Hilda Ryumon Gutiérrez Baldoquín responds:

Being able to see deeply into our mind's conditioning is great power. It's the power to see, as Suzuki Roshi used to say, "things-as-they-are," the reality of the moment. This power transcends the limitedness of the human experience. She who is free does not need to struggle, for she will endlessly know the appropriate response.

In my experience, this fits with socially engaged Buddhist practice, for if my activism is generated from this place, my actions will spring forth with clarity, flexibility, joy, compassion, and unbounded vision. To truly see through my mind's ignorance is to touch the mind of not knowing—Buddha-mind—where there is complete connection and intimacy with all beings. Without this awareness anchoring my activism, I run the risk of my actions being fueled by unhealed wounds, dualistic thinking, antagonism, isolation, powerlessness, hopelessness, and scarcity of possibilities.

As human beings we have a moral imperative to dismantle our society's systems of structural violence. However, this will not happen through struggle, as we have been conditioned to believe. Dismantling systems of oppression, from what I have learned in the past 25 years, can only happen through vibrant, vigorous, holistic, and focused ongoing processes. This will require from each of us a radical shift in our worldview, and a realignment of everything we hold to be "true."

I am completely delighted—and humbled—that you felt encouraged by my words. In your questions I sense a commitment to practice. Thank you for keeping me in check!

Indra's Net

In the image of the "jeweled net of Indra," found in the Avatamsaka Sutra, *the universe is represented as an infinite network of jewels, each of which reflects all the others. We are always struck in putting this section together by the way all our lives touch each other, as symbolized by Indra's Net.*

Baghdad Encounters

On April 10, as U.S. troops were rolling into Baghdad, BPF member Ted Sexauer, who went to Iraq in February with the Iraq Peace Team (IPT), wrote:

Complex emotions coincide—relief at news that all 13 IPT members still in Baghdad are safe and well; deep distress at not knowing how Iraqi friends and neighborhood acquaintances have fared; great sadness for the beautiful city of Baghdad and its citizens; and apprehension that the worst may be yet to come.

That same day, Kathy Kelly wrote from Baghdad's Al Fanar Hotel, where most IPT members were staying:

Early this morning, Umm Zainab sat quietly in the lobby staring at the parade of tanks, APCs, and Humvees that slowly rolled into position along Abu Nuwas Street. Tears streamed down her face. "I am very sad," she told me. "Never I thought this would happen to my country. Now, I think, my sadness will never go away."

To give Umm Zainab some quiet time, I took her two toddlers, Zainab and Miladh, outside to enjoy the sunshine and fresh air. Several soldiers stood guard nearby. I wanted to bring the children over to them, to let the soldiers behold these tiny beauties. But, no, too much of a risk.

We're staying put. Quite literally. Eun Ha Yoo, our Korean Peace Team friend, unrolled a huge artwork created by a Korean artist, and sweetly laid it out in the intersection just outside the Al Fanar. A map of the world covers the top third; grieving victims of war fill the middle third; piles of ugly weapons with various flags scattered over them bulge out of the bottom third.

Neville Watson and Cathy Breen take turns sitting in the middle of it—Neville with his prayer stool and a small wooden cross; Cathy wearing her "War Is Not The Answer" T-shirt.

At least a dozen soldiers have stopped to talk with us since we began the vigil this afternoon. "OK, can you tell us your side of the story?" asked one young man. "Can I sit there with you for a while?" asked another. Each has assured us that he didn't want to kill anyone. One young man—who said he'd joined the Marines to gain some respect in this world and also help support his wife and child while he completed college studies—told us he was relieved that he was stationed at the rear where his role was to guard prisoners. He didn't shoot anyone.

One soldier offered earnest concern for us: "You're sitting in a dangerous place." We smiled. "Thanks," I said, "But we've been in a dangerous place for the past three weeks." He was puzzled. "What they mean," said a soldier standing next to him, "is that they've been here all through three weeks of bombing."

"Do you try to put yourselves in our shoes?" asked one soldier after he'd respectfully listened to me explain major contradictions between U.S. rhetoric and practice regarding Iraq. "Well, yes," I said, "We try. We're taking the same risk as you by being here, and perhaps an even greater risk since we're unarmed and unprotected. Actually, just now we're lucky not to be burdened by all that heavy gear."

"Yeah," said the soldier, "It's really hot. I don't have much of an appetite. I just give away most of my rations, give 'em to these people."

Hassan, one of the shoeshine boys, joined us, carrying a ration packet. He opened it, came across processed apple spread and a few other curious items, then decided to donate it to us. Now the flies have discovered it.

I'm sick of war—disgusted to the point of nausea.

Burma: Boycotts and Hopes

Forty major U.S. clothing retailers have stopped selling products made in Burma in the three years since March 2000, when the Free Burma Coalition launched a consumer boycott and public education campaign aimed at denying money and legitimacy to Burma's dictatorship. Overall, apparel imports have dropped one-third from a high of $411 million in 2001.

Burma's apparel exports had quintupled between 1997 and 2001, bringing enormous revenue to the junta through an unparalleled 10 percent tax. Facing economic losses in the late 1990s, when boycotts forced Pepsico, Texaco, and Amoco to close operations in Burma and President Clinton banned new investments, the generals promoted garment exports.

The Free Burma Coalition, founded in 1995 by a Burmese student at the University of Wisconsin, is now a worldwide network of Burmese exiles and students, activists, concerned shareholders, and others. Through skillful use of the Internet, they have built powerful campaigns urging consumer boycotts and divestment by cities and universities.

They found inspiration in Aung San Suu Kyi's repeated urging of multinational corporations to stop doing business with Burma. Profits from such ventures "merely go toward enriching a small, already privileged elite," she said, and support an army that forcibly recruits children, wages war against ethnic minorities, uses rape as a war tactic, and presses millions into forced labor.

UNOCAL, one U.S. company that stayed in Burma, is being sued in a U.S. court by Burmese villagers who charge the company shares responsibility for the enslavement, relocation, rape, and murder committed by Burma's military while guarding its pipeline. A federal court recently ruled that UNOCAL conspired with the military and can be sued.

Suu Kyi was unconditionally released from house arrest in May 2002 but her attempts to hold substantive talks with the junta have failed so far. The generals seem to be playing for time, freeing about 200 political prisoners but keeping

1,200 behind bars and making new political arrests.

Suu Kyi recently said, "The important thing is to concentrate on what we can do, not to concentrate on hopes.... [I]f we do everything that we ought to do, everything that we can do, we will realize our hopes in time."

☞ The *freeburmacoalition.org* Web site describes actions you can take to help.

Hello, Peace!

An automated telephone system that allows any Palestinian or Israeli to call someone on the other side free of charge is the most recent project of the Bereaved Families Forum, a group of parents of Palestinian and Israeli victims.

Callers who dial *6364 from any phone in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, or Israel can leave a message saying whether they are Israeli or Palestinian and want to talk to a man or woman. Or they can listen to hundreds of such messages and choose someone to talk to, anonymously if they wish.

The service, called "Hello Peace!," advertises in Arab and Hebrew, but most users learn about it through word-of-mouth. Over 110,000 calls were made in its first six months of operation—calls that reveal people hurting but hungry for dialogue, often laboring through conversations in fractured Hebrew or Arabic.

Palestinian Sammy Waed has befriended an Israeli soldier: "Arik told me how much he hated his army service, because he was in the middle of a civilian population, policing children and causing harm to innocent people.... Before, I thought Israelis didn't care at all when innocent Palestinians suffer and are killed."

Israeli soldiers who called out of curiosity were surprised to find themselves talking with a human being, not a terrorist, and say this has changed the way they act toward Palestinians. Some Israelis have begun sending money to Palestinians with no means of livelihood. Palestinians call after they learn of a suicide bombing to make sure an Israeli friend is okay.

The forum's founder, Yitzhak Frankenthal, whose son was kidnapped and killed by extremist Islamic Hamas, described to a reporter a call to a Palestinian: "Nabil told me he had lost his sister, and I told him about my son. Then he said: 'Here we are talking. I don't want revenge, and I don't feel hatred.'"

☞ Help Hello Peace! at *www.hellopeace.net* or 323/651-5938.

☞ Support Palestinian farmers by purchasing their olive oil. If you are interested in buying it on an ongoing basis, contact 510/465-2799 or <bashir.anastas@sbcglobal.net>.

A Marine's Courage

Marine Lance Corporal Stephen Funk is 20 years old. I am struck by how young he looks standing amid some 50 supporters gathered for a press conference, where he declares that his conscience forbids him to kill. Slim and smooth-featured, he explains how basic training sergeants urge recruits to bayonet cutouts of bin Laden shouting "Kill

the ragheads!" and "They hate Americans!" I picture U.S. soldiers in Iraq, some younger than Stephen, bewildered and frightened, and a car loaded with women and children approaching....

We are waiting with several TV crews outside the U.S. Marine Reserve Unit barracks in Fremont, California. Brown-robed Franciscan Father Louis Vitale, with an arm around Stephen's shoulders, offers comfort. But Stephen says he feels very calm.

His mother and sister are here—his mother came from New York. Aimee Allison, the African American woman who will introduce Stephen, explains she enlisted at 17 because she wanted to become a doctor and needed financial support. But her doubts grew and she became a conscientious objector before the first Gulf War.

People take turns at the microphone defending the sincerity of Stephen's convictions. Then Stephen himself explains that an aggressive recruiter in February 2002 convinced him that the Marines would teach him leadership and teamwork. He did not think about having to kill. During boot camp, he found he could not yell "Kill, kill!" He became convinced that war is immoral; it creates wounds that never heal; it steals, from soldiers—their free will and sometimes their lives—and from the community—immense resources needed for people's well-being. So he did not report for active duty last February.

One reporter prods sarcastically: "How could you not know Marines can be called upon to kill? How do you feel about being safe here while your comrades risk their lives?" Stephen replies, "I may not be a hero, but I know it takes courage to disobey."

Then Stephen walks away with friends, changes into his uniform, and reappears to surrender to the military authorities. He stands between his mother and sister, each holding a hand. Three Marines open the gate as Father Vitale blesses Stephen. One, a spokesman, addresses the crowd, then Stephen, his mother, and sister follow them into the base. One Marine has grabbed Stephen's duffel bag and carries it in a gesture that reveals respect, even concern.

Aimee is breathlessly crying, "He will not go to jail; they were touched by his sincerity and commitment." Stephen must report for desk duty for a month before the long, difficult evaluation of his conscientious objector application begins.

After 15 minutes, Stephen's mother and sister return. Tearful, his Filipino mother defiantly tells reporters that she admires her son for being able to change his mind—it is better than persevering on the wrong path; President Bush must have misgivings too, but he would rather go on waging war. —*A.H.* ❖

☞ If you are in the military and have second thoughts about participating in war, call the GI hotline at 800/394-9544.

Indra's Net is researched and written by Annette Herskovits.

Allies for a Livable Future

by Stephanie Kaza

In South Central Los Angeles, African American families mobilize to block a proposed waste incinerator in their neighborhood. In Colorado, Hispanic farming communities are fighting to retain access to irrigation water. In West Dallas, Texas, neighbors have demanded cleanup of a toxic lead smelter plant. All of these are responses to environmental racism—the disproportionate and often deliberate toxic impacts on communities of color. Through community and regional networking, the movement known as "environmental justice" has brought together health, labor, economic, and environmental concerns around the United States. The strength of the movement lies in its powerful and highly motivated grassroots organizing, often affiliated with mainline Christian churches. Is Buddhism a part of this conversation? Not too much.

In a volume of essays on Buddhist-Christian dialogue, Buddhist scholar Masao Abe points out some fundamental philosophical differences that may explain why. While Christian and Buddhist expressions of love and compassion are similar, their affiliated principles of justice and wisdom are quite distinct. As Abe explains, the Buddhist concept of wisdom does not depend on judgment or election (as in the concept of the "chosen people") but rather affirms the suchness of everything. In contrast, the concept of justice creates strong dualities between just and unjust, righteous and unrighteous (good and evil). The carrying out of justice often leads to punishment, revenge, or even war, while wisdom engages reconciliation and peacemaking.

How might the Buddhist view be a handicap in perceiving environmental injustice? First, there is the comfortable fallacy that "everything/everyone is already enlightened, so what's the problem?" This skims over the actual distinctions of situation and experience that propagate environmental injustice. Second, in an effort to practice nonduality, one can overlook the oppressive dualisms built into the structures of society—rich vs. poor, white vs. people of color, protected nature vs. toxic dumping ground. Third, it is not so clear in Buddhism that material action (as in "doing the will of the Lord") is necessary for enlightenment; maybe meditation is enough.

Given these and other possible blind spots, a Buddhist role in environmental justice is not so obvious. One effective role may be as allies to those already engaged in fighting racist environmental policies. In this role, Buddhists can provide resources, publicity, community support, and connections to potential collaborators. However, do-gooders of any faith can have their efforts backfire if they unintentionally perpetuate the same patterns of oppression that created the problems in the first place. Thus it becomes crucial that Western Buddhists, especially white Buddhists, actively confront their own racism, ignorance, and unexamined white privilege. No small task.

A new movement within environmental justice may offer inspiring motivation. Working with poverty, pollution, and racism in a wide range of environmental contexts, the natural assets movement aims to provide hope and practical solutions by building natural assets. (See *The New Environmental Activists,* edited by Miriam Bolle and James Boyce, 2003.) These economists expand the traditional wealth and property-based definition of assets to include human capital (skills, health, education), social capital (building community strength), and natural capital (from local ecosystems). Their strategies focus on investing to add value to existing assets, redistributing natural capital from rich to poor through land reform, and claiming rights to clean air and water.

The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative in Boston, for example, has used legal power of eminent domain to reclaim vacant lots and transform them into community assets such as gardens, parks, and housing. In Alaska, native Americans and their allies are fighting the spread of military toxins and pesticides that have contaminated drinking wells to reclaim their natural assets. Buddhists concerned about disproportionate impacts of environmental pollution will find no shortage of community groups in need of allies. Here folks at work on the frontlines are trying to save their health, families, and neighborhoods while still investing in a livable future. ❖

Stephanie Kaza is an associate professor of environmental studies at the University of Vermont.

Duct Tape and Dharma: Homeland Security and Family Practice

by Mushim Ikeda-Nash

The newspaper tells me to stock up on duct tape and plastic sheeting. The U.S. government wants Americans to stay inside our cars or inside sealed rooms in our homes in case of a terrorist attack with poison gas. And what about children in schools? The government is working on a series of school safety recommendations, soon to be available on the Internet.

Parents, myself included, have enough to worry about these days—and now this. Just as I began to feel sorry for myself, however, I found a transcript of an interview that two students conducted with my mother some years ago. They were interested in her experience as a Nisei (second-generation Japanese American) growing up on Oahu during World War II. My mom remembered having to carry a gas mask to school every day, going through drills where she had to put the mask on and run through tear gas. She complained, mildly, that the mask was heavy for a young child to carry.

OK, I said to myself. If it comes to kissing my 14-year-old son goodbye on a school morning and handing him his lunch and his gas mask, I can do that. Like all of the other privileges I often take for granted, living with a basic sense of physical safety isn't a guaranteed right. My Buddhist practice tells me this; my experience as an adult with knowledge of the situations in other countries in the world confirms it.

But I'm not immune to fear. Living in the Bay Area, I've been through the 1989 earthquake and the Berkeley-Oakland Hills fire a few years later, a dual trauma that Northern Californians dubbed "Shake and Bake" so that we could laugh to help heal our terror. As a parent, I fear that kids could bring guns to my son's school and start shooting, as happened at Columbine High School in Colorado. I fear racism, and I cry when I imagine Victor Chin's mother hearing that her son had been beaten to death simply because he had an Asian face.

My Zen Buddhist training was helpful when it came to showing me my fears and my ways of handling fear. I trembled and sweated my way through many a teacher-student interview, perched nervously on my cushion in freezing meditation halls while people carrying large sticks stalked around behind my back, and discovered that, like every other intense emotion, fear is simply a mental and physical state of being that manifests, triggered by an event or a thought. It exists for some duration, long or short, then dissolves or transforms. Just sitting with raw fear was difficult but not impossible. And I gradually noticed what was most important: that when I didn't feed the sensations and obsessive worries that arose, they too went away after hours or days, instead of cascading and overwhelming me.

My son has often reflected back to me how well I'm doing in my everyday practice. If I seem nervous and scattered, he makes tea for me and gives me a hug. When I can handle a stressful situation with equanimity and good humor, he too makes cheerful comments that see beyond the immediate annoyance to the larger picture of the situation at hand.

And if all else fails and he is overcome with fear and grief, he responds wholly, without self-consciousness. My husband Chris and I left Josh in the waiting room of an intensive care unit some years back, when we were taken into the ICU by our friend Hideko, whose teenage son Mark was in a coma following a car accident. When Chris and I emerged from visiting Mark, Josh had crawled under some chairs and was curled in a fetal position, patiently waiting for us to return. He was profoundly affected and sad, but not panicked.

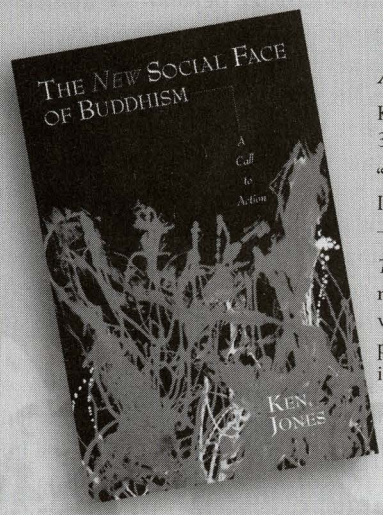
Like all parents, I know that our child is watching us to see how we respond to what's going on in the world, in our family, and in our individual work. He's soaking up our real feelings and reactions and areas of denial and aversion, even if we don't express them verbally, because these things are transmitted, body-mind to body-mind, within families. If we remain calm and in touch with our emotions, he does too.

We do live in a world of fearful things. I want to acknowledge that up front. I also know that love, awareness, perspective, and courage are what create true homeland security. I don't want my son to think that duct tape and plastic sheeting will save us should the unthinkable happen. The Buddha was clear on this point:

> Your worst enemy cannot harm you
> As much as your own thoughts, unguarded.
>
> But once mastered,
> No one can help you as much,
> Not even your father or your mother.
> (*The Dhammapada*, trans. Byrom)

In other words, if something terrifying happens to me, then I'll be terrified, and I'll deal with things to the best of my ability. Until then, I have this sandwich to pack for my son's lunch, this laundry to wash, this letter to write to my senators, this prayer to offer for those who suffer, this moment of deep gratitude for things daily, warm, and evanescent. ❖

ACTION AND WISDOM GO HAND IN HAND.



The New Social Face of Buddhism

A Call to Action

Ken Jones ~ Foreword by Kenneth Kraft
320 pages, ISBN 0-86171-365-6, $16.95

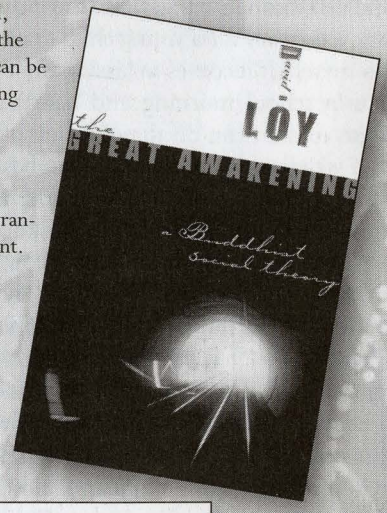
"Ken Jones has given us an inspiring, challenging handbook for Buddhist social activism. In such practice lies hope for the world."
—Sam Hamill, founder of Poets Against the War

The New Social Face of Buddhism presents the philosophy, history, and future of socially relevant Buddhism. At a time when clear social action is needed more than ever, this is vital reading for activists, scholars and everyone seeking to transform their spiritual practice into a force for social, political, and global change. Jones' groundbreaking work is a wellspring of inspiration that should not be missed.

The Great Awakening

A Buddhist Social Theory

David R. Loy
240 pages, ISBN 0-86171-366-4, $16.95



Scholar and Zen teacher David R. Loy examines how the three poisons of greed, ill-will, and delusion are embodied in society's institutions, and therefore lie at the root of all social maladies as well. Loy boldly proposes that Buddhist teachings can be applied to institutions—and even whole cultures—for the alleviation of suffering on the collective level.

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Ashvaghosha Denounces the Caste System

by Diane Patenaude Ames

In the time of Ashvaghosha (first century C.E.), Buddhist monks and Brahmin priests vied for the religious allegiance of the Indian people. Brahmanism taught, among other things, that the gods had divided humankind into four basic castes. Brahmins, supposedly distinguished by their natural spiritual gifts and light skin, were at the summit of the resulting social hierarchy. Relegated to the bottom were the wretched *sudras*—dark-skinned outcasts who were considered virtually a separate and inferior race, and who were sometimes required to use a clapper to announce themselves, like European lepers, lest their caste superiors be polluted by their presence. In theory the caste and subcaste you were born into irrevocably determined your life's path—whether you became a priest, a prince, a potter, or a scavenger.

The Buddha had denounced this system. He accepted into his sangha many monks and nuns of the despised sudra caste, some of whom, such as Upali the Vinaya expert, became famous. Buddhist texts stated explicitly that those who are "bound by racial prejudices" or "bound by caste prejudices" had strayed "far from the way of salvation."

One of the few things we know about Ashvaghosha is that he was born near the summit of the caste hierarchy. His writings reveal an excellent Brahmanic education, indicating that he must have come from an elite Brahmin family. The fact that he wrote in classical Sanskrit—and, indeed, was one of the first poets and dramatists to do so—also speaks of a privileged background, and tradition holds that he was spiritual advisor to King Kanishka, who had conquered much of northern India. Yet despite his high-caste Brahmanic roots—and perhaps in part because Kanishka was a Buddhist—Ashvaghosha converted to Mahayana Buddhism. He is now best remembered as the author of the *Buddhacharita,* a beautiful—and clearly Mahayana in flavor—epic poem about the Buddha's life.

Ashvaghosha also wrote one of the most scathing attacks on the caste system to be penned in ancient India. In his *Vajrasuchi,* he argues, echoing the Buddha's words, that "all men are formed alike, and are clearly of one race.... Do they differ in intellectual faculties, in their actions or the objects of those actions; in the manner of their birth or in their subjection to fear and hope? Not a whit." Ashvaghosha thus concluded that "all men are of one caste." These were daring words then, and they still resound today in India, where thousands of members of the outcast Dalit class have converted to Buddhism to escape the Hindu caste system. ❖

Quotes from G. P. Malalasekera and K. N. Jayatilleke, *Buddhism and the Race Question* (The Wheel Publication No. 200/201, Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1974). Other resources: Sarla Khosla, *Asvaghosa and His Times* (New Delhi: Intellectual Publishing House, 1986); A. L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India* (New York: Grove Press, 1959).

This Was Not an Area of Large Plantations

Suffering Too Insignificant for the Majority to Notice

by Alice Walker

This was not an area of large plantations, since the land is hilly with some bottoms of rich soil. Whites usually had small or medium-sized farms with slaves, but one pervasive thread of "southern life" ran through Leake County history. White masters raped black slave women who bore their children, as Winson Hudson tells in her own grandmother's story. The treatment of these children varied, and sometimes they were accepted or acknowledged as relatives of white families.

And other perversity was always looming. Percy Sanders, a descendent of an early black family in the area, recalled hearing as a child about George Slaughter, a white farmer's son by a black woman, who came to a horrible death because "he didn't keep his place." Ambushed by white men, including his own father, he was shot while riding his horse because the saddle horse was "too fine." The story goes that when he was found "the horse was drinking his blood."

—Constance Curry, from the introduction to *Mississippi Harmony: Memoirs of a Freedom Fighter,* by Winson Hudson and Constance Curry

When I went to live in Mississippi in the 1960s and to work in the Civil Rights movement, whose aim was to emancipate and empower African Americans who were still, thousands of them, treated as badly as and sometimes worse than slaves, I met Winson Hudson. She was trying to write the story of her life. I helped her until I left Mississippi to live in New England. We sat under a tree and I wrote what she dictated. Today her story has become a published book.

I begin my talk with this harrowing quote simply to ground us all in the reality of being African Americans, African Indians, African Amerindians. We are that mixture of peoples, brought together very often and for centuries in the most intense racial confusion, hatred, and violence. This horrible story, which has haunted me since I read it, is typical of the kind of psychic assault we endure, while it is exactly the kind of assault today's white majority takes no notice of, just as it took no notice two and three and 100 years ago. This story, so chilling—The horse was drinking his blood? His own father was one of the assassins? His crime was that his horse was "too fine"? —unfortunately is one in a storehouse of such stories those of us present might hear or expect to hear, on any given day of our lives. What do we do with the shock? What do we do with the anger? The rage? What do we do with the pain?

When I read this story last month I was sitting in a federal courthouse, preparing to do jury duty. I felt ill immediately. But not as ill as I would feel an hour later upon entering the courtroom, when I was confronted with the fact that three young men of color, one Asian, two Latino, were to be tried for the murder of a policeman whom they allegedly killed when he interrupted their burglary of a steakhouse. One glance at the accused trio revealed the faces of malnourished children barely out of their teens. The choice before the jury would be life imprisonment without parole or the death penalty. The judge, white and middle class, well fed and well educated, seemed prepared to impose either choice.

Here were the contemporary brothers of George Slaughter.

❁ ❁ ❁

My first version of this talk began with a poem by Basho:

Sitting quietly
Doing nothing
Spring comes
And the grass
Grows
By itself.

I was thinking of how I found my way from the backwoods of Georgia as a young woman into the company of the finest poets. It was a route of unbelievable, serious magic. As a child my family had no money to buy books, though all of us loved to read. Because I was injured as a child and blinded in one eye, the state gave me a stipend which meant I could buy all the books I wanted. When I went North to college, my first stop after settling in my room was the bookstore, where I entered a state of ecstasy seeing before me all the books of poetry I was literally dying to read. It was there in the Sarah Lawrence College bookstore that I encountered Basho and Buson and Issa, Japanese Buddhist haiku poets who had lived centuries before. And also a book called *Zen Telegrams* by Paul Reps. We connected on the profound level of Nature. That is to say, in these poets I discovered a kindred sensibility that respected Nature itself as profound, magical, creative,

and intelligent. There was no hint, as in other poetry, that simply because he was able to write about Nature, man was somehow, therefore, superior to it.

So this is the way I was going to start. But then I thought: It is more honest to start with the hard stuff. The stuff that makes addicts and slaves of Africans 150 years after the Emancipation Proclamation. For I knew while sitting in that courtroom, having read the story of George Slaughter and acknowledging the young men before me as today's version of him, that the pain I was feeling is the same pain that sends our people reeling into streets and alleys looking for a "fix" to fix all that is wrong with this gruesome picture. It is the pain that undermines our every attempt to relieve ourselves of external and internalized white domination. The pain that murders our every wish to be free. It is a pain that seems unrelenting. A pain that seems to have no stopping and no end. A pain that is ultimately, insidiously, turning a generous, life-loving people into a people who no longer feel empathy for the world. We need only listen to African American comedians to see that our traditional compassion for Life has turned into the most egregious cynicism.

We are being consumed by our suffering.

We are a people who have always loved life and loved the earth. We have *noticed* Earth. How responsive and alive it is. We have *appreciated* it. We have been a nation of creators and farmers who adored the earth even when we were not permitted to own any part of it larger than our graves. And then only until a highway needed to be built or a condominium constructed on top of them.

I remember distinctly the joy I witnessed on the faces of my parents and grandparents as they savored the sweet odor of spring soil or the fresh liveliness of wind.

This compassionate, generous, life-affirming nature of ours, that can be heard in so much of our music, is our Buddhanature. It is how we innately are. It is too precious to lose, even to disappointment and grief.

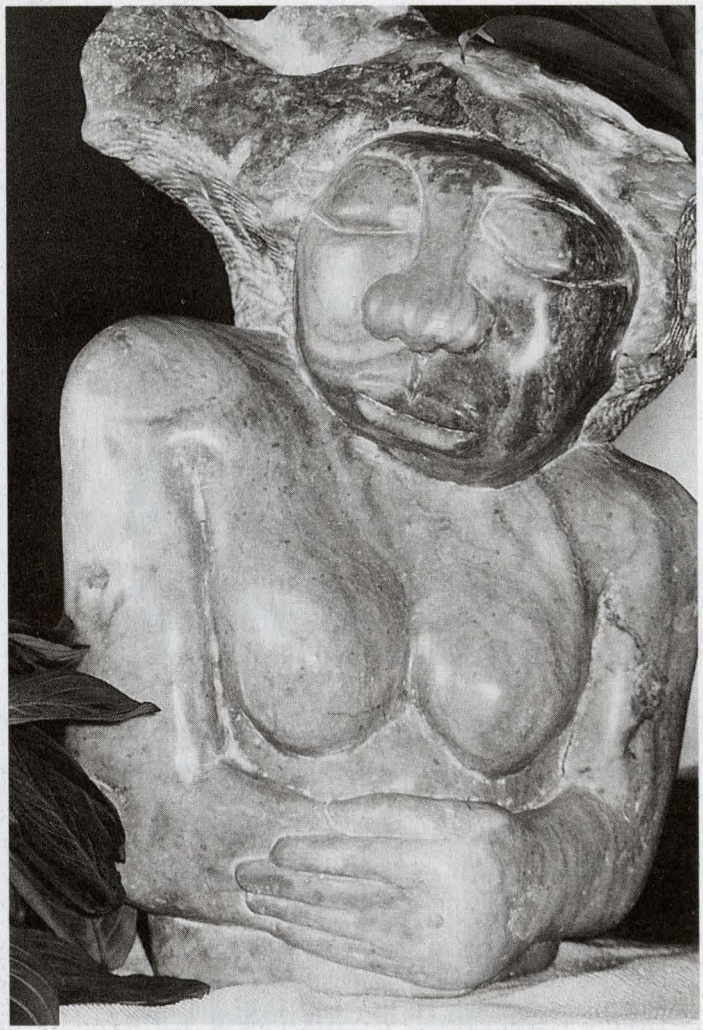
Looking about at the wreck and ruin of America, which all our forced, unpaid labor over five centuries was unable to avert, we cannot help wanting our people who have suffered so grievously and held the faith so long to at last experience lives of freedom, lives of joy. And so those of us chosen by Life to blaze different trails than the ones forced on our ancestors have explored the known universe in search of that which brings the most peace, self-acceptance, and liberation. We have found much to inspire us in Nature. In the sheer persistence and wonder of Creation Itself. Much in Indigenous wisdom. Much in the popular struggles for liberation around the world, notably in Cuba, where the people demonstrate a generosity of spirit and an understanding and love of humankind that, given their isolation and oppression by our country, is almost incomprehensible. We have been strengthened by the inevitable rise of the Feminine, brought forward so brilliantly by women's insistence in our own time. And of course by our own African American struggle for dignity and freedom, which has inspired the world. In addition, many of us have discovered in the teachings of the Buddha wise, true, beautiful guidance on the treacherous path life and history set us upon.

Having said this, let me emphasize that I did not come to the study and practice of Buddhism to become a Buddhist. In fact, I am not a Buddhist. And Buddha would not have minded this in the least. He would have been happy to hear it. He 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. The challenge for me is not to be a follower of something but to embody it; I am willing to try for that. And this is how I understand the meaning of both Jesus and Buddha. When the Buddha, dying, entreated his followers to "be a lamp unto yourself," I understood he was willing to free his followers even from his own teachings. He had done all he could do, taught them everything he had learned. Now, their own enlightenment was up to them. He was also warning them not to claim him as the sole route to their salvation, thereby robbing themselves of responsibility for their own choices, behavior, and lives.

We have been a nation of creators and farmers who adored the earth even when we were not permitted to own any part of it larger than our graves.

I came to meditation after a particularly painful divorce. Painful because I never ceased to care for the man I divorced. I married him because he was one of the best people I'd ever encountered and he remained that way. However, life had other plans for us both. I left my home, as Buddha left his 2,500 years ago, to see if I could discover how I at least could be happy. If I could be happy in a land where torture of my kind was commonplace, then perhaps there was a general happiness to be found.

The person who taught me Transcendental Meditation was teaching out of the Hindu tradition and never mentioned the Buddha, the Four Noble Truths (about the fact of human suffering, its causes, and the necessity to engage, endure, and transform it), or the Eightfold Path, which provides a guide to moral, conscious living. What she did teach me was the deeper value of sitting quietly, doing nothing. *Breathing.* This



Earthlyn Marselean Manuel, *Meditation*

Earthlyn Marselean Manuel is an author and artist living in Oakland, California. She's been practicing Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism for 15 years, and is currently sitting with the People of Color Group at the San Francisco Zen Center.

took me back to childhood days when I did this without thinking. Days when I was aware I was not separate from the cosmos. Days when I was happy. This was actually a place where poets, time out of mind, have frequently lived. No wonder I felt at home there.

And so I laughed. The laughter bubbled up, irrepressible. I saw the path to happiness and to liberation at a glance. It was inside myself.

Now I understand that all great teachers love us. This is essentially what makes them great. I also understand that it is this love that never dies, and, having once experienced it, we have the confidence always exhibited by well-loved humans, to continue extending this same love. Buddha, presumably raised as a Hindu, was no doubt disheartened by its racism, the caste system that today blights the lives of 160 million Indians. Indians who were once called "Untouchables" and now call themselves "Dalits" or "Those broken to pieces." They are not allowed to own land. They cannot enter the same doors, attend the same schools, or drink from the same wells, as the so-called "higher" castes. Their shadow must never fall on those above them. They are brutalized and the women raped at will. *Niggers* of India, they are.

Traditionally it is taught that the Buddha discovered someone old, someone sick, and someone dying, after having lived a very sheltered life, and that because of this suffering, inherent to all humankind, he struck out into the world to find a remedy. There's no mention, usually, of the horrible caste system, everywhere in place in his area, which I personally find impossible to imagine the Buddha ignoring.

I like to think of the young prince, Siddhartha, observing this hypocrisy of his native religion, perhaps touching or loving an "untouchable," and deciding there had to be a better way. A higher truth. I like to think of him leaving his cushy home and delightful family, his loving wife and adorable son, and striking out into the wilderness. Searching for a way humans could rid themselves of the hideous affliction of spirit that the forced division and degradation of part of the human family imposes.

Which is to say, I felt Buddha's spirit long before I began to study his words. I felt him not as a God or as the son of a God but as a human being who looked around, as any of us might do, and said to himself: *Something here is very wrong. People are such beautiful and wondrous creations, why are they being tortured? What have they done that this should be so? How can there be an end to their suffering?*

The Buddha sat down.

Most of the representations of the Buddha show him sitting down. Sometimes he is lying down. Sometimes he is walking, though this is rare. Sometimes he is shown leaping to his feet and flinging up his arms in joy. Anyone who meditates recognizes these states. First, the sitting. The concentration on the breath. Sometimes the lying down, feeling our connection to The Mother, the great support of Earth. There is the walking, which integrates our bodies with our mindstate. Then there is the feeling of exuberance when we realize we have freed ourselves. Again.

How does this happen?

I imagine there are people who turn to Buddha because they've lost a lot of money. My experience however is that almost everyone I've met who has turned to Buddha did so because they have suffered the end of a love affair. They have lost someone they loved. Perhaps they have lost a country, as well, or parents or siblings or some function of their bodies. But very often, people turn to the Buddha because they have been carried so deeply into their suffering

by the loss of a loved one that without major help they fear they will never recover. (I actually love this about Buddhists; that though their reputation is all about suffering and meditating and being a bit low-key sexually and spiritually languid, they are in fact a band of hopeful lovers who risk their hearts in places a Methodist would rarely dare to tread.)

This is what happened to me. I had lost my own beloved. The pain of this experience seemed bottomless and endless. Enter my teacher for that moment of my life, the Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön and her teachings on a set of tapes called *Awakening Compassion.* Under her guidance, far in the country away from everyone, on my own retreat of one, I learned an ancient Tibetan Buddhist meditation practice called *tonglen,* along with the teachings that accompanied it, called *lojong.* This involved, during meditation, learning to breathe in the pain I was feeling, not to attempt to avoid or flee it. It involved making my heart bigger and bigger just to be able to hold it all. It involved breathing out relief and happiness for myself and for everyone on Earth who was feeling as miserable as I was. I stayed at this practice for a year.

It worked.

So that today I sometimes wonder what my suffering over the loss of a loved one was really about. And I have almost concluded that it was again the love of the Buddha reaching through 2,500 years wanting me to understand I had some control over how much suffering I endure. Wanting me to try a remedy he had found and to see for myself whether it works.

My novel *The Color Purple* was actually my Buddha novel without Buddhism. In the face of unbearable suffering following the assassinations and betrayals of the Civil Rights movement, I too sat down upon the Earth and asked its permission to posit a different way from that in which I was raised. Just as the Buddha did, when Mara, the king of delusion, asked what gave him the right to think he could direct humankind away from the suffering they had always endured. When Mara queried him, the Buddha touched the Earth. This is the single most important act, to my mind, of the Buddha. Because it acknowledges where he came from. It is a humble recognition of his true heritage, his true lineage. Though Buddhist monks would spend millennia pretending all wisdom evolves from the masculine and would consequently treat Buddhist nuns abominably, Buddha clearly placed himself in the lap of the Earth Mother, and affirmed Her wisdom and Her support.

It has been enormously helpful to me to learn that Buddha's wife and son eventually joined him in the wilderness and that she became both a follower and a teacher. There was love between them, for sure. How I wish we had a record of some of her thoughts. The male effort to separate Wisdom from the realm of the Feminine is not only brutal and unattractive but it will always fail, though this may take, as with Buddhism, thousands of years. This is simply because the Feminine is Wisdom, and it is also the Soul. Since each and every person is born with an internal as well as an eternal Feminine, just as everyone is born with an internal and eternal Masculine, this is not a problem except for those who insist on forcing humans into gender roles. Which makes it easier for them to be controlled.

Sometimes, as African Americans, African Indians, African Amerindians, People of Color, it appears we are being removed from the planet. Fascism and Nazism, visibly on the rise in the world, have always been our experience of white supremacy in America, and this has barely let up. Plagues such as AIDS seem incredibly convenient for the forces that have enslaved and abused us over the centuries and who today are as blatant in their attempts to seize our native homelands as Columbus was 500 years ago. Following the suffering and exhilaration of the '60s, a pharmacopia of drugs suddenly appeared just as we were becoming used to enjoying our own minds. "Citizen Television," which keeps relentless watch over each and every home, claims the uniqueness and individuality of the majority of our children from birth. After the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Che Guevara, and so many other defenders of humanity, known and unknown, around the globe, we find ourselves with an unelected president who came to office by disenfranchising black voters, just as was done, routinely, before Martin Luther King Jr. and the rest of us were born. This is a major suffering for black people and must not be overlooked.

Though Buddhists' reputation is all about suffering and meditating, they are in fact a band of hopeful lovers who risk their hearts in places a Methodist would rarely dare to tread.

I myself, on realizing what had happened, felt a soul sickness I had not experienced in decades. Those who wanted power beyond anything else—oil and the money to be made from oil—(which is the Earth Mother's blood) were contemptuous of the sacrifices generations of our ancestors made. The suffering of our people, especially of our children, with their bright, hopeful eyes, is of no significance to them. George Slaughter—the surname would have been his master/father's, and deadly accurate—was not killed, we intuit, because his "saddle horse was too fine," he was killed because *he* was too fine.

This is the bind we are in.

There is a private joke I have with myself: The question is: Why did Europeans enslave us in Africa and take us to the United States?

The Answer: Because we would not go voluntarily.

The African Americans who are aiding and abetting the rape and pillage of Earth, helping literally to direct

the bombs that fall on the innocent and the exquisite, are still another cause of our suffering. We look into their eyes and experience a great fright. They appear so familiar, and yet, somehow, we feel they are not. I do not call their names because essentially they are, as we are, energies. And they are familiar because they have been around just as long as we have. It is also necessary to acknowledge that some of those energies we find so frightening exist within ourselves.

This poem, which I think of as one of my "bitter" poems, expresses something of their position, when they can bear to acknowledge it, throughout the long centuries:

They Helped Their Own

They helped their own
They did not
Help us

We helped
Them
Help
Themselves

Beggars
That
We are.

Underneath what is sometimes glibly labeled racism or sexism or caste-ism lurks covetousness, envy, and greed. All human states that can, through practice, be worked with and transformed. This is the good news for our oppressors, as it is for humans generally, since we all have these qualities to a degree. The equally good news for us is that we can turn our attention away from our oppressors—unless they are directly endangering us to our face—and work on the issue of our suffering without attaching them to it.

The teaching that supports that idea is this: Suppose someone shot you with an arrow, right in the heart. Would you spend your time screaming at the archer, or even trying to locate him? Or would you try to pull the arrow out of your heart? White racism, that is to say, envy, covetousness, and greed (and incredible sloth and laziness in the case of enslaving others to work for you), is the arrow that has pierced our collective heart. For centuries we have tried to get the white archer even to notice where his arrow has landed; to connect himself, even for a moment, to what he has done. Maybe even to consider apologizing, which he hates to do. To make reparations, which he considers absurd.

This teaching says: Enough. Screaming at the archer is a sure way to remain attached to your suffering rather than easing or eliminating it. A better way is to learn, through meditation, through study and practice, a way to free yourself from the pain of being shot, no matter who the archer might be.

There is also the incredibly useful assurance that everything is change. Everything is impermanent. The country, the laws, the Fascists and Nazis, the archer and the arrow. Our lives and their lives. *Life.* Looking about at the wreckage, it is clear to all that in enslaving us, torturing us, trying to get "ahead" on the basis of our misery, our oppressors in the past had no idea at all what they were doing. They still don't. As we practice, let this thought deeply root. From this perspective, our compassion for their ignorance seems the only just tribute to our survival.

Who or *What* knows what is really going on around here anyway? Only the *Tao,* or *Life,* or *Creation,* or *That Which Is Beyond Human Expression.*

Sitting quietly
Doing nothing
Spring comes
And the grass
Grows
By itself.

This place of peace, of serenity and gratitude, does exist. It is available to all. In a way, this place of quiet and peacefulness could be said to be our shadow. Our deserved shadow. Our African Amerindian shadow. In European thought the shadow is rarely understood as positive, because it is dark, because it is frequently behind us, because we cannot see it; but for us, ultrasensitive to the blinding glare of racism, and suffering daily the searing effects of incomprehensible behavior, our shadow of peace, that we so rarely see, can be thought of as welcoming shade, the shade of an internal tree. A tree that grows beside our internal river and bathes us in peace. Meditation is the path that leads to this internal glade. To share that certainty is the greatest privilege and joy.

I am grateful for the opportunity to join you in this first ever African American Buddhist retreat in North America. Though not a Buddhist, I have found a support in the teachings of the Buddha that is beyond measure, as I have found comfort and support also in those teachings I have received from Ancient Africans and Indigenous people of my native continent and from the Earth Itself.

The teacher who has been most helpful to me, in addition to Pema Chödrön, is Jack Kornfield, an extraordinary guide and human being, whose books and tapes, among them *A Path with Heart, After the Ecstasy, the Laundry,* and *The Roots of Buddhist Psychology,* I would recommend to anyone who seeks a better understanding of the Enspirited Life; Sharon Salzberg's book *Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness* has been an incomparable gift. Recently,

in a book called *Knee Deep in Grace,* I discovered the teachings of the Indian female yogi, householder, and mother, Dipa Ma. Her instructions and observations seem endlessly potent.

I am deeply grateful to all the teachers who came before these four that I have mentioned. Teachers from Vietnam (Thich Nhat Hanh has been a beloved teacher) Thailand, Burma, India, China, and especially Tibet. I thank the Dalai Lama for allowing himself to be a symbol of good in a world that seems, at times, hopelessly tilted toward evil. I thank Martin Luther King Jr. for the warm, brotherly touch of his hand when I was young and seeking a way to live, with dignity, in my native land in the South. And for the sound of his voice, which was so full of our experience. I thank him for loving us all so very much. If he had been able to live and teach, as the Buddha did, until the age of 80, how different our world would be. It is such a gift to have his books and recordings of his words; and to be able to understand his death as a teaching on both the preciousness of human existence and impermanence.

And, as always, I thank the ancestors, those who have gone on and those who are always arriving. It is because our global spiritual ancestors have loved us very dearly that we today sit together practicing ways to embody peace and create a better world. I feel personally ever bathed in that love.

Let's sit for 10 minutes.

Let us bring our attention to the life of our young brother, our murdered ancestor, George Slaughter. We know he was a beautiful young man, and that it was this beauty and his freedom expressing it that caused his father, himself unfree, to seek his death. We can see George sitting on his stunning saddle horse. We do not know if his half-sister, white, confused by her liking for her darker brother, gave it to him. We do not know if his mother, dark and irresistible, as so many black women are, gave it to him. We do not know if he bought it himself. All we know is that he is sitting there, happy. And the horse, too, is happy.

George Slaughter, an English name. We might think of Bob Marley, half English, with his English name: perhaps George had a similar spirit. A kindred look and attitude.

May you be free
May you be happy
May you be at peace
May you be at rest
May you know we remember you

Let us bring our attention to George's mother. She who came, weeping, and picked up the shattered pieces of her child, as black mothers have done for so long.

May you be free
May you be happy
May you be at peace
May you be at rest
May you know we remember you

Let us bring our attention to George's father. He who trails the murder of his lovely boy throughout what remains of Time.

May you be free
May you be happy
May you be at peace
May you be at rest
May you know we remember you

Let us bring our attention to those who rode with the father, whose silence and whose violence caused so much suffering that continues in the world today.

May you be free
May you be happy
May you be at peace
May you be at rest
May you know we remember you

And now let us bring our attention to George's horse. With its big dark eyes. Who drank George's blood in grief after the horror of his companion's bitter death. We know by now that the other animals on the planet watch us and know us and sometimes love us. How they express that love is often mysterious.

May you be free
May you be happy
May you be at peace
May you be at rest
May you know we remember you

I cherish the study and practice of Buddhism because it is good medicine for healing us so that we may engage the work of healing our ancestors. Ancestors like George. Ancestors like George's father.

Both George and his father are our ancestors.

What heals ancestors is understanding them. And understanding as well that it is not in heaven or in hell that the ancestors are healed. *They can only be healed inside of us.* Buddhist practice, sent by ancestors we didn't even know we had, has arrived, as all things do, just in time. ❖

[From a talk given at the African American Buddhist Retreat at Spirit Rock Meditation Center, Woodacre, California, August 16, 2002.]

Alice Walker's writing has been translated into many languages and published all over the world. Her most recent of many books are Absolute Trust in the Goodness of Earth *(poetry) and* The Way Forward Is with a Broken Heart *(fiction). Also of particular interest to* TW *readers is* Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer's Activism.

Buddhism and the Body Problem

A Historical Perspective on African American Buddhists

by Lori Pierce

African American Buddhists have recently begun to speak up about what it means to be black and Buddhist, and this gives us a tremendous opportunity to reexamine the history of African Americans who make nontraditional religious choices and to explore the ways that racism has shaped the history of Buddhism in the United States.

Religious people tend to assume that their religious practice somehow absolves them of the responsibility of dealing with racism. For white Christians, for example, religious institutions have been places to hide from rather than confront the reality of social oppression. I have seen white Buddhist practitioners evince utter shock that there might be a "race issue," because they themselves don't feel like they have done anything wrong. They misperceive racism as intense bigotry—bad feelings between individuals or groups. Racism, as they understand it, is the Klan burning a cross on someone's lawn in the middle of the night. They do not conceive of it as real-estate redlining, underfunded schools, and the disproportionate number of minorities in American jails. American popular culture perpetuates this simplistic notion of racism as simple bigotry, so it is difficult to help people unlearn it. And, because Americans wholeheartedly believe in the myth of hard work, individual effort, level playing fields, and color-blind opportunities, we have a hard time hearing or talking about power and privilege.

White Buddhist practitioners evince utter shock that there might be a "race issue," because they themselves don't feel like they have done anything wrong.

African American Religious Choices

Although the vast majority of African Americans have been and remain Protestant Christians, throughout our history members of the black community have made other religious choices, choices that affirm our ethnicity, our history, and our bodies and also resist oppression, discrimination, and racism. Even Protestant Christianity, the religion of the oppressor in the eyes of many, was used by African Americans to empower their community—spiritually, economically, and politically.

We know that most Africans brought as slaves to the Americas were practitioners of traditional indigenous religions of West Africa or were Muslim. We also know that Africans made persistent efforts to retain their religious beliefs on the plantations, and in the mines, fields, and other work and home sites. This was nearly impossible.

Slavery stole the youngest able-bodied men and women—adolescents, children just growing into adulthood. The younger members of any community have the least understanding of the totality of their community's cultural practices. They might be familiar with the rituals but could they reproduce them? They might remember prayers but after years of not hearing them, a lifetime of not being reminded, what would happen to their faith? Enslaved Muslims could not possibly fulfill even the minimum requirements of Islamic practices—prayer five times a day—let alone the more stringent requirements such as fasting, almsgiving, and pilgrimage to Mecca. Enslaved Africans had no access to their traditional religions except that which they kept alive in themselves.

Nevertheless, anthropologists have argued that African communities in the Americas retained elements of African language, rituals, beliefs, and cosmologies. It was once thought that African American communities were wholly the creation of slavery and modernism, but most social scientists now believe that a cultural legacy inherited from Africa is visible in music and dance, language, and other cultural forms in African American communities.

Although only a sparse legacy remains of the rich cultural heritage that enslaved Africans brought to this country, many African Americans have tried to reach back to that heritage as a way of making sense of a new reality. For some this has meant adopting Islam and adapting it to an American context. For others it has meant literally returning to Africa to revive long-forgotten spiritual practices and religious rituals. This is not a new phenomenon; in the years after slavery was formally abolished, as African Americans began to migrate North to escape the racial terrorism of the South and to better themselves economically, charismatic religious leaders emerged to profess faiths other than Christianity. For example, in 1913 Timothy Drew renamed himself Noble Drew Ali and founded the Temple of Moorish Science. Drew had been a member of Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement

Association (UNIA), which advocated black economic separatism and a "back to Africa" philosophy. At its peak, the UNIA had tens of thousands of members in chapters all over the United States and throughout Africa. Garvey's movement affected black Americans as no other had; it was a grassroots effort that offered blacks a chance for uplift and economic independence by buying shares in Garvey's Black Star shipping line. And Garvey referred to Africa as a source of pride, not shame, making the UNIA a model for later political and religious movements that advocated black self-esteem.

Noble Drew Ali appropriated many of Garvey's themes, but his movement had ethnic and religious bases. He argued that blacks were "Moors," and therefore owed no allegiance to the American flag. This was a powerful message in the years after World War I when African American soldiers who had fought for their country returned to find racism as deeply entrenched as ever.

Wallace Fard, a follower of Noble Drew Ali, also attempted to create a more authentic ethnic identity for African Americans. He argued that blacks were the "Lost Found Nation of Islam," not Americans, and owed no allegiance to this country. Fard's group was the nucleus of what became the Nation of Islam, established by his disciple, Robert Poole, later known as Elijah Muhammad. The Nation of Islam focused on a belief in Islam as "the natural religion of the black man." This was not orthodox Islam—Elijah Muhammad preached that Fard was Allah and that god was black. The Nation of Islam, of course, grew into one of the largest non-Christian religious movements in African American history, producing prominent and well-known leaders such as Malcolm X and Louis Farrakhan. After Malcolm's assassination and the death of Elijah Muhammed, some have retained their loyalty to the Nation of Islam while others have chosen to convert to or affiliate with more traditional forms of Islamic worship.

These movements provide an important context for understanding African American religious history because they were deliberate attempts to create a new, empowering ethnic and religious identity that validated and explained the African American experience. Other groups have reached back to Africa, particularly West Africa, to find a basis for such an identity.

Yoruba, Santeria, and Voudou are three large groupings in what is now known as African Diasporic traditions. Spurred by the migrations to the United States of blacks from the Caribbean, these groups have grown, especially over the last 25 years. They are highly eclectic and most of them practice blended forms of religion. Santeria, for example, which developed in Cuba among enslaved communities, combines Catholicism with magic and other rituals passed down through oral traditions. These religions do not share any one set of beliefs or practices but all point to a very deep desire to validate a specific ethnic tradition from West Africa. These religions are personally empowering and validate blackness and African identity in much the same way as Marcus Garvey and Black Muslim groups did.

An important part of our religious life as African Americans concerns the way we make sense of the founding reality of slavery and the continuing legacy of racism.

These groups are highly creative expressions of American religious freedom, important because they represent the fact that an important part of our religious life as African Americans concerns the way we make sense of the founding reality of slavery and the continuing legacy of racism. Obviously Protestant Christianity has done this as well: David Walker, Nat Turner, Sojourner Truth, and Frederick Douglass were all good Christians who used the power of the Biblical revelation to shame white Americans into living up to their ideals. The Christian message can be powerfully transformative; enslaved Africans were able to survive and imagine a life of freedom because they took literally the words of the Bible: Jesus was their savior. The Old Testament provided any number of subversive messages, like the example of the Jews whose faith eventually freed them from the tyrant Pharoah. Biblical Christianity was and remains a very important part of explaining how Africans were able to survive slavery. But because our white owners, neighbors, persecutors, and tormentors shared that Christianity, some thought it could not provide a strong foundation for a new ethnic identity that validated blackness and indicted (or at least explained) white racism.

Black Buddhists and the Body Problem

Many people are surprised to learn that there are African American Buddhists (though none are surprised at the idea of white Buddhists). African Americans began to join Buddhist groups when white Americans did, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, during the so-called "Zen boom." Both are latecomers, of course: the oldest and largest American Buddhist groups are still those affiliated with Asian American communities, most notably the largely Japanese Jodo Shinshu Buddhist Churches of America, which dates back to the late 19th century. Asian immigrants were the first Buddhists in the United States, and Asian American Buddhist sanghas, temples, and churches still represent the majority of Buddhists in the United States.

The first and most popular Buddhist group to gain

a foothold in the African American community was Soka Gakkai International (SGI; formerly Nichiren Shoshu of America), a new religious movement that gained popularity in Japan after World War II. Japanese war brides who were members of Soka Gakkai brought their faith with them to the United States and gradually began converting their American husbands, neighbors, and friends. Soka Gakkai has very deliberately created an image of itself as international and therefore multicultural and multiethnic, and internationalism and world peace are part of its theological message. To that end, SGI has established groups in urban areas and encouraged proselytizing on city streets and in subway stations.

Certainly we all need to rid ourselves of hate, but why are we required to rid ourselves of ethnicity in the process?

David Chappell, one of the few scholars to examine the role of minorities in Soka Gakkai (in *Engaged Buddhism in the West,* edited by Christopher Queen), argues that blacks and other minorities became (and remain) members of SGI for several reasons: the group's internationalist outlook, its basis in urban areas, and its commitment to personal empowerment and practical attainable goals—the organization views Buddhism as a tool for personal transformation. Finally, SGI president Daisaku Ikeda has identified himself with African American Civil Rights heroes like Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks. Respondents to Chappell's survey talked about feeling at home, relaxed, and "fully acknowledged" by their fellow Buddhists in SGI.

But Chappell's research also reveals that this laissez-faire universalist approach is not powerful enough to deal with the personal and communal suffering of African Americans caused by racism. Ikeda, he contends, sees race as "fictitious" and encourages that attitude—one woman in Chappell's survey identified her race as "human." Another credited SGI with "cleaning hate" out of her life. "I was raised to hate white people.... I don't see color. I am not a black girl. With all my heart, I am a person...I am just me."

We might want to agree with this idealistic sentiment but its false universalism rings hollow in the day-to-day lives of most African Americans. The strength of black Christianity and African Diaspora traditions is that they affirm black ethnicity *and* appeal to our human desire to understand the ultimate and make our lives meaningful expressions of divinity. Indeed, the idea that "I am not a black girl" if I choose not to be is not only dangerous but suggests that ethnicity is a hindrance to one's humanity. Otherwise, why would the person quoted above feel she must abandon her blackness (and her girl-ness, for that matter) in order to be or feel fully human? To counterpose blackness and humanness is to follow the racist logic that has plagued us for centuries. Certainly we all need to rid ourselves of hate, but why are we required to rid ourselves of ethnicity in the process? This is only necessary if we believe, as white supremacy requires, that our racialized ethnic selves are somehow a problem, a barrier to full self-realization.

More than 20 years ago, white women who had joined Buddhist sanghas in the early heady days of the Zen boom began to write and speak publicly about the sexism and discrimination they faced as women. They spoke about sexual coercion by teachers, and about the unthinking exclusion they faced as mothers—since they could not go on retreat for days and weeks at a time. Eventually women in the academy began to write scholarly treatises about "the body problem," and what the Buddha and Buddhist textual traditions said about women, sex, practice, and enlightenment. Most scholars now recognize that this persistent, well-thought-out feminist critique has been one of the signal contributions of white westerners to Buddhism in the 20th century. Not only has it empowered women in leadership positions, it has also created a segment of American Buddhism focused on bringing a Buddhist perspective to issues of discrimination and justice. The Buddhist Peace Fellowship is very much a part of the legacy of these women and their scholarly and personal interventions.

The feminist critique of the patriarchy and sexism of white American Buddhist groups should be able to provide us with a model to address yet another body problem. One strength of Buddhism for African American practitioners is that it gives us practical, efficient means to help alleviate suffering—chanting, meditating, walking, any number of centering practices. The Buddha's great insight was that enlightenment was possible in this very body, in this very lifetime. There is no need to ignore the suffering of the body or to fixate on it. By showing us the middle path, Buddhism reaches for balance in perspective and practice.

The presence of African Americans in Buddhist sanghas is an opportunity to deal with the historical realities of the suffering caused by racism in all our religious institutions. How can we bring a critical analysis to American Buddhism that will shed light on the history of discrimination and racism that has shaped all American Buddhisms?

There is a tension at the heart of religion; religions are created by, and therefore are a reflection of, specific peoples and historical periods. Religions are also humanity's attempt to reach beyond cultural, national,

(continued on page 30)

Black Buddha: Bringing the Tradition Home

An interview with Choyin Rangdröl

by Rebecca Walker

Choyin Rangdröl is a Vajrayana teacher in the Nyingma tradition whom I had the good fortune to meet at the historic African American Buddhist retreat held last summer at Spirit Rock in Woodacre, California. After listening to his nuanced teaching on the importance of both honoring cultural heritage and transcending it in order to achieve complete realization, I visited his Web site, www.rainbowdharma.com, *and requested a meeting. We have been in communication ever since.*

Rebecca Walker: What led to your decision to bring the Dharma to African Americans?

Choyin Rangdröl: When I discovered that it was possible to avoid becoming ensnared in the mentality of an 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.

The most profound injury that Buddhism can address in African Americans is the fracture in our identity that we continue to hold as a result of slavery. The nature of the injury is disconnection from our ancestral lineage and indigenous Divine. When we ask the question, "Who are we?" Buddhism offers us great clarity in realizing that being a human being is enough, and the rest is a footnote.

Rebecca Walker: Do you think the Dharma needs to change in order for it to speak more directly to the needs of people of African descent?

Choyin Rangdröl: The Dharma doesn't need to change, people need to change. They need to begin to understand the difference between inclusion and exclusion in terms of the environments they create, the books they write, the language they use, and presentation of the structure that houses Dharma. At the centers, they need to look at who is in charge, who greets who at the door, what the Buddha statues look like, and what resources are offered for African Americans to find their own inherent connectedness to the Dharma. Finally, 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.

For instance, how can a Dharma center be in existence for a decade or more and have no connection with the African American community that is right outside its own window? How is it that American Buddhists can create something that is so alien to African Americans that even though they stand and look at it they still don't know what it is? How does this happen?

How can a Dharma center be in existence for a decade or more and have no connection with the African American community that is right outside its own window?

Rebecca Walker: Do you think this lack of connection with the African American community is pervasive in the American Buddhist community, irrespective of tradition?

Choyin Rangdröl: There have been Buddhist communities in America that have been more open, for example, Soka Gakkai International (SGI)-USA, but at the same time, this issue of Asian ethnocentrism is real. Buddhism that is encased in Tibetan, Japanese, or Chinese cultures can be very confusing because often people can't see where culture ends and Buddhism begins. With African Americans, you're dealing with a people who have had to fight to maintain their culture through 200 years of slavery and another 100 years of segregation. In order to practice Buddhism, they now have to figure out how to hold it as well as be the agent of the culture they find it in. It feels as though there is no such thing as practicing Buddhism without assimilating to Asian culture under the watchful eye of the dominant culture. To African Americans this can appear to be a destructive cultural process that goes against the grain of their historicity, their heritage, and their legacy in America as survivors of cultricide.

There is also a sense of narrowness in the presentation of Buddhism from Asia. It does not seem inclusive of the black people in Asia. We know that there are hundreds of millions of black people throughout Asia. They were there before there was an Asia, and yet when we go to a Dharma center, where are they represented? Conversely, we find many European Americans in American Buddhism. Sometimes the statues of Buddha in the West even have a chiseled European nose. When one considers that Europeans en masse are not found in Asia's antiquity but black people are, then the puzzlement and disinterest in African Americans' minds is better understood.

Rebecca Walker: Which black people are you talking about?

Choyin Rangdröl: Look at the statues at Angkor Wat or look at Bodhidharma, the founder of Zen Buddhism, who is depicted with a broad nose, thick lips, and curly hair. There are also some interesting murals in India's Ajanta caves depicting black people handing a lotus to a prince. Or look at Runoko Rashidi's book, *African Presence in Early Asia,* and read about black people in Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Laos, and so on. I have personally met black people from Burma and I have a student who is currently living among the black people of south India. And that is just skipping the rock over the surface, because we don't have a lot of archaeological information to discern the complete history of black people in Asia.

Buddhism needs to spread like the works of a good country doctor, from one house to the next, so that the teacher knows the living rooms of all his or her students.

The African diaspora in Asia has been mislabeled, and African Americans' continuity with the black global diaspora has been broken as well. African Americans' disconnection with the black people of the world is an injury resulting from slavery in America, and in some way, Western Dharma's exclusion of the black Asiatic experience in Buddhism has become conjoined with that continuum of injury.

Rebecca Walker: Do we do injury to ourselves by focusing on ethnicity while practicing Dharma?

Choyin Rangdröl: Buddhism's pedagogical structure moves step by step. We don't start with enlightenment, we start with suffering, and then we proceed from there. The purpose of that is to clear obstacles that prevent us from living as fully awakened, unobstructed human beings. Some of these obstacles are intellectual, some are emotional, some are psychological, and some are cultural. It is how we move through these obstacles that gives Buddhism its ability to penetrate into the depths of people's hearts.

It is important for African Americans to be free to use their culture as a means of liberating themselves from their culturalisms. We're not in competition with our Asian Buddhist counterparts, but just as Tibetans or Chinese or Japanese people can use their culture to achieve enlightenment, African Americans can use their own culture, too. No one questions Tibetan, Japanese, or Chinese culture in Buddhism, but the moment African Americans say, "This is my culture and I am doing Buddhism," people say we are being ethnocentric. In fact, culture itself can be a vehicle for liberation when we use its narrowness and divisiveness as a teaching of what we must transcend. This is not just for African Americans but for all human beings to consider carefully. What is your culture, and has your practice allowed you to transcend it, or are you maintaining your culturalisms under the guise of Buddhology?

Ultimately, we must always remember that the seed syllable *Om* is Buddha's gift to all of humanity. Buddha was not thinking about giving it to ensure the longevity of one cultural group.

Rebecca Walker: Can you give an example of how you inflect the teachings for African Americans?

Choyin Rangdröl: African Americans are known for their appreciation of ritual—music, dance, and an affinity for written doctrine. However, I teach my students to look at the meaning of ritual itself, the meaning of sacred art, and how a doctrine is used to create or alleviate suffering. I ask what is the purpose of the symbolism, what is it all pointing to? What is it that transcends these things and is uniquely common to all human beings?

Just the pure statement of Buddhanature itself without any elaboration is a quintessential instruction to African Americans because it is the essence, like a basketball is to Michael Jordan, or a tennis racket to the Williams sisters, or a golf club to Tiger Woods. Mastery of this one tool, Buddhanature, is liberative in and of itself. Then, having mastered that one tool, to feel free to evidence it in the world through one's own culture is the process. And the goal perhaps could be that one day we may see a Buddhist version of Martin Luther King Jr., and then the meaning of what I am saying will be abundantly clear and the benefit to humanity immeasurable.

Rebecca Walker: What do you say to practitioners who feel isolated?

Choyin Rangdröl: Over the past seven years I have heard from many African American practitioners

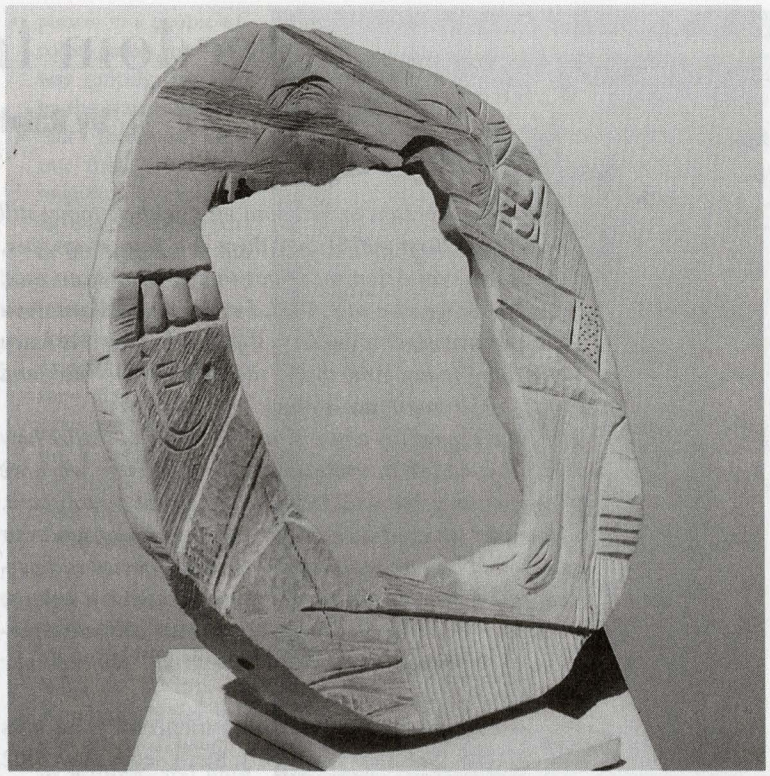
from all over the country on this subject of isolation. I get questions like, "I am in this major metropolitan city. Do you know any place I can go where there are other African Americans practicing?" Although they are in a big city with millions of people, they feel alone. So I have recommended and also adopted as a teaching style a very intimate presentation of Buddhism in the African American community. Buddhism in my view needs to spread like the works of a good country doctor, from one house to the next, so that the teacher knows the living rooms of all his or her students.

The adoption of a new faith practice in the African American community is confidential and its power lies in people being able to hear the teachings unobstructedly. It begins with establishing the Dharma in one's family, not just as an individual practitioner but in teaching people the legacy of how the Dharma is transmitted from parents to children. Very quickly a small living room can become a safe haven for new practitioners. That does not mean that larger organizations and centers have no role, but time is of the essence. No further delay is necessary. Buddhism in the African American community is an idea whose time has come.

Rebecca Walker: What is the role of black people in the bringing of Buddhism to the West?

Choyin Rangdröl: America plays a pivotal role in Western Buddhism, and that role is not separate from the history of America. The plight of African Americans and their ancestors is living testimony to the barbarism that samsara can yield. When African Americans as a community find an indisputable, irrevocable, unshakable healing, America is likewise healed from the karmic onus of its devastating history. When we as a society intentionally or unintentionally obstruct the path of African Americans' quest for self-healing, we are in essence still enslaving the minds of our fellow citizens, our fellow human beings. How can we say we have a new realization when the essence of our conduct remains the same?

I don't think white people need to be told what to do. I think they already know what to do. Really what is needed are offerings from people outside their group to help them to jump-start the deep compassion that dwells within their hearts, and maybe a little bit of direction about where to put the accumulated resources that are at their disposal as a result of the privileges they have had. White people are human beings and human beings are white people, just like everyone else. Privilege can be a burden like blinders on a horse, and so again we must figure out how to be one, so that the mutuality of our hearts can resonate together. Buddhist philosophy and practice alone has enough instruction. The rest is just knowing that to do the right thing has boundless benefits for many lifetimes.



Woody Johnson, *Circle of Life*

Woody Johnson is a sculptor living in Oakland, California. He studied art in Bay Area schools and with a woodcarver in Africa, and he continues to create in Oakland.

Rebecca Walker: How can we bring European American and African American practitioners together? Should we?

Choyin Rangdröl: We have to. Despite all that has happened in America between African Americans and European Americans, the answer for the Buddhist community, for America, and for peace on Earth is for the descendants of slaves and slave owners to use Buddhism to become One.

The only Buddhism that needs to be practiced in America is called world peace. We can see that peace is disappearing from the world. It is no longer a matter of the environment or the devastation to the animal kingdom, it is humanity itself that is perishing. To the extent that we can disallow our history to be a factor in what we must do together, the potential for us to save humanity and the world has its best chance. We have to become bigger than our differences and to know that we are the same in our ability to improve the world or to serve as obstacles that will lead to its destruction. This is not a racial issue, this is not a cultural issue, this is not a Buddhist issue, it is now an issue of human survival. ❖

Rebecca Walker has studied Zen and vipassana, and is currently practicing in the Nyingma tradition. She is the author of Black, White and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self, *and her new book, an anthology on revisioning masculinity tentatively titled* Putting Down the Gun, *will be published in January 2004 by Riverhead Books. She can be reached at rw@rebeccawalker.com.*

Freedom from Racism

by Ralph M. Steele

Every single person in here and on this stage today still uses the understanding that there is a Caucasian race, that there's an Asian race, that there's an African race, and an indigenous race. Well, I am here to tell you, you should have never invited me if you didn't want to learn one thing today. And that's: there's only one race, and that's the human race. Period.

I have spent my entire adult life trying to realize how in the world are we ever going to come together when we keep on using the word "race" as a cultural determinant. How can we even look at one another, understand our unity and humanness, when we consider ourselves different races? Why was it started? We all know why: because it's easier for me to kill you because you are a different person, a different race, and for you to kill someone else because they are a different race.

—Edward James Olmos, commencement address at National University, San Diego, May 2002

Approximately 29 years ago I did my first weeklong retreat with Jack Kornfield and Jacqueline Mandel. There were 100 people in attendance and I was the only person of color in the room. Together, we practiced the five precepts—at least in the meditation hall. From 1975 to 1979, anywhere from two to four times a year I would do a weeklong retreat; generally 100 to 150 people would be there. But I was still the only person of color. Why was I doing that to myself?

From 1979 to 1982, I took a break from Theravada practice and assisted with Steven Levine's retreats, and some of Ram Dass's retreats, up in the Northwest. I would often get up early in the morning to ring the wake-up bell. I'll never forget one morning, stepping into a building and ringing the bell, and hearing someone say, "Lord, you sent a nigger to wake me up!" I took a breath and continued walking. Was I being a do-gooder? No. I was a Vietnam veteran, and I'd already seen a lot of people die. I decided instead to rely on my practice, to wish that person kindness, and to go back to my job of helping people wake up.

In 1985, I took a monthlong metta retreat led by Joseph Goldstein and Sharon Salzberg at Joshua Tree, in Yucca Valley, California. There were 150 to 250 people there, but at least this time I wasn't the only person of color in the room. There was one other: a Vietnamese monk. He and I were in the same group with Joseph. Once, Joseph said, "You two are the old students." And I said, "Joseph, something has to change." He said, "What do you mean, Ralph?" I said, "Just look around. Something has to change. This is not right. We are the only people of color, just two of us." He said, "Yeah, you're right. But you're here now, so let's do the practice." And I said, "OK. I can do the practice." And I learned something very important: that I can take this practice and really not look at the issue of diversity. But now—at the present moment—I'm taking the practice and I'm looking at this issue.

As time went on, I ended up at Lama Foundation in New Mexico, and I had to make a decision: whether to become a closet practitioner or…what? I decided that I loved to practice because it took care of my post-traumatic stress disorder from being a Vietnam veteran. And so I said, "Jack, I want to learn how to teach this." And he said, "OK." It was great. He came to Lama Foundation once a year for 10 years. I began ringing the bell and sitting in groups. After a few years he said, "Ralph, I want you to start a group in Santa Fe." I did, and now that group is alive and strong. Another year came around and Jack said, "OK, next year you are going to give a Dharma talk." Great. I had a whole year to prepare for it! No problem.

During that time, I had a conversation with Jack, Julie Wester, and, I believe, Mary Orr. We agreed, "We need to do something about this sangha. It's much too European American." So a number of us designed the concept of the Inter-Racial Buddhist Council. But it took a few years before we held a retreat at Spirit Rock. It wasn't an easy thing to do. We got a lot of flak from the teachers and staff there—everything from "Why do you want to do a retreat like this?" to "Why can't they just come in with everybody else?" But after explaining how Ruth Denison had held so many retreats just for women, and how the gay and lesbian community was such a strong force in initiating its own retreats as far back as the '70s and '80s, some understood that people of color needed to have their own retreat. And they finally gave in.

I'll never forget the day of that retreat at Spirit Rock. There were about 50 or 60 people, including Jack and, I believe, Michelle Masudo. I'd never been in a room like that before. For the first time in my life, I felt the difference between working in a meditation group of mostly European Americans versus working with a people-of-color meditation group. The difference was…well, it was like black and white. We were in tears just about the whole day. I had never felt so much sadness and, at the same time, so much joy—in myself

but also in the room, in everyone. I had certainly never experienced that in any European American retreat setting. Just looking at people who were more connected to, and in contact with, the sadness of being born into oppression was a very different experience. I realized what a rare opportunity it is, in this oppressed culture, for people of color to come together in that way. One person stood up and said, "I'm so glad to be here. I thought I was the first. I thought I was the only African American, gay, vegetarian physician in Oakland." It was an incredible moment, and I saw how much there was to learn there.

Now there is a people-of-color sitting group, seeded by Joseph Goldstein, in Albuquerque, New Mexico. It's a very mature group, quite unusual. They don't want their group to just be a "people of color" group. They want European Americans to be included and there are European Americans in the group. But the European Americans must have an understanding that people of color live in an oppressed culture—American society—and need to show a certain kindness toward the people of color in the group.

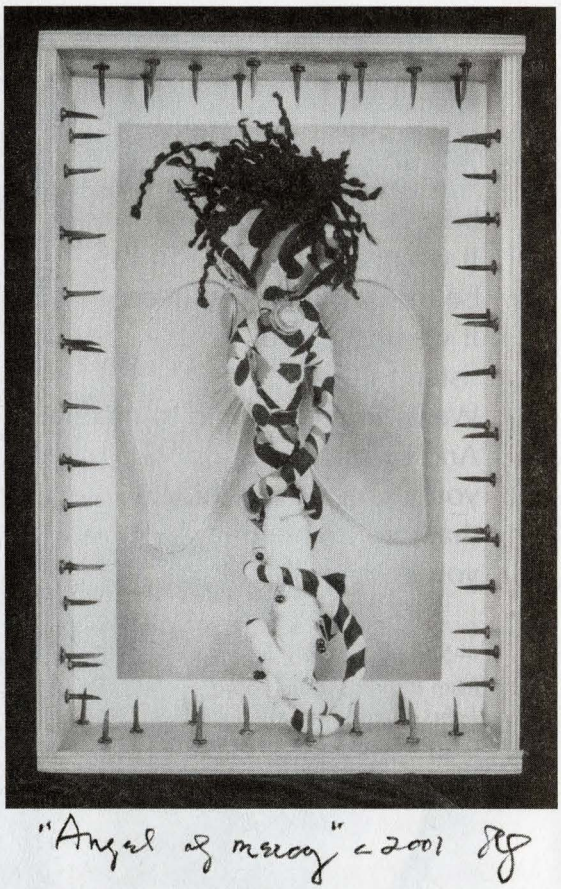
One of the members of that group is a Native American man, a shaman, who has done a lot of Theravada practices. Writing about the group, he said, "For me, to sit is a ceremony." He continued:

> It is no different than a sweat lodge. It just has slightly different protocols and rituals. I go to listen and hopefully learn something. In the sweat lodge, not just anyone can come. You have to be invited, whether that's a personal invitation or an invitation to an entire group.

For me, if the Dharma is to continue as a people-of-color Dharma, people need to be invited by other members of the group. I don't think this requires any special rules, necessarily. It's just like a ceremony, a spiritual ceremony. Regardless of color, one should be invited. Tam—a white woman—said to me last week that often, white people don't get this. I believe this has to do with the issue of privilege. "What do you mean, I don't have a right to go where I want when I want?" they say. Well, in the Native American worldview, you don't necessarily have that right. You have a responsibility to the group, and sometimes that means you aren't a part of the group. This is true in all indigenous cultures. Members of one cultural society don't necessarily know the ceremonies of another and aren't expected to. They also don't feel slighted because of it.

Someone else wrote the following about being a European American in that group:

> Perhaps I am being naive, but I joined the group as a way of healing and looking inward, while both giving and receiving energy within the group without any thought to racial issues. As I said during last Friday's group, I had some apprehension about being a white person in a people-of-color group, but that was quickly dispelled by the warm welcome that I received. This is my first foray into meditation practice. I have never been part of any sangha. It was never my intention to intrude on or infiltrate anything. I truly understand the need for safety, and if my presence causes any uncomfortable feeling for those who have been there before me, I will gracefully exit. I do, however, think that focusing on our differences rather than on singularity is what leads to racism, or even war. My feeling is that we are all hanging by a thread and must try to be kind to each other and ourselves.



Shahara Godfrey,
Angel of Mercy

Shahara Godfrey is a mixed-media artist and clinical psychologist living in the San Francisco Bay Area. She has been a featured artist in the annual exhibit The Art of Living Black.

That brings up two concepts to consider: separation/segregation and integration. You need to understand that at one time in most of our lifetimes, only 40 years ago or so, the first was forced upon us. Only now is it a choice: a separation of people of color from European American culture or an integration of the two cultures. At Spirit Rock we've been doing a lot of different projects and activities in relation to people of color as a means to include "them," but we also need to understand that our way of doing things is still segregation. That's okay...but only if integration eventually follows. Currently, we have people-of-color retreats, and then we have other retreats. Yet although people of color are invited to our "regular" retreats (and scholarships are even provided), they are only now beginning to attend. When they do, it is generally because of the inspiration they have felt from having first attended a people-of-color retreat and then deciding to continue in the practice.

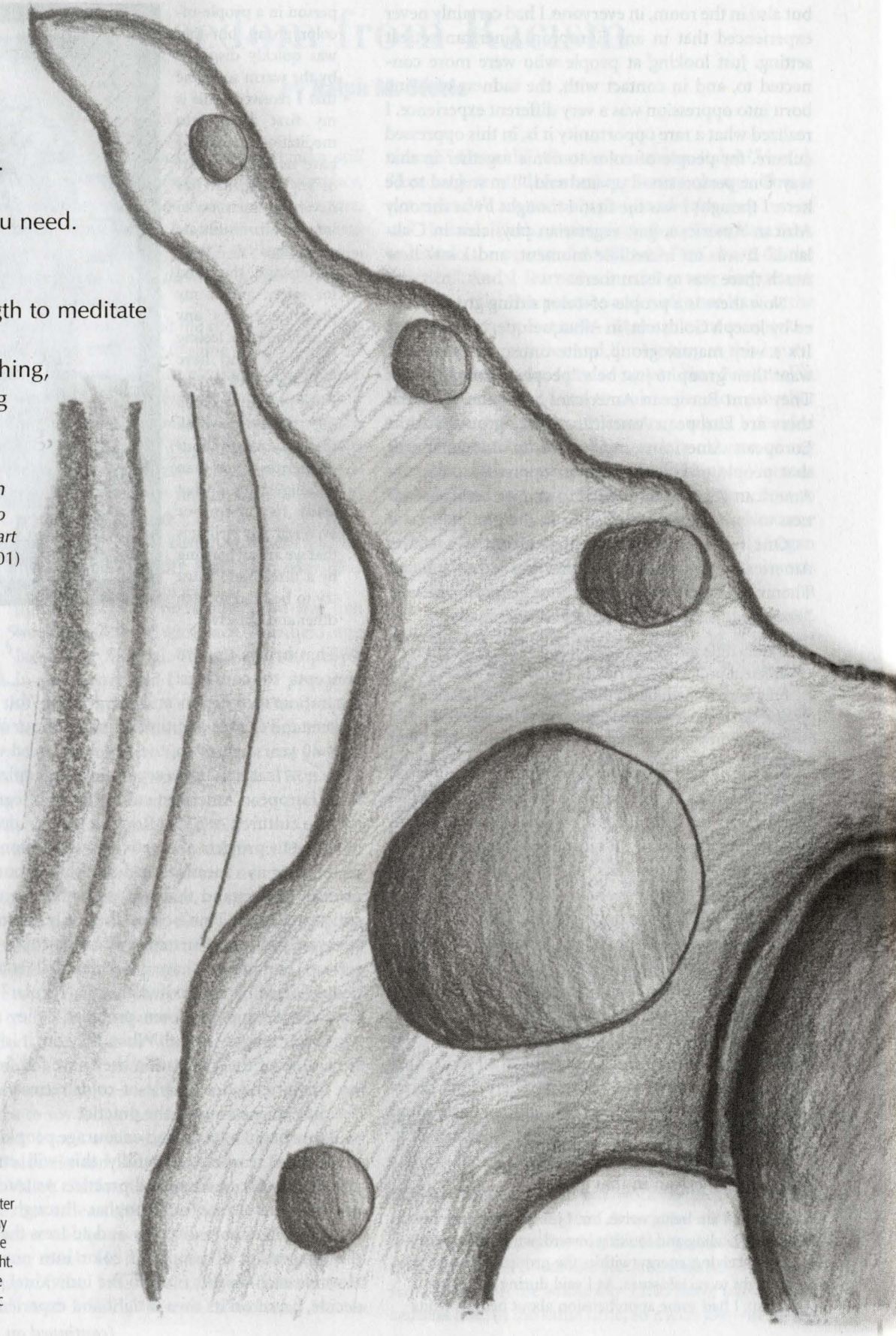
As we begin to train and encourage people of color to become teachers, hopefully this will encourage people of color to come and practice. As teachers, we can also encourage our sanghas through Dharma talks to create more diversity and address the issue of the integration of people of color into our groups. How we each do this is up to the individual group to decide, based on its own insight and experience.

(continued on page 30)

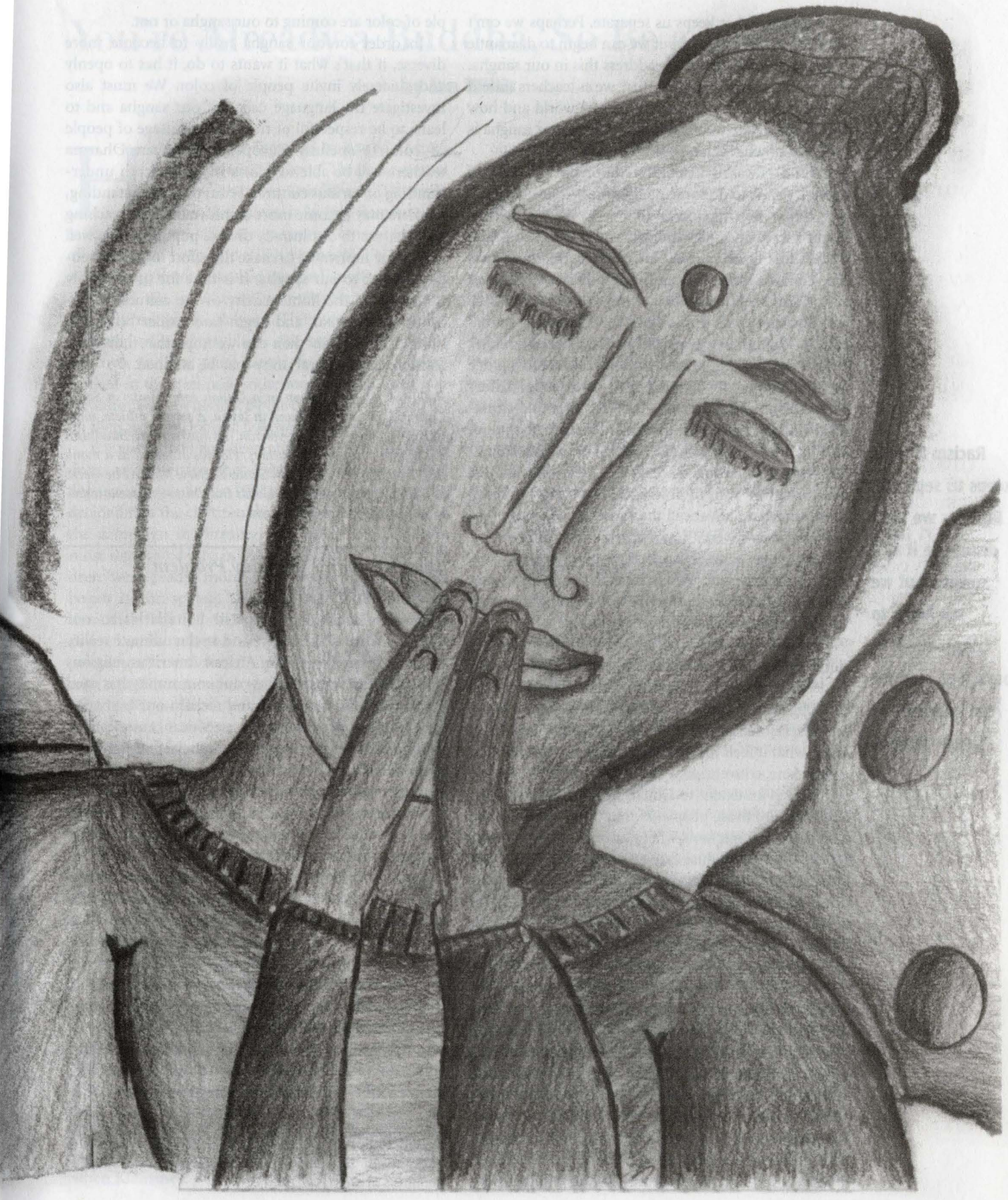
Meditate to Love

If we love,
be love,
If we sing,
be the sacred song.
If we need help,
be the help that you need.
If we are scared,
listen to this;
We have the strength to meditate
And by that,
you frighten everything,
that was frightening
you away.

—*Sahara Sunday Spain*
from *if there would be no light: poems from my heart*
(HarperSanFrancisco, 2001)



Sahara Sunday Spain is the daughter of photographer Elisabeth Sunday (see page 35). Now 11, she made this poem and drawing at age eight. Along with poetry and art, she also pursues interests in music and Buddhism.



Racism is what keeps us separate. Perhaps we can't dismantle it as a society, but we can begin to dismantle it in ourselves. And we can address this in our sangha. And this is at least a start. In turn, we as teachers should be aware of what is happening in our world and how that might relate to our sangha, because our sangha is a mirror of what is happening in the world.

In 2001, I was invited to the National Conference of Black Lawyers to do some meditation work with them. The conference organizers decided to have their conference in Selma, Alabama, that year because Selma had its first black mayor. One of the speakers, Morris Dees, a local attorney from Montgomery and founder of the Southern Poverty Law Center, began to tell us stories about some of his cases. As he talked, I started crying—as did everyone else in the room. I couldn't believe some of the stories he told: How could a judge order all people of color out of the courtroom, telling them "Don't you dare come in here!"? He told stories of kids being picked up for a misdemeanor by police and then for 24 or 48 hours being sexually abused. It was very, very strong. Racism is alive and well. Dees has created a "Wall of Tolerance," a public tribute to those who have advanced the cause of tolerance. (See the Southern Poverty Law Center Web site, *www.splcenter.org.*) He has a network of people always looking, surfing the Internet. When anything close to racism appears, they target it. Morris Dees is doing the practice of a bodhisattva. What are we doing?

Racism is what keeps us separate. Perhaps we can't dismantle it as a society, but we can begin to dismantle it in ourselves. And we can address this in our sangha.

The last concept I want to touch upon is the relationship between privilege and oppression. We need to understand that any person of color born here is born into oppression. Now, of course, this is on a mundane or conventional level. But that person will never, never, know what it feels like to have a sense of freedom—on a mundane, conventional level. It's impossible.

There is an extent to which money buys privilege, and there are those people of color who have reached a certain economic level where "money talks and color walks." But it is an illusion to think that privilege is just a matter of economics that transcends racial distinctions. The fact remains that European Americans are privileged people. If you are European American it doesn't matter if you were born into a very poor family; at least you can step out and up in the world.

Now, this is something that is very important. For people of color to grow and advance in this society, they have to—it's an absolute must—connect with the culture of European Americans. To get a taxicab, buy a house, buy land, or buy a plane ticket, the connection is necessary. For a European American, to connect with people of color is a matter of choice. It's only a choice. We need to understand this. Otherwise, it is too easy to walk around thinking that everything is okay in our sangha, and that it doesn't really matter whether people of color are coming to our sangha or not.

In order for our sangha really to become more diverse, if that's what it wants to do, it has to openly and sincerely invite people of color. We must also investigate the language usage of our sangha and to learn to be respectful of the language usage of people of color. Hopefully European American Dharma teachers will be able to gain a more in-depth understanding of various cultures. From this understanding, teachers may become more comfortable with teaching the Dharma to a culturally diverse population, as well as become motivated to make the effort to attract people of color to our sangha. It is time for us to openly acknowledge the homogeneity of the cultural makeup of our sanghas, and begin to consider becoming more diverse. Only then can we hope that individual freedom and cultural unity may be attained. ❖

Ralph M. Steele grew up in a Gullah community in South Carolina, in California, and in Japan. A former athlete, martial artist, and Vietnam veteran, he has studied Buddhism under many important teachers. He was ordained as a monk in Burma in 1999. Based in Santa Fe, New Mexico, he works as a clinical psychologist and leads Buddhist retreats nationally. See www.lifetransitions.com.

Buddhism and the Body Problem

continued from page 22

and other socially constructed boundaries to our common core of humanity and to the ultimate reality of god. We can see that in African American religious history; we can observe how our community has used religion as a way to affirm and reclaim our humanity and to fully express ourselves as African Americans—dealing with unique historical and social problems, not the least of which was slavery and persistent racism and discrimination after abolition. We can also look at our history as the story of humans who, as individuals and as groups, have sought to understand our connection to the ultimate reality of god.

It is important for the African American community to find modes of religious expression and religious belief that allow us to worship, believe, and practice with our minds, our hearts, and our bodies. It is equally important to call attention to the fact that religious institutions inherit the legacy of racism that is an intrinsic part of American history. Any religious institution that does not fully acknowledge the complicated legacy of race and white supremacy in all our cultural and social institutions will not win the allegiance of African Americans. Nor should it. ❖

Lori Pierce is an assistant professor of American studies at DePaul University in Chicago. She researches, teaches, and writes about race and ethnic studies and the history of Buddhists in the United States.

You're Already a Buddha, So Be a Buddha

by Jan Willis

Hatred is never appeased by hatred. Hatred is only appeased by love." This is an eternal law, or what we would call Dharma. Within Buddhism, it is very foundational to choose the path of peace and nonviolence. For some of us, that has been, and will be, a tough choice.

I grew up in what is called the Jim Crow South, in the 1950s and '60s. I was raised in a little mining camp outside of Birmingham, Alabama. There was one street that separated whites from blacks. We moved there when I was two, and the mine closed soon after. My father worked in the steel mill, so he wasn't dependent upon the mine. He kept his job. By the time I was five, men sat on their porches, jobless, hollow-eyed, despairing.

For years there had been attacks against black children, and perhaps there were even more in that depressed area. So in 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. decided that the children should be in the forefront of the campaign in Birmingham, which he called the most segregated city in the South, and all of us children were ready, more than ready. The campaign began in the spring. Dr. King was arrested shortly thereafter. Bull Connor was the police commissioner, and after he arrested King he gave orders to his policemen to attack the children. We were attacked with water hoses and dogs. So I grew up being very afraid of dogs. (It was nice later to be able to get my own dog and have that special relationship.)

There were people who weren't satisfied with the negotiations that the city reached following the spring campaign, so in September of that same year the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church was bombed, and those four little girls died.

In 1965, I won several scholarships, and because I lived in this little mining camp, news spread about it and it wasn't liked. The KKK found out about it and so they targeted my family. Now, we'd seen people in the black community be targeted before. Everybody knew when it was happening. When the cars went through the camp honking, everybody knew that some black was being targeted by the Klan. We just didn't know who it was. It was not good to be conspicuous in that camp.

The KKK burned a cross in front of my house. My father was working the graveyard shift so he was away from home. The KKK came and only my mom was home and my sister Sandy, a year and a half older than me. My mom had a .22-caliber pistol. That was a time when Klansmen were throwing bombs.

So my mom stood by the door with her .22-caliber pistol, whispering to us to get down, get under the bed. My sister was trying her best to do that but I was glued to the window, looking out, awestruck. I was just amazed, because what I saw out of the window was that there were more than just men in robes. There were men, women, and children in robes. And I noticed the robes weren't just white. They had purple satin and stripes, you know, the pomp and circumstance of regalia at a graduation. My mom was trying to tell me to get down, because we were expecting that they were going to throw a bomb. They set up a cross, and they did mumbo jumbo as it was blazing there. And all the blacks knew it was us being targeted but nobody had the courage to help out. Later on, blacks started shooting through their doors but in those days, people just peeked through their windows and hoped for the best.

There were men, women, and children in robes. They set up a cross, and they did mumbo jumbo as it was blazing there.

My mom was really brave: she gave me that image of a strong woman. But when I saw the families there with the KKK, my inclination was to go out and tell these people that they were making a mistake, that we were a family just like they were, that we were a mommy and a daddy and two sisters. We were human beings just like they were.

But I didn't. I probably couldn't have, though that's what I really wanted to do. And fortunately for all of us, no bomb was tossed. After a period of ceremony and ritual, bands of people got back in their cars and men, women, and children drove off. The whole idea was to give us a message about our "place." It was important that we not step out of line.

So today, when I go back down South to county courthouses—I'm working on family history (and I have been to about 25 county probate offices in Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina)—and ask simply one question, "Hello, could you tell me where the records room is?" I've been met with one response and one response only: "Where are you from?" And it always means, "Where the heck did you go to learn that you can look me in the eye and ask me a direct question like that?"

In 1965, I went off to Cornell. And in 1967–68, I went to India where I met the Tibetans. That was

wonderful. The Tibetans just took me right in. I was amazed by them, since I knew they'd experienced their own historical trauma with the invasion of their country by the Chinese. Yet they seemed to be coping very well. I wanted some of their peace and understanding. I began to spend time with them.

I had a choice: will it be the Black Panthers or returning to Nepal to study in a Buddhist monastery? It was a hard choice.

Then in 1969, when I returned to Cornell, there was a cross-burning on the lawn of a residence where 12 black women lived. That's why we took over Straight Hall, the Student Union. The administration was terrified. The president was saying the whole time, "There will be no police on campus. There will be no soldiers on campus." But we had a radio station and we had the president's phone line monitored and we played it on the intercom. We were listening to the president talk to the National Guard and we knew when he gave them the order to come in. That was when we decided, prudently, to come out, because the tanks were rolling toward us.

In 1965, I was the only woman of eight African Americans on campus—the seven others were guys from little towns all around the South. This was a campus of 14,500 people! There were eight African Americans and 200 to 250 Africans. We didn't talk to one another. By 1969, when we took over the building, there were about 260 African Americans, mostly from New York City.

After the takeover I was made Minister of Women's Defense. I'd helped get guns in the building, so I was put in charge of women's safety. Oh, please! I had to learn to shoot a weapon, and I got my afro. But I didn't want the job, because campus was a dangerous place then.

One of the people who flew in to advise us belonged to the Black Panther Party. Because I had a title, I was told to go see this guy. Then I was supposed to go out to Oakland to join the Black Panther Party. I had a choice: will it be the Panthers or returning to Nepal to study in a Buddhist monastery? It was a hard choice. By that time, I saw that this race thing just wasn't going to go away. And it seemed as though nonviolence wasn't working either. So I had to consider it seriously.

I did, in fact, make a cross-country trip with the aim of meeting that Black Panther. On the way, I met Fred Hampton. He said, "Hey, Sis. Heard you know how to use a piece." I didn't want to have to demonstrate it—I was scared to death to use one. But I was proud as anything that Fred had said that, and that he shook my hand. But the closer I got to Oakland.... Can you imagine sleepless nights?

You know that any time your mind turns around *me, me, me, me, me,* you're miserable. I was so scared and so miserable and so responsible and so young. The closer I got to Oakland, the more frightened I got and the less sleep I got, until finally one morning I said, "I just can't be Huey Newton. I just can't stand on those steps with that shotgun. It's not me."

Once I could say that, I slept for the first time in months. And I called up that professor at Cornell who had said, "That's quite a choice you've got there. Panther Party or Nepal. We'll give you a fellowship to go off to Nepal." I'm so glad I accepted.

By the time I got to India, Fred Hampton had been shot up in a Chicago flat. Fred Hampton was a fine human being.

All this is to say, I believe that peace and nonviolence are the only sane choices we have. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "We must learn to live together or we'll destroy everything." I believe, like A. J. Muste, the Dutch pacifist and Communist, that—and it's perhaps because I follow the Tibetan way that I go for this—"There is no path to peace. Peace is itself a path."

Buddhism offers methods that are helpful for transforming rage, anger, and wounds of low self-esteem. I met my Tibetan teacher, Lama Thubten Yeshe, in '69. Everything up until that point had been a battle, my private struggle to be smart, to read, against all the powers that told me not to. And everything told me—not only the Klan, but everything told me—that there's only so far a black girl can go and there's only so far she should want to go. Everything about Lama Yeshe seemed right for me, even his teeth! I've got a gap between my front teeth, and people used to say, "You know what that gap means? Girl, it means you are a liar." All I wanted to do was tell the truth! When I met Lama Yeshe, it was the first time I saw somebody smile this grin with a big gap between his teeth. And I knew, "He doesn't lie!"

There was something about Lama Yeshe that made him very keenly aware of Americans' temperament, before he'd ever come to the States. He said that one problem he saw in all of his students was low self-esteem. So these people could use the tantra. Why? Tantra offers methods like those he describes in *Introduction to Tantra:*

> One of the essential practices at all levels of tantra is to dissolve our ordinary conceptions of ourselves and then, from the empty space into which these concepts have disappeared, arise in the glorious light body of a deity a manifestation of the essential clarity of our deepest being. The more we train to see ourselves as such a deity, the less bound we feel by life's ordinary disappointments and frustrations. This divine self-visualization empowers us to take control over our life and to create for ourselves a pure environment in which our deepest nature can be expressed. It is a simple truth that if we identify ourselves as being funda-

mentally pure, strong, and capable, we will actually develop these qualities. But if we continue to think of ourselves as dull and foolish, that is what we will become. The health of the body and of the mind is primarily a question of our self-image. Those people who think badly of themselves, for whatever reason, become and then remain miserable, while those who can recognize and draw on their inner resources can overcome even the most difficult situations.

How does Vajrayana Buddhism work? Its principles can be stated very briefly. Vajrayana uses the end as the means. It says: "We know you're already a Buddha. Well, doggone it, *be* a Buddha!" That's the secret of the method. It takes the end as the means. So you melt down this ordinary body, and in its place, using your visualization, you create an arcane body and internal yogic system. You're doing lots of yoga. It's really kind of technical. But basically, what you're doing is transforming your ordinary body, speech, and mind into a Buddha's. This means, from the very beginning, contemplating, thinking, and dealing as though you were a Buddha.

The danger of it is that without a lama, without a guru, you could just dig the hole of samsara so much deeper. Your arrogance grows by leaps and bounds. You think you are somebody. But instead of getting liberated from samsara, you get deeper and deeper into it.

Kalu Rinpoche said the aim of tantric practice is for us to be authentically ourselves. That's Buddha-nature. Be authentically yourself. And your authentic self is already Buddha. It's already capable. It's already compassionate.

Kalu Rinpoche's teaching is very important here because you can get proud: "Hey! Yesterday I was just ordinary old me! Today—Buddha! Out of my way, girl. I'm powerful here. Buddha, Buddha, I'm a Buddha." That's ludicrous, you know. That's why you need a lama, because it's really easy to fall off this path. That ego just jumps in, saying, "Hey, you're fine, lookin' good."

The deities in Vajrayana are used like specific medications. If you want to improve your memory, you need to hang out in the form of Manjushri for a little while. If you want to improve your health, you need to hang out in the form of White Tara. But all the time you're doing that you are not swapping one pretense for another. You have to know that this is actually you. None of those deities are external. The deities are iconographic representations of our innermost selves. Green Tara is fearless, long life, courageous—all those things. We want to feel that way.

There's something important about tantra that's often misunderstood. Have you ever heard anybody describe a "tantric retreat" and it was about...you know, better sex? Imagine the English arriving in Tibet in 1904 and going into the temples. They're horrified because there are all these deities in union one with the other. (We ought also to say that in most of the traditional paintings, the female is smaller than the male, even though they are together. She is wisdom, he is compassion. He's facing out and she's usually facing in and she's smaller than him. We need some new artists out there!)

But practicing tantra is not about having sex. It is

Vajrayana uses the end as the means. It says: "We know you're already a Buddha. Well, doggone it, be *a Buddha!"*

about using the energy of desire, using the energy of anger, using the energy. It says since we do it all the time, that is, we visualize ourselves negatively—hey, we could visualize ourselves positively. So substitute this deity, visualize yourself strong, capable, and fearless. It becomes a habit. It actually takes, after awhile.

We're always filled with desire or anger or something. Those emotions have energies with them. Now, it takes some practice to separate the energy from that negative emotion. The distinction is between the negative emotion and the energy of that negative emotion. It's a little tricky. So it takes guidance.

Those are the main features of how tantra is practiced: It takes the end as the means, uses visualization of deities for specific illnesses, and works on transforming ordinary body, speech, and mind into Buddha's body, speech, and mind through visualization. Tantra uses the ever-present energy of negative emotions to propel us along the path.

Shantideva, the eighth-century Sanskrit Mahayana poet, wrote: "There is no evil equal to hatred and no spiritual practice equal to forbearance. Therefore, one ought to develop forbearance"—patience—"by various means, with great effort." I want to emphasize that choosing peace does not mean being passive. Compassion is active compassion. Anything that takes you out of yourself, that lessens your clinging to self—for example, when you give to others—makes you happy. When you volunteer at the soup kitchen or do some other form of service, when you give over self, action becomes compassionate. And what you gain is wisdom, because you lessen clinging to self. They work together, male and female deities, masculine and feminine qualities, within ourselves. ❖

[From a talk given at the African American Buddhist retreat at Spirit Rock Meditation Center, Woodacre, California, August 2002]

Jan Willis is a professor of religion at Wesleyan University. She has studied Tibetan Buddhism for more than three decades, and has taught courses in Buddhism for over 25 years. In 2000, she was named one of Time *magazine's "Top Religious Innovators for the New Millennium." Her autobiography* Dreaming Me *is reviewed on page 44.*

Breathing Through History

A Dark Reflection on Zen

by Michelle T. Clinton

I sit. And then I seek the rhythm of the breath. And then I try not to seek. And then I try not to try. And then I'm just like sitting. And then everything is bothering me: my back is strained by this, you know, maybe I should be in another chair. I have to scratch; if I scratch I will prove myself as a weak, jive Buddhist, but if I don't scratch some weird toxin will take hold of my nose and make me sick, I'm sure of that, and I shouldn't be thinking about being a Buddhist, I should just be a Buddhist, Zen and all that, and I shouldn't be thinking because thinking is the delusion that makes the angst Buddhism is against, but Buddhism isn't against anything except....

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.

OK, I sit. Breathing happens. And again the breathing is happening. I sit. I give myself to breathing, sitting, the silence that is sound, and the rhythm of the body of breath. From this daily action I take my identity as a Buddhist.

I am not meditating here. I want to have this conversation via word, paper, and language with you about my sitting and my body, an African American body, a body and consciousness taken by the causes of social justice. I want you to know I am a jive Buddhist, a simple lay Buddhist with no authority and minimum training: three days at Zen Mountain Center in Los Angeles (ironically during the summer of the Rodney King riots), a few books, one graduate class, no current sangha, and a few conversations seeking the Dharma with some "heavyweight" Buddhist teachers, monks, and friends. On the other hand, I sit regularly. I hold a lifelong commitment to sitting (including lapses) and I reflect daily on the Dharma.

I think the voice of the layperson is important: how the Dharma is held and practiced with the unschooled, how the Dharma evolves and travels through the solitary practitioner, how it mutates and spawns new meanings even at this far distance from the originator and communities of authority. I am saying this as way of apology to you: forgive my ignorance, forgive my misinterpretation of the teachings. I hope these words are useful to you.

I will start with the bad news. 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 (class is inextricably linked to race). 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. I hate that this is true—is hate too strong an emotion, even for a jive Buddhist?

I believe that this inability to relax is rooted in two causes. The first is my inability to fully recover from the wounds inflicted upon myself and my family in the name of middle- and upper-class white people. For my failure in this realm, I reach into the Dharma, into the breath, into the unity of emptiness, for relief and acceptance. Some wounds are generational and require more than one lifetime, more than one rung on the family tree, to heal.

Second, there is the talk in Buddhist groups dominated by middle-class white people. I am perpetually asked to discuss the dynamics of race/culture/class, conversations that are paradoxically necessary and unsettling. It makes me nervous to be asked to heal so much guilt, to be given so much responsibility. It makes me tired to be asked to articulate the subtle (and often subconscious) dynamic of race and racism. It restresses the first level of balance given to me by my practice.

Relative to white middle-class American culture, or Asian and Asian American culture, I am loud. I wear bright colors and laugh up through my neck and whole face. I talk with my hands and my hips. If I see a friend across the room, I am likely to yell, "Hey! 'S'up? What it be like?" I love urban, Southern African American vernacular so I use "ain't" and any new word I have scrounged from my family, hip-hop, rap, or some badly conceived bougie* black movie about advertising executives and lawyers in doomed love triangles (I can only resist so much pop culture). For Asians and Asian Americans, being black is fine in that they expect me to be black. For white Americans (again, from the middle and upper classes), being black triggers (sometimes unconscious) fear and guilt.

Of course, there are other issues. I am recovering from a chronic illness that limits my mobility a bit, and I don't really have the energy to seek a working-class, people-of-color sangha.

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* *Bougie* (from "bourgeoisie"; the "g" is pronounced like the "j" in the French word *je)* is an African American term meant to critique the black middle-class lifestyle. Someone who is "bougie" is materialistic, with some money. The term is also associated with the word "uppity."

I don't know you and I don't know how you understand your/our history. I do know that mainstream secular American culture offers an immature view of history created by distortion, amnesia, denial, and no spiritual connection to the dead. Social justice work, on the other hand, demands an open embrace of the past. The question "How the hell did we get here?" promises some part of the answer to the question "What must we/I do to bring change and peace?"

Try to be me for a moment. Reflect on my sense of this history of tragedy. I see family roots that go into the North American earth—my family's ancestry, as is true for many African Americans, is mixed with the ancestry of Native American people. I see a lot of blood and illness. I remember the betrayed heart. In the slave narratives, I hear the excruciating suffering and humiliation of millions. And Africa, the massive mother of all origin, beyond the water—I see her. I see the hunt, the capture, the branding, and the rapes.

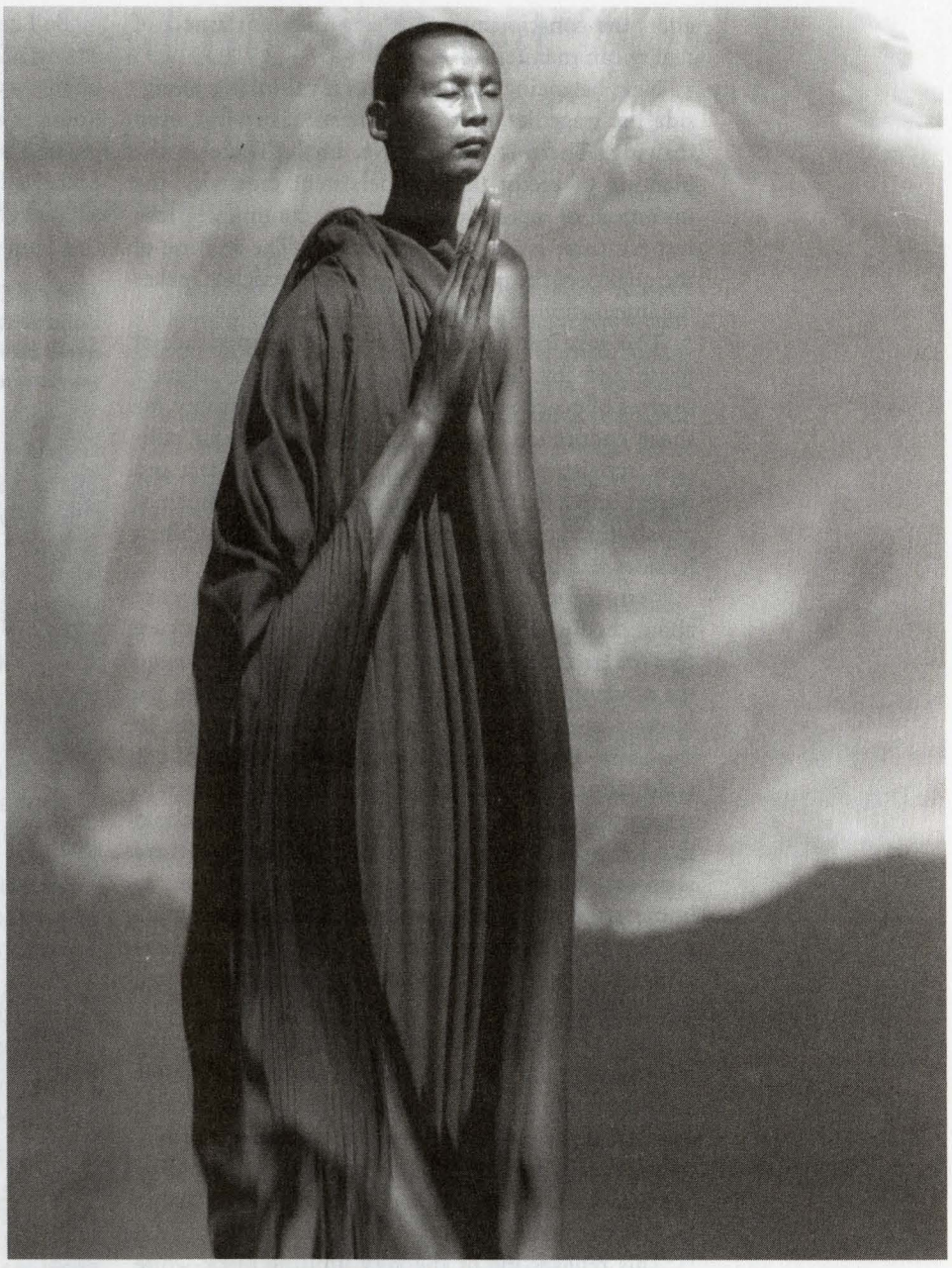
Imagine filling these horrors with your mother's sadness, your grandmother's weeping, your great-grandmother's fear, your great-great-grandmother's terror. I understand these images of collective history as embedded in and defining my small, singular consciousness (but is any consciousness small or singular?). I understand these experiences as shaping the very dynamic of my family, including some of our contemporary dysfunction. It is quite a lot to bear.

And yet there is more. This grief expands because, sadly, the details of suffering are not widely known. There are insufficient museums, films, books, and rituals to grieve those African and Native Americans who suffered.

So, as I turn my mind's eye toward the past, I feel alone. I feel isolated by American history education. I fear I am carrying this by myself. How I make peace and move into the strength necessary to do social justice work has everything to do with Zen practice and Buddhist sensibility.

To bear the meaning of history requires fortitude. Without the fortitude of will, mind, and body, one collapses from despair or burnout when trying to hold the gaze of history. In my experience of Buddhist practice, everything eventually rises to consciousness. In time, all of your shit, all of your memories, thoughts, dreams, even a connection to collective consciousness, rise to the video screen of your mind. Zen practice, sitting and breathing before the stream of history, builds strength into the spine and breath that makes holding this difficult gaze possible.

There are elements of the consciousness that are resistant to will, reason, or knowledge. Even though I know that Africa(ns) survived and Native American culture persists, this knowledge offers little relief. My thinking is drawn obsessively into images of tragedy. The knowledge of survival has little or no impact on my ability to create peace within my consciousness. It is the practice of meditation, sitting, breathing that



Elisabeth Sunday,
Path of Dharma

Elisabeth Sunday is a photographic artist who travels all over the world to create her images of indigenous people and spiritual teachers. She is based in Oakland, California.

alters the consciousness so that a different aspect of reality can manifest.

New, balancing thoughts enter my thinking: alongside the tragedies, there is endurance, survival, even thriving. There is music, love, birth. There is the planting of seeds; there is persistent creativity, the invention of new ideas. There is community and respect, there is vast spiritual energy. The shifting of the quality of the mind created by Zen practice makes the integration of this side of history possible.

This gaze into history can block our experience of peace and joy. Social justice work requires regular sources of peace and joy for renewal, for creativity, for sheer endurance. Without happiness, without stillness, activists and cultural workers burn out fast and retreat into a destructive cynicism. I retrieve much of my ability to experience peace and joy from Buddhist folklore and practice.

I remember the story of the mustard seed, a story about the Buddha's teachings on death. I am not sure that the translation is correct and I don't care. I forego the academic rigors of exact teaching and receive the luscious sweetness of community, family, friends. In this story, a woman who was grieving the loss of her child comes to the Buddha for help. He tells her to return to him with a mustard seed from a household that has not been touched by death. Of course, there is no such household. The woman goes from home to home, speaking of her tremendous loss. In her journey, she finds solace and comfort from others, and she gives solace and comfort to others who have suffered similar loss.

From this story, I receive another brilliant, loving improvement on my historical framework: my people are among All People who have suffered innumerable oppressions and wars. To broaden one's sense of history beyond the bloodline into the human line requires a wide view, a perspective of humanity that includes and transcends clan identification.

This relieves me of the very limiting black-white American dualism. I remember the presence and importance of Asians/Asian Americans, Latina/os, Jews, and many more. I remember those who are bi- and polyracial and have deep connection to more than one cultural identity. I think of all the cultures and classes compressed into the word "white" and how unfair and limiting that is to people who bear that identification.

In this regrounding Buddhist practice, I can participate in my simple humanness while holding the harsh gaze of history. In the center of the ever-returning breath, I am able to remember our many mis-uses of power. In the simplicity of the mustard seed, I remember we all face and know death, life, and rebirth. In sitting, I realize the ability to do the work to bring peace.

So I am a Buddhist. I sit. I breathe. When I am not sitting, sometimes I try to work through the problems of history and community. Folktales and teachings, however sparse and naive, help bring buoyancy and joy into my mind. From these thoughts and practices I receive the energy and hope necessary to be responsible as a cultural activist in our troubled world. For this I am grateful. ❖

Michelle T. Clinton is a poet living in Richmond, California. Good Sense & the Faithless, *from West End Press, is her most recent book of poetry. She is currently working on a book on spiritual health for the chronically ill.*

For those readers who want to take a little personal responsibility, here is:

A Jive-Buddhist's Checklist for Privileged Americans on How to Welcome Diversity into Your Sangha

0. You must make peace with your cultural karma. You must seek to behave in culturally sensitive ways.

1. Seek sources of multicultural education in our expansive media. Books, film, Web sites, cultural events, and so on can build a wonderful cultural framework. Just like meditation, this needs to be a steady, lifelong commitment and has tremendous long-term benefit. (There is pleasure here. Don't miss the pleasure.)

2. Guilt can be a good thing. For a while. Seek to evolve out of it.

3. Counter the impulse to seek absolution of guilt through conversations with people of less privilege. It makes many of them uncomfortable. It is your task to be sensitive to that discomfort and take your necessary questions deeper into yourself, your family, and others who share your background.

4. Seek sincere crosscultural friendship and community. Do not live in all-white neighborhoods. Do not indulge all-white restaurants, schools, bookstores, markets, etc.

5. If there appear to be contradictions in this list, good.

6. Ignore me. Find your own way.

Mindfulness and the Beloved Community

by Charles Johnson

If we wish to understand the special meaning that the Buddhadharma has for blacks in America—and why in the 21st century it may be the next step in our spiritual evolution toward what Martin Luther King Jr. called the "beloved community"—we need look no farther than the teaching of mindfulness, which is the root and fruit of all Buddhist practice. In Sanskrit, the word for mindfulness is *smriti,* which means "remembrance, recollection, or memory." One important variation on smriti is s*mritimat,* which means "possessing full consciousness." Bhikkhu Bodhi explains this core Dharma teaching succinctly when he says:

> The task of Right Mindfulness is to clear up the cognitive field. Mindfulness brings to light experience in its pure immediacy. It reveals the object as it is before it has been plastered over with conceptual paint, overlaid with interpretations. To practice mindfulness is thus a matter not so much of doing but of undoing: not thinking, not judging, not associating, not planning, not imagining, not wishing.

For black Americans in the post–Civil Rights period, this systematic undoing of the cultural indoctrination, the "conceptual paint" we have received from a very decadent, violent, materialistic, and Eurocentric society, is crucial for our liberation, personally and as a people. The situation of being a racial minority in a predominantly white country—this provincial, Western fishbowl, or "wasteland," as T. S. Eliot described it—is rife with ironies and dangers. One of the greatest ironies is that black Americans for centuries had to be open to more than one cultural orientation. We had to know how to "read" American society in at least two ways—first in terms of what we knew about the enormous contributions African Americans have made to this country since the time of the 17th-century colonies, a knowledge gleaned from other black people and from unrecorded stories transmitted by family members and friends, which whites ignored, didn't know, or marginalized in their history books and "mainstream" media. Secondly, we had to understand, as any social (or racial) outsider must, the cultural formations of a WASP society simply because such intimate knowing of the white Other was necessary for navigating successfully through America's institutions (schools, jobs, social situations, etc.).

That "double consciousness," as W. E. B. Du Bois put it 100 years ago in *The Souls of Black Folk,* creates a valuable critical distance. When you look at American materialism and decadence, DuBois said in 1926, "you know in your heart that these are not the things you really want. You realize this sooner than the average white American because, pushed aside as we have been in America, there has come to us not only a certain distaste for the tawdry and flamboyant but a vision of what the world could be if it were really a beautiful world."

We know that until recently the white Weltanschaang was myopic and blissfully ignored the history, lives, and philosophical visions of people of color, privileging and prioritizing instead the ideas, texts, and experiences of whites as the universal standard for the good, the true, and the beautiful. This is, of course, to be expected in a country where those of European descent still control so much of the cultural apparatus that shapes public (and popular) consciousness. If one is in the majority, unenlightened, and holds the reins of power in the realm of samsara—the world of racial dualism, egotism, and Them vs. Us—one naturally defines the world in one's own (white) image.

There is much of great value in the Western world, but many WASPs too often are, sadly, hesitant to experience the world beyond the parochial fishbowl they have created. This is a form of spiritual and intellectual laziness we black people cannot afford if we hope to survive in a society long hostile to us. From the beginning of our Western experience we have been positioned, culturally, to be open to all racial Others, to explore and absorb multiple visions of human experience, Western and Eastern. We are a people forged, as writer Albert Murray once said, as "Omni-Americans."

That openness to, say, the East can serve us well in contemporary America. For in today's Western fishbowl, the American mind, black or white, is conditioned day and night to resemble the famous "monkey mind" described by the 19th-century philosopher Vivekananda in *Raja Yoga:*

> There was a monkey, restless by its own nature, as all monkeys are. As if that were not enough, someone made him drink freely of wine, so that the monkey became still more restless. Then a scorpion stung him. When a man is stung by a scorpion, he jumps about for a whole day; so the poor monkey found his condition worse than ever. To complete his misery a

> demon entered into him. What language can describe the uncontrollable restlessness of that monkey? The human mind is like that monkey, incessantly active by its own nature; then it becomes drunk with the wine of desire, thus increasing its turbulence. After desire takes possession comes the sting of the scorpion of jealousy of the success of others, and last of all the demon of pride enters the mind, making it think itself of all importance. How hard to control such a mind.

How difficult, indeed, especially for black people who know America is still, for the most part, a racially balkanized nation, and who find here so many negative images of themselves mirrored back by popular culture. Fortunately, the Buddhadharma provides, through mindfulness and other meditational practices, time-honored techniques for taming the labile mind. For undoing the received and generally biased interpretations of the world (and Madison Avenue's endless propaganda of having and getting) with which this society bombards all its citizens. Those practices deliver to us, phenomenologically, a perception of the world before it has been mediated by the language of samsaric influences, for mindfulness is, if nothing else, the practice of radical attention. Of clear seeing. Of listening, which is one of the attributes of love, or *metta* (lovingkindness). When we practice moment-by-moment mindfulness, or vipassana ("insight meditation"), as outlined in the *Mahasatipatthana Sutra,* we carefully and dispassionately observe all that arises and passes through the mind, but without clinging or attachment, "contemplating feelings as feelings...mind as mind...[and] mind objects as mind objects." After decades of practice, we trust, as Shakyamuni Buddha counseled his followers, only what is empirically given in our direct experience, and we let go the illusions created by social conditioning, by a flawed, Eurocentric educational system, and by a language steeped in metaphysical dualism. (As Thomas Hobbes once said, "Speech has something in it like a spider's web.") The result, as Alex Kennedy reminds us in *The Buddhist Vision,* is that the practitioner of Dharma tames his mind, knows where his thoughts have come from, is able to distinguish what in the mind is the product of past conditioning and what is genuine. He lives in the here and now. He is epistemologically humble, respecting the mystery that lies at the heart of Being. And he knows as well that whatever we find of value in our life's experiences—all the teachers and texts and practices—are simply tools to serve our enlightenment and liberation. After we have crossed to the "other shore," we can "let go" of these tools, just as one would not cling or be attached to a boat after it has taken us across the sea (of suffering).

Through mindfulness African Americans will experience a long-deferred peace. In fact, we will be peace embodied.

Among the unnecessary baggage that mindfulness allows us to let go is the tragic belief in a separate, enduring (black) self. It slashes away, as effectively as does Ockham's Razor (which says we should avoid postulating entities to account for what can be explained without them or, scientifically, when presented with two hypotheses that explain something, it's best to select the simpler one), the narrow, obscuring ego. When that ego is gone we experience what Thich Nhat Hanh calls our "interbeing," his neologism for dependent origination (*pratityasamutpada*). As Dr. King put it, "We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

Through mindfulness, the Four Noble Truths, and the "three jewels" of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, African Americans will experience a long-deferred peace. In fact, we will be peace embodied. We will experience not only solace in the face of life's general sufferings (sickness, old age, and death) but also a clarifying refuge from white racism, and certain crippling, samsaric aspects of black American life, by which I mean the socially conditioned thirst and attachment too many black people have for transitory, material possessions and ephemeral pleasures that have been so long denied. Reams have already been written about the devastating effects that black-on-black crime, drugs, gang violence, the high incarceration rate for young black men, and the preponderance of single-parent homes have on our fragile communities. These dysteleological aspects of black life do not simply have sociological and economic causes. Behind those we find deeper layers of selfish desire, much self-inflicted suffering, and the chimera of the ego.

Such problems can only be addressed if the Revolution first begins within each and every one of us. Only if we can let our hearts flower open 24/7 to a life of nonviolence (physically and verbally) and to *ahimsa* (harmlessness) toward all sentient beings who, after all, want only the same two things we do—happiness and to avoid suffering. And only if we tame our tempestuous "monkey minds" through the daily practice of mindfulness, which can be realized anywhere and at any time: when we sit, walk, wash the dishes, or do any worldly task, for in Buddhism there is no distinction (or dualism) between the sacred and profane.

As the great dialectician Nagarjuna revealed to us, samsara is nirvana. The everyday is the holy. The dream-world of samsara—of so much suffering—is

(continued on page 42)

Inside a Triple Parentheses

Being a Black Buddhist in the U.S.

by Ramon Calhoun

When I received the e-mail last year announcing that *Turning Wheel* would focus its Summer 2003 issue on African American Buddhists, my heart jumped and adrenaline surged through my veins. I was elated and excited, to say the least. The fact that black Buddhists would be spotlighted and given an opportunity to express their thoughts, feelings, and identity on being both black and Buddhist to a larger community of Buddhists seemed to me so right on, so culturally fascinating, so cool. So I decided to write a piece myself. But first I had to ask myself if I was a black Buddhist.

I am not a "declared" Buddhist, nor do I identify myself solely as African American. Let me explain. I have not taken the Buddhist vows, the "Threefold Refuge" (I take refuge in the Buddha; I take refuge in the Dharma; I take refuge in the Sangha), by which one declares oneself a Buddhist; thus I do not tell people that I am a Buddhist. Second, I am a mixture of Japanese American and African American, so I identify myself as both, as "black-Japanese," or "Afro-Asian," or simply as mixed. Mestizo. And sometimes, Hapa.

Buddhism and the African American experience exert powerful influences on my being, my thinking, and how I define myself. Buddhism guides and informs my life right now. Meditation, in the traditions of Zen and vipassana, helps ground and center me in our fast-paced and consumer-based capitalist society. In addition, Buddhist precepts and concepts such as impermanence, compassion, nonattachment, and constant awareness have had a deep impact on me. I think about these things every day, and I strive to apply them as guiding principles in how I conduct myself in the world.

Also, the fact that I have African American ancestors, and African American genes and "blood," has had a huge impact on how I see myself in this society, and how I see the world in general. Being mixed with Japanese ancestry has certainly not prevented me from experiencing both subtle and overt forms of discrimination because of my black background. As is common with most blacks living in the U.S., I've encountered and experienced my share of racism and bigotry from whites, and from the Asian American community too. So I feel that I'm Buddhist enough, and black enough, to say something about the black Buddhist experience, and perhaps provide a different perspective.

Black ≠ Buddhist

Being both black and Buddhist in our society seems a cultural oddity. And perhaps this is true. The U.S. is still overwhelmingly Christian: 76.5 percent of the population (roughly 159 million people). The percentage of Buddhists, on the other hand, is half a percent, about a million people (according to *www.adherents.com*). So being Buddhist in this country is an anomaly. Most Western-convert Buddhist sanghas are composed mainly of whites/European Americans (and highly educated, middle-/upper-middle-class whites at that), with a very small number of people of color. Within this group there is an even tinier fraction of African Americans. So black Buddhists comprise a minority within a minority within a minority, or a parenthesis within a parenthesis within a parenthesis (((BB))). A triple parentheses.

For many, the image of Buddhism brings Asian culture and people to mind. Few would think of white people, even though whites' fascination with Buddhism has helped to popularize it in the West. Black people, African Americans, certainly do not come to mind when one thinks of Buddhism.

Conversely, when one thinks of black people and black culture, a whole host of complex associations come about: positive associations such as jazz, blues, and soul music, Civil Rights leaders, the church, spirituals, perseverance, improvisation, poets/spoken word artists, and sports heroes, among others. But often what comes to mind too are negative images and stereotypes—the inner city, poverty, crime, welfare, violence, and gangs. One does not tend to think of Buddhism when thinking about black people and black culture.

There is perhaps a belief that black and Buddhist are opposite in terms of manner, outlook, and culture. Buddhists are usually thought of as being serene, contemplative, deliberate, displaying equanimity. Think of Buddhist statues or Zen rock gardens. Blacks, on the other hand, are usually thought of as being outspoken, expressive, emotional, forceful. Think of the blues, jazz, and eloquent speakers like Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X.

So being a "black Buddhist" confounds people's expectations. It's a good thing to deconstruct the usual notions about what black is, and what

There is a small Buddhist altar in my grandparents' living room, next to the television. My grandma puts food on it–oranges and *manju* (rice cakes)–and prays in front of it every day.

Buddhism is, and the very appearance of African Americans at sittings and sanghas can have this effect.

The Winding Road to Buddhism and Meditation

My path to Buddhism has been circuitous. I was raised in a Japanese American environment and culture, and Buddhism as a religion was always in the background. There is a small Buddhist altar in my grandparents' living room, next to the television. My grandma puts food on it—oranges and *manju* (rice cakes)—and prays in front of it every day.

Funeral ceremonies were always Buddhist, usually held in Buddhist "churches" or temples (where the majority of the members are Japanese or Japanese American), with long chanting of sutras by the priest, and sprinkling incense into the large bowl before the shrine. But Buddhism remained a mystery to me. The meaning behind the rituals was never explained. Questions such as "What are the bracelets that people wear?" and "What is the symbolism of incense?" were never answered. Rituals were only to be followed. Thus Buddhism was remote, almost impenetrable. Like Americans of my generation who come from a Christian background, I didn't really know much about Buddhism as a religion, and I certainly didn't practice it. Even now I don't know the exact name of the Buddhist order my Japanese American family belongs to. And to this day my mother, who is 61 years old, doesn't really understand the significance of certain Buddhist rites, such as the 49th-day service for a deceased family member.

Other Buddhists can learn from the particular experience of black Buddhists in America—they can learn that hatred and anger and pain can be transformed.

It wasn't until I traveled to India, a few years after I graduated from college, that I started to become interested in Buddhism, both as a religion and as a spiritual practice. I met a fellow traveler who told me about a free course on vipassana meditation he was going to take. I decided to check it out, trekked to Igatpuri, the small town where it was being held, and after jumping right into a 10-day silent meditation retreat—which I found both challenging and easy—my life was seriously altered. I began to read Buddhist texts such as the *Dhammapada* and *The Word of the Buddha.* I visited Buddhist sites in India, such as the Ajanta caves and the village of Bodhgaya where the historical Buddha gained enlightenment. Whether I realized it or not, I was on a spiritual quest.

A year later, back in the States, my interest in Buddhism continued, but in a more academic manner. I read books more for knowledge and information than anything else. As for my spirit, I hadn't meditated since the retreat in India, and for some reason didn't want to. My experience at Igatpuri was so intense that I had to let it play out in my system—I wasn't ready yet to meditate again. After a while my interest in Buddhism waned, and three or four years after my travels to India I seemed to lose interest completely. Books on Buddhism that I hadn't yet read remained on the shelf, collecting dust.

It wasn't until recently that my interest in Buddhism was renewed, and this time it was in terms of a spiritual practice and meditation. When I broke up with my girlfriend in late 2000, I felt isolated, disjointed, unmoored, like a raft drifting in an endless sea. I thus gravitated quite naturally to meditation as something that would sustain and nourish me. Somehow I heard about people-of-color sittings at both the San Francisco Zen Center and the San Francisco Buddhist Center. Both places had independently organized monthly POC (or BOC, Buddhists of Color) sittings, and so I started attending them later that year.

I was ready to meditate again, almost eight years later. Finally.

It's been good. I've been meditating since then, attending retreats when I can, and though I don't meditate as consistently as I would like during the busy workweek, I nonetheless feel a discipline and commitment to the practice that was never there before. It seems to be a definite part of my life now.

People-of-Color Sanghas

Sanghas are very important as communities of practitioners; they provide inspiration and support and understanding. The people-of-color sanghas at the SFZC and the SF Buddhist Center arose out of a need for people of color to have their own space, their own community. In the established sanghas and Buddhist centers there were often only one or two nonwhite persons at retreats, so they were likely to feel isolated from their white Buddhist peers and not completely comfortable. The POC sanghas were created so that ethnic minorities would feel at ease and would have a safe space in which to practice, as well as to talk about whatever is going on in our lives, to discuss issues that are of concern to us.

These POC sanghas are invaluable. I have learned much from them, and continue to improve my practice and increase my knowledge about these Buddhist traditions. The sanghas are also quite diverse in their own right, with the majority of people being from various Asian ethnicities (Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Koreans). There are also a smaller number of Latinos

(of different nationalities and ethnic groups) and a few mixed-ethnic people. There are around 15 or 20 people who normally show up. Black practitioners are few and far between. I'm usually one of two or three blacks who come to these POC meditation sittings. If there are four or five of us—my god, it's time to celebrate! My eyes light up when I see another black person in the group. I suppose this has to do with sharing a similar experience, having a different connection that doesn't exist with the other people. Then too, I'm just fascinated that other black people are into Buddhism and meditation like me.

How, I want to know, did these black people get involved in Buddhism and Buddhist meditation? My exposure to Buddhism was through my own family, through the traditions and ceremonies of my Japanese American side; thus it's a cultural inheritance of mine. It was there for me to either accept or reject, to explore more deeply on my own, or to simply let it remain in the background, like wallpaper. But for these other black folk who come to the POC sanghas, what was their path to Buddhism?

Geoffrey I. Nwogu, *Namu Myoho Renge Kyo*

Nigerian artist Geoffrey I. Nwogu shows his work in museums and galleries all over the world. He has lived in San Francisco since 1986, and practices with Soka Gakkai International, which, he says, "reaffirms the values I learned from my parents."

The Wisdom of Black Buddhist Teachers

I have attended a few daylong retreats and talks at Buddhist centers, and the ones that were especially instructional for me had black Buddhist teachers and speakers. Reverend Bhante Suhita Dharma (ordained in the Tibetan and Vietnamese Zen traditions of Buddhism) held a daylong retreat at SFZC in early 2002 that was particularly memorable for me. Bhante Dharma is an engaged Buddhist, and has worked with prison inmates, homeless people, people with AIDS, and geriatric patients. He has a gentle soul, and his large eyes radiate wisdom. I was also fortunate to hear Jan Willis speak. Professor Willis is the chair of Religious Studies at Wesleyan University, and in the 1960s spent time at a Tibetan monastery in Nepal (the only woman among 60 monks). Her talk was "down home," not academic at all, which was cool, and her style reminded me of a jazz musician as she improvised on various and recurring themes.

Both are inspirational figures who have transcended the expectations (and limitations) put upon them. The teachings of people like Bhante Suhita Dharma and Jan Willis have more meaning for me because as black people they have been through the cauldron of racism in this country. This is especially true for older-generation folks like them. They know intimately the First Noble Truth of Buddhism—that in life there is suffering. There are various reasons for suffering for all people (birth, decay, death, sorrow, pain, grief, unfulfilled desires), and for African Americans there are further reasons: racism and the lingering effects of slavery (segregation, discrimination, poverty, drug- and crime-infested neighborhoods, unequal access to quality education, limited job opportunities). Bhante Suhita Dharma and Jan Willis know all too well the pain of being black in a society that constantly degrades and dehumanizes black people, and they have had to deal with and confront this pain on their Buddhist path.

I too have had to confront these powerful emotions in my path of understanding and learning Buddhism. And that's why I respect them and feel that they have more to offer me as teachers. Their compassion is borne out of the deep conflicts that

they have had to come to terms with. It is borne out of the deep waters of human experience that they each have been submerged in. I listen to what they have to say, and it penetrates deeply.

Black Buddhist teachers have used powerful emotions such as hatred, anger, and pain as aids to better understand the meaning of compassion, and connectedness to humanity. As aids to better understand impermanence—that feelings (whether anger or joy, pain or happiness) come and go, that nothing lasts forever. As aids to better understand one's feelings for oneself and one's feelings for others. As aids to better understand the consequences of both our thoughts and actions.

It's a struggle and a challenge to be a black person and a Buddhist in the U.S. Other Buddhists can learn from the particular experience of black Buddhists in America—they can learn that hatred and anger and pain can be transformed, can be used to deepen one's connection with another human being.

Beacons of Light

I still have a lot to learn—in life, in meditation, in Buddhism. It will take a lifetime, and then some. But people like Bhante Suhita Dharma and Jan Willis are beacons for me; they inspire me to keep practicing meditation, to keep striving to better understand myself and others, to continue deepening my compassion, to be open to new ideas and new experiences, and to see life not as full of limitations but as full of wonder, full of achievement, full of possibility. ❖

Ramon Calhoun is a native San Franciscan who works for an educational nonprofit in Berkeley. He frequently attends the POC sittings at the SF Buddhist Center, and hopes to do another 10-day silent meditation retreat.

Mindfulness and the Beloved Community

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the projection of our and others' sedimented delusions and selfish desires (Bhikkhu Bodhi's "conceptual paint") onto nirvana. Yet, samsara is logically prior to and necessary for our awakening to nirvana, which in Sanskrit means "to blow out" (*nir,* out; *vana,* blow). When that is achieved, we—as a people—will know greater joy, freedom, and abundant creativity; and we will realize, like the poet Bunan, the transcendent beauty and liberation that lies beyond a false sense of dualism:

The moon's the same old moon,
The flowers exactly as they were,
Yet I've become the thingness
Of all the things I see. ❖

Charles Johnson is a writer and professor at the University of Washington in Seattle. His new book Turning the Wheel: Essays on Buddhism and Writing *is reviewed on page 47.*

Resources for and about African American Buddhists

Books, Audio/Video

Being Black: Zen and the Art of Living with Fearlessness and Grace by Angel Kyodo Williams (Viking Compass, 2000). Writing from her perspective as a black woman and ordained Soto Zen priest, Williams offers principles and tools for overcoming greed, anger, and fear in order to achieve self-acceptance and community empowerment in terms easily understood by readers not familiar with Buddhism. While essentially aimed at the black reader, this book offers practical guidelines for readers of any faith or race who are interested in a beginning look at Zen teachings. *—Virginia Hickey*

Buddhist Women on the Edge: Contemporary Perspectives from the Western Frontier edited by Marianne Dresser (North Atlantic Books, 1996). Includes essays by bell hooks, Lori Pierce, and Jan Willis.

Dreaming Me: From Baptist to Buddhist, An African American Woman's Spiritual Journey by Jan Willis. See review, page 44.

Finding Freedom: Writings from Death Row by Jarvis Jay Masters (Padma Publishing, 1997). Masters began and continues his Buddhist practice in his cell in San Quentin, where he has been incarcerated since age 19. Now on death row, he writes movingly about his efforts to overcome the violence of prison life. Available from Padma Publishing, 877/479-6129, or from the Free Jarvis Web site, *http://www.freejarvis.org.* The Web site also contains information about Masters's life, his legal case, and efforts to get him released from prison.

Making the Invisible Visible: Healing Racism in Our Buddhist Communities. Booklet prepared by a group of Buddhists of color for a conference of Western Buddhist teachers at Spirit Rock in June 2000. Contains personal essays by people of color and their allies about the impact of racism, practical suggestions and strategies for making predominantly white sanghas more inclusive, an excellent bibliography, and a variety of diversity-related resources (several of which are also mentioned here). Available at *www.spiritrock.org/html/diversity_2invisible. html* or in printed/bound form from the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, $7 per copy (postage included), 510/655-6169.

Pema Chödrön and Alice Walker in Conversation, audio cassette or videotape, available from Sounds True, 800/333-9185, *www.soundstrue.com.*

Turning the Wheel: Essays on Buddhism and Writing by Charles Johnson. See review, page 47. See also his books *Middle Passage,* (Simon & Schuster, 1998) and *Oxherding Tale* (Dutton/Plume, 1995).

Rock My Soul: Black People and Self-Esteem by bell hooks. See review, page 44.

Internet

Black Practitioners of Nichiren Shoshu, *www.proudblackbuddhist.org.* Independent, unofficial Web site for African and African American practitioners of Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism, published by Anthony Elmore, a longtime Nichiren Shoshu practitioner.

Diversity Page at Spirit Rock Web site, *www. spiritrock.org/html/diversity.html.* Information on various resources, including retreats at Spirit Rock (Marin County, CA) for people of color, an ongoing meditation and discussion group for women of color, interviews with African American Buddhist practitioners George Mumford, Lawrence Ellis, and Ralph M. Steele, and the Diversity and Multicultural Initiative at Spirit Rock.

Internet Listserve for Black Buddhists. To subscribe, e-mail: <blackbuddhists-subscribe@yahoogroups.com>. For information about a separate list for Buddhists of color, contact <boc_caretakers@hotmail.com>.

Rainbow Dharma, *www.rainbowdharma.com.* Founded by Choyin Rangdröl, an African American lay teacher in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition and the author of two booklets, *Buddhist Meditations for African Americans* and *Black Buddha: Living Without Fear,* both available from the Web site. The site also includes a calendar of events (primarily in the San Francisco Bay Area), Dharma teachings, and discussions on a variety of topics.

UrbanPEACE Initiative, *www.urbanpeace.org.* Founded by Angel Kyodo Williams to integrate awareness and individual transformation with social activism. Sponsors a variety of events, retreats, trainings, and projects, including newDHARMA, which provides a forum for teaching by Dharma teachers of color. Operates primarily in New York City.

Groups, Gatherings, and Dharma Communities

Brooklyn Buddhist Association and **Direct Mind Zendo.** Both organizations are associated with the Jikishinkan Aikido Dojo in New York, headed by Joseph Jarman, an African American Aikido master, Jodo Shinshu priest, Zen teacher, and jazz musician. The Brooklyn Buddhist Association is dedicated to Shin (Pure Land) practice; the Direct Mind Zendo practices Rinzai Zen and a variety of Zen arts. See *www.directmind.com/buddhism.htm.*

Informal Gatherings in Oakland, CA. A weekly event every Wednesday for meditators of color, meets 6:30 P.M. at the Organic Cafe, 1050 40th Street (between Market and Adeline), near Macarthur BART station. Phone: 510/653-6510. Vegan dinners at the cafe range from $7 to $11.

Mindfulness, Diversity, and Social Change Sangha. See Announcements, p. 53.

Ordinary Dharma/Manzanita Village. A Buddhist community and retreat center in Warner Springs, California, offers retreats for people of color led by resident teacher Michele Benzamin-Miki, a biracial woman and a teacher of Aikido and Iaido. The community draws upon both vipassana practice and the Zen teaching of Thich Nhat Hanh. See *www.ordinarydharma.org.*

People of Color Sitting Group. Meets once a month on Sunday, 1:00–3:30 P.M., at San Francisco Buddhist Center, part of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO). The group also hosts occasional residential retreats for people of color. For more info, see *www.sfbuddhistcenter.org* and click on the "people of color" link, or contact Viveka at 415/282-5918; <viveka@igc.org>.

Retreats for Activists of Color. The Vallecitos Mountain Refuge in Taos, New Mexico, hosts a variety of retreats specifically for activists of color and for multicultural groups of activists. For details, see *www.vallecitos.org* and click on the "Retreats for Activists" link.

Sangha for Buddhists of Color. See Announcements, p. 53.

Soka Gakkai International. This is the most ethnically diverse form of Buddhism in the United States. It was formerly associated with Nichiren Shoshu, a Japanese Buddhist organization, but the two groups split several years ago. For more information, see *www.sgi_usa.org.*

Women of Color Sitting Group. Vipassana group meets monthly in Marin County, CA, facilitated by Marlene Jones, a woman of African ancestry, activist, and longtime meditator. Info: 415/488-0164 x314.

The Color of Dharma. Various programs and events at San Francisco Zen Center, including sitting groups for people of color; a teacher-in-residence program for teachers of color; daylong retreats and teachings for people of color from all spiritual traditions; meditation instruction in Spanish; daylong events for people of color and their allies; and diversity training for Zen Center staff and residents. A weekly meditation and discussion group for people of color meets Thursdays 7–8:30 P.M. For more information see *www.sfzc.org* or contact Lee Lipp, 415/863-3761; <sfzclee@yahoo.com>.

The Dharma of Martin Luther King Jr. Weekend course at San Francisco Zen Center with Hozan Alan Senauke of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, Saturday–Sunday, August 16–17, 2003. Participants will study MLK's writings and actions, and share experiences and concerns. Cost: $80; $72 for SFZC members. For more information, see *www.sfzc.org.*

The Untraining, workshops designed to help white people unlearn racism. See Announcements, page 53. ❖

—compiled by Shannon Hickey

Dreaming Me: From Baptist to Buddhist, An African American Woman's Spiritual Journey

by Jan Willis

Riverhead Books, 2001; 321 pp.; $14.00 (paper)

Reviewed by Sandy Boucher

In some ways, Jan Willis's story mirrors that of many gifted young African Americans who were of an age to participate in the civil rights struggles of the '60s. They were given chances to study at first-rate colleges, where they worked hard to educate themselves; many of them went on to compete for jobs and carve out substantial careers. Willis left a childhood of poverty in the South to attend Cornell and Columbia Universities, and later became a professor at Wesleyan University. But her path turned in a surprising direction when she traveled to India as an undergraduate and tasted the power of Tibetan Buddhism. She returned to India for graduate study, forged a strong lifelong bond with Lama Yeshe, the charismatic Tibetan monk who established the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT), and embarked on a career in Buddhist scholarship. She is one of the few African American female Buddhist scholars in the universe.

The saga of Jan Willis's life sometimes cuts deep, as when she describes the burning cross on her lawn in Alabama, put there by the Klan, who thought her too uppity because she had won a scholarship to a northern school. At Cornell she found herself at the center of black student activism, and was a hair's breadth from joining the Black Panther Party. Her decision to go to India, instead, to study Buddhism determined her future. It was not so much an intellectual decision as an honoring of her essential nature, which was peaceful and rational; her Buddhist practice and studies reinforced this innate disposition.

Willis explores the pain of being an African American in a white world; she struggles to reconcile her strong Baptist upbringing with her equally strong commitment to Buddhist philosophy and practice. Some of her stories—like her being dragged unwillingly to accept Jesus in a revival tent—sparkle with humor. Her depiction of the Tibetan Buddhist monastery and monks and her own somewhat unlikely presence there is appealingly modest and vivid. Her love for her family and efforts to keep in lively contact with them give a strong sense of the support she feels from this earliest relationship.

The "dreaming" of the title refers to a series of threatening and puzzling dreams about lions, which hint at a secret truth. Inside this brilliant high achiever lurked a timid creature often uncertain of her worth. Through her Buddhist tantric practice over the years, her close association with the luminous and warmly encouraging Lama Yeshe, and her own success as a scholar and teacher, Jan Willis ultimately settles into a sense of her own value and the extraordinary gift she brings to the world. In a final dream, she becomes the lion she had so feared, and learns to roar.

This is a fascinating memoir, well written, thoughtful, and challenging. I read the book with renewed liking and respect for Willis, and finished it with gratitude for her presence in this world. ❖

Sandy Boucher is the author of Hidden Spring: A Buddhist Woman Confronts Cancer *and six other books. She met Willis in 1985 when she interviewed Willis for her book* Turning the Wheel: American Women Creating the New Buddhism.

Rock My Soul: Black People and Self-Esteem

by bell hooks

Atria Books, 2003; 226 pp.; $23.00 (clothbound)

Reviewed by Jacqueline A. Gross

On one of the final broadcasts of Bill Maher's late-night television talk show *Politically Incorrect,* a panel discussed whether the word "nigger" was OK to use at any time. On one side were the comedienne Mo'Nique and Dr. Randall Kennedy, author of *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word.* On the other sat Tempest Bledsoe, a former *Cosby* kid. (The fourth panelist, guitarist Dave Navarro, had sense enough to stay out of it.) As Mo'Nique insisted that "nigga" was different from "nigger," and that the former was

clearly a term of affection, Tempest resisted the idea that the words were different. For her, this was not a case of positively reclaiming a word; it was an invitation to self-destruction. To paraphrase her argument: "How could you reclaim a word that had such devastating consequences for our people?"

I thought of that broadcast as I read bell hooks's new book, *Rock My Soul: Black People and Self-Esteem.* Hooks is a well-known cultural critic, writer, and teacher whose early work had been a staple of feminist classrooms for nearly a decade. In the past few years, she's turned toward more focused examinations of class, race, politics, and love, and how they operate in the lives of black Americans. *Rock My Soul* is a hard, critical, yet necessary wakeup call to the diverse black communities, to promote our survival by building up our own systems of healthy self-esteem.

After reading a news magazine story about the failure of blacks to thrive in American society, hooks was compelled to ask:

> If racism was not to blame for a lack of progress in black life, then what could the issue be? No one seemed then or in recent times to be able to answer that question. While I never accepted the notion that black people had disappeared, I had begun to wonder why we were not doing more and why with so much opportunity and success on all fronts there was so much suffering in the lives of black folks. The suffering was not limited to the poor and the underclass. It had and has no relation to how much money we are making or how successful we are.

Through 16 dense chapters, hooks defines the ways that efforts to gain healthy self-esteem are sabotaged both within and without, and how that sabotage can be counteracted.

Hooks looks to the work of psychologist Nathaniel Branden for definitions of self-esteem: personal integrity, self-acceptance, self-responsibility, self-assertion, living consciously, and living purposefully. "Without self-esteem," she writes, "people begin to lose their sense of agency. They feel powerless. They feel they can only be victims." Her message, however, is that we can begin to cultivate healthy self-esteem at any time—but only by facing some very painful home truths, and then letting them go, so that they can no longer hurt us individually or collectively.

The beginnings of healthy self-esteem, in hooks's view, involve looking at how history has shaped our relationships with both the dominant white supremacist culture and with one another. Slaves created alternative ways of coping with the inhumanity of their condition, including putting up masks to prevent masters from seeing how abusive treatment affected their innermost selves, and developing their own standards of truth and personal integrity. Those same survival skills helped to sustain the efforts of black communities toward racial uplift, and throughout the Civil Rights movement. Self-esteem and the need for a holistic view of black life in America were a regular part of community discourse. However, as hooks notes, no psychological studies examined the effects of freedom on the lives of the newly emancipated, or later, the costs of integration:

> To gain optimal benefit from racial integration, black folks were compelled to surrender the oppositional subcultural values developed in a segregated context that often shielded the black psyche from the assaults that had been commonplace in the culture of whiteness.

In addition, the acceptance of patriarchal gender roles and violence as a means to an end succeeded in relegating love and self-worth to the back burner. hooks presents searing evidence of the ways that self-esteem and self-love have been ripped out of the lives of black men and women, not only by external forces but also by internal demons that constantly tell us that we are not worthy of being loved.

The only way that we'll make and sustain effective life changes is to consciously choose to save our own lives, releasing the fears and shame that have kept us silent and complicit in our own destruction. Also, African Americans must once more develop and value our capacity for critical thought and analysis, in order to critique the dominant capitalist consumer culture, which distorts the images and lives of black people on a daily basis. What we absorb serves only to chip away at self-esteem.

The effects of a racist educational system, intracommunal color caste issues, lingering traumas, and fears of abandonment also figure into hooks's analysis, as does the influence of religion and spirituality. Most of her views on this subject deal with the effects of fundamentalist Christian viewpoints on the community. However, much of what she

says also takes into account many of the different spiritual paths blacks choose to walk.

Finally, hooks provides concrete strategies in which self-esteem and mental health can be bolstered, inviting readers into the act of self-creation.

This is probably one of the most challenging of hooks's works that I have read to date. It definitely feels like a continued conversation from any number of her more recent books. I'm not necessarily in total agreement with her sweeping views of the black middle class, mostly because she doesn't take into account choices that parents such as mine may have made in order to ensure the survival of their children. I was left feeling at times that somehow those choices were wrong, or at least ill-advised, and I will probably go back and review those particular chapters again.

However, that does not detract from the importance of this work, which should be required reading for everyone who cares about the souls and lives of black people, both here in America and throughout the Diaspora. ❖

Jacqueline A. Gross lives in Oakland with her partner and is an Associate of the Order of the Holy Cross, an Episcopal/Anglican monastic community. Her work has appeared in a variety of women's publications including Womanews, Mama Bear's News and Notes, *and* Common Lives/Lesbian Lives.

Turning the Wheel: Essays on Buddhism and Writing

by Charles Johnson

Scribner, 2003; 208 pages; $23.00 (cloth)

Reviewed by Marianne Dresser

Charles Johnson is a modern Renaissance man. He is a scholar and professor of English at the University of Washington, and the author of a dozen books. In *Middle Passage, The Sorcerer's Apprentice, Oxherding Tale, Dreamer,* a reimagining of the life of Martin Luther King Jr., and in nonfiction works such as *Being and Race, Black Men Speaking,* and *Africans in America,* he mines African American—more accurately, American—history, culture, and experience. He is also a philosopher, cartoonist/humorist, martial artist, student of Sanskrit, and longtime Buddhist practitioner.

His new book is a collection of 16 essays organized in two parts, on Buddhism and on writing, particularly writing by or about African Americans. Discussing topics ranging from "The Elusive Art of Mindfulness" to "The Role of the Black Intellectual in the Twenty-first Century," Johnson explores a wide field of ideas to illuminate central questions of identity and freedom. As he writes in his Preface:

> [M]y sense of black life in a predominantly white, very Eurocentric society—a slave state until 1863—was that our unique destiny as a people, our duty to our predecessors who sacrificed so much and for so long, and our dreams of a life of dignity and happiness for our children were tied inextricably to a profound and lifelong meditation on what it means to be free. Truly free.

Johnson's quest for freedom led him into a life of intellectual and spiritual inquiry, and this book offers a pleasing taste of the fruits of his journey. Reflecting on how Buddhist practice has shaped his life and work, he writes:

> Were it not for the Buddhadharma, I am convinced that, as a black American and artist, I would not have been able to successfully negotiate my last half century of life in this country.... Buddhism has always been a refuge, as it was intended to be: a place to continually refresh my spirit, stay centered and at peace.

Enriched by his knowledge of Sanskrit and classical and contemporary Buddhist texts, the essays in part one discuss core Buddhist teachings on the Eightfold Path, mindfulness, and sangha. This is an appealing form of Buddhist studies—rigorous in its scholarship and enlivened by the author's deep humanism and apparent joy in the beauty of the teachings. The Dharma is "a call for us to live in a state of radical freedom," and in these essays Johnson eloquently explores the challenges and ramifications of that call to freedom.

In part two, though the focus shifts to literature, the fierce spirit of inquiry is the same. Johnson examines how black writers and thinkers have been set apart from the "mainstream" of American intellectual life, and challenges the limited role to which they have been relegated, as chroniclers of "but one worldly subject: *themselves,*" while white intellectuals are free to explore a variety of human endeavors—religion, science, history, philosophy. This section also offers literary analysis of such icons as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man,* and less-known (to non–English professors) works such as *Kingsblood Royal* by Sinclair Lewis and John Gardner's *On Moral Fiction.*

The two final essays reflect a more personal tone. *"Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing"* is a brief history of the "Negro national anthem." And Johnson finds in "An American Milk Bottle," a memento of his grandfather's dairy business, a symbol of "the African-American world of hope, struggle, heroism, and long-deferred possibilities."

This collection of essays is informed by the depth of Johnson's way-seeking mind. Describing poet and writer Jean Toomer, his words might well apply to himself:

> A metaphysical seeker and searcher. A pioneering genius, which is a polite way of saying that among black writers (and most white ones)...he is a glorious oddity. To put it bluntly, colored men were not supposed to think about the perennial epistemological and ontological questions—Western and Eastern—that absorbed [him], or to think about them so well.

Like Johnson, I look forward to the day when one's legacy is valued not on the basis of whether they are black or white, male or female, or on any other category into which human beings are separated, but solely on the quality of their being and the freedom they have realized and offered to the world.

Marianne Dresser is Associate Editor of Turning Wheel.

BPF Reports

From the Interim Coordinators

Years ago, Walt Kelly's Pogo said, "We have met the enemy, and he is us!" These words seem the essence of engaged Buddhism, at least for Americans of our generation. The more deeply we look, the more we come to understand that those we see as enemies, as other, are not different from ourselves.

The time since 9/11 has been a long unfolding of the universal truth of suffering. One war was "won" in Afghanistan. Now warlords rule the Afghan countryside again, and the heroin trade, all but eradicated by the Taliban, has made a comeback. Another war has been "won" in Iraq. A made-for-TV crowd cheered the fall of Saddam's hollow statue. Then looters pillaged the National Museum of priceless manuscripts and treasures from the dawn of civilization. Iraqi protestors hold weekly demonstrations, urging the Yankees to go home. And it is no surprise that the "blowback" has begun with terrorist reprisals in Saudi Arabia and Morocco. Nearly 150 American soldiers were killed in Iraq. An estimated 3,000 to 5,000 Iraqi civilians also died. We will never know how many thousands of Iraqi soldiers lost their lives. Or how many Iraqis have been horribly wounded, or will suffer the poison of depleted uranium from the bombs we dropped there.

The proximate cause of this great and unnecessary suffering, some of us believe, lies in the actions of the Bush Administration. It is easy to blame them. We have watched with disbelief as they rolled out a seamless policy of preemptive war, media embedding, and corporate profiteering. Yet we are all party to this catastrophe. It is our family, our tribe, that is doing this grim work in the world. We simultaneously privilege and harm ourselves.

The roots of suffering are fear, hatred, greed, and delusion at both the individual and structural level. But what is it in our society that gives rise to such policies and structures of power? There may be a clue in the phrase "coalition of the willing." American people have been willing to accept primitive appeals to fear, patriotism, and pride by supporting our military buildup. In our yearning for comfort and security, all of us have helped create a global capitalism that devours the Earth and turns us into hungry ghosts.

The Buddha spoke about suffering and the end of suffering. We believe this includes the end of social suffering. We imagine a world where the structures of suffering are dismantled, where our social behavior reflects care and concern for one another. Many of us are heartsick over the war in Iraq. That war is not over. In a sense we failed, and that failure weighs heavily upon us. But we understand, too, that with continual effort and practice, even negative outcomes can turn to good. And we also acknowledge the good that arose from our opposition to the war. Around the world, millions were awakened to the call for peace. We took to the streets to say "no" to empire, and offered alternatives of generosity and diplomacy. We compelled the attention of a reluctant media and helped postpone the war for months.

The path to ending social suffering is a path of engagement. At BPF's Spring Board Retreat, Maia Duerr offered a mandala addressing our work for peace: 1) stopping harmful action, 2) educating and organizing, 3) healing divisions and polarities, and 4) building a culture of peace. The 2004 election offers us, at least, the possibility of a great public discussion of our concerns. Jim Lawson, a prominent civil rights leader from the '50s and '60s, is talking about a campaign to end U.S. militarism, on the same scale and with the same moral authority as the Civil Rights movement. The principles of Maia's mandala serve as guideposts as we engage with essential issues that face us as citizens of an American empire.

Zen Master Dogen wrote, "The mind of a sentient being is difficult to change.... We resolve to continue to transform them until they attain the Way." It is even more difficult to change our societies, and yet as we do our work we may find that change will take place slowly, imperceptibly, until it is suddenly realized. One day we may replace Pogo's words with those of John Lennon: "I am he as you are he as you are me and we are all together."

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Change is universal, even at BPF! The Board has approved a new leadership concept, with a three-person team—a National Coordinator, Administrative Coordinator, and *Turning Wheel* Editor. After a national search, we selected Janice Senju Baker as the Administrative Coordinator. She will join us in mid-June. Sue Moon will continue as *Turning Wheel* Editor. And Bob Lyons has accepted the Board's invitation to step down as Board President and take on the role of National Coordinator.

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This will be our last column together as BPF's Interim Coordinators. Our Interim Leadership Team—Martha Boesing, Bob Lyons, Sue Moon, and Alan Senauke—will

yield to new leadership soon. Since coming together after last October's board meeting, we have enjoyed working together. Our weekly meetings have been challenging, feisty, and fun. We learned to speak freely with each other and go deeply into questions confronting BPF. We are grateful, as well, to have been able to serve an organization we love and that the world seems to need. All of us also plan to be part of BPF for years to come. We hope you will be too.❖

—Robert Lyons & Alan Senauke

From the Prison Project

President Bush has declared victory in Iraq. Massive numbers of humans, animals, and plants are dead; the seeds of hatred and bitterness toward the American government have been sown worldwide. President Bush has been equally victorious on the domestic front: On March 18 (24 hours before the start of the "shock and awe" campaign), Louis Jones Jr. was executed by the federal government in Terre Haute, Indiana. He was an African American Gulf War I veteran.

In the last issue of *Turning Wheel* I wrote about the Listening Project, in which Judith Stronach and I asked passers-by what the American flag meant to them. Many said it symbolized American ideals they would like to share with other countries, like Afghanistan. But many of the ex-military I interviewed spoke of their disillusionment with the vision of America that had motivated them to enlist in the first place. I was moved by their courageous break with the traditionally patriotic line, though many had yet to find a new perspective to replace their old views. Our most vivid discussions involved searching for peaceful alternatives to war and bombing.

Louis Jones Jr. suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) from his Gulf War traumas. He was the third man to be executed in the federal system since federal executions were reinstated in 2001. The first was Timothy McVeigh, who, like Jones, had served in the military. Trial transcripts mention that he had been seen as an "outstanding soldier...the top gun in his platoon. [Other soldiers] said they felt safe in the Persian Gulf when they were with him because he was such a good gunner and such a strong soldier." His honed skills yielded tragic consequences. Another former soldier who committed murder was Manny Babbitt, executed at San Quentin State Prison in California on March 7, 2000. After returning to the U.S. from Vietnam he had ambushed and murdered an elderly grandmother—in the combat style he had learned in Vietnam.

Buddhadharma teaches the law of cause and effect. If you sow "A" then you reap an "A" result. However, an event seldom has only one cause. It tends to have a complex set of "causes and conditions" that, in their turn, lead to complex results. The current U.S. administration is not only engaging in a conflict that will lead to more wars, it is planting the seeds of violence in our children and setting the stage for future executions of PTSD-suffering war veterans.

The BPF national office is working to strengthen and extend the network of chapters and members who are engaged in prison Dharma work. If you'd like to connect with others doing this work, please e-mail us at <prisons@bpf.org>.

During the many execution vigils I have attended, I have thought: We are modeling to our kids that violence is the best response to conflict. We recruit young people into the military and train them to kill; then we honor them for it. Then, however, we take their lives with a death sentence when they come back from war with PTSD and continue to commit murder.

Research shows strong associations between PTSD and violence, including murder. Clarence Darrow, the famous American lawyer, referred to this association in his 1924 closing arguments of the Leopold and Loeb case:

> Your Honor knows that in this very court crimes of violence have increased, growing out of the war. Not necessarily [only] by those who fought but by those that learned that blood was cheap, and human life was cheap, and if the State could take it lightly why not the boys? There are causes for this terrible crime. There are causes, as I have said, for everything that happens in the world. War is a part of it; education is a part of it; birth is a part of it; money is a part of it—all these conspired to compass the destruction of these two poor boys.

Since the Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976, we have fed 852 people into the jaws of our execution machines. They have been disproportionately people of color, poor people, and working class people. This national practice is continuing to create the conditions that lead to an endless cycle of violence in this country and others.

As we survey the domestic consequences of the violence we have spread abroad, let us continue our work to end the death penalty. We have to plan a wise and functional strategy toward this goal. Securing a moratorium on executions

is a realistic first step. It *has* happened in Illinois; it *can* happen in California. It can also happen in Texas, Virginia, Oklahoma, Missouri, Florida, Georgia (in descending order of annual executions), and the other 25 states that continue to execute prisoners. I remind those of us who, in the last few months, have been so intensely focused on the war: Ending the death penalty is karmically connected to working for peace. ❖ *—Diana Lion*

From BASE

The San Francisco BASE (Buddhist Alliance for Social Engagement) House has doubled in size! After a long process of collecting five more socially engaged Buddhist practitioners and waiting for renovations to be completed on the apartment below ours, we were excited to see the new members finally moving in. The BASE House now comprises nine people living in two apartments within the same larger house.

Begun a year ago, BASE House is an intentional community that serves as a community center for both the residents and the larger engaged community. At BASE House we have held daylong retreats for the BASE community, several workshops on topics such as healing racism, classes on Buddhist psychology, and social events to unite the community.

For now it seems natural to develop small groups (three to five people) living together as an intimate BASE community. Each apartment or house could offer itself to the nearby larger community as a place to come together. What is helpful in a BASE House is a large living room and a space outside to do walking meditation to support practice as well as to accomodate larger gatherings. Being near public transportation is also a plus. In this way BASE Houses or apartments can exist in any size and be located anywhere a group wishes to cultivate the tenets of BASE (action/service, meditation, wisdom, community, and clear dedication). With the establishment of more BASE Houses in many towns and cities we can build a more lasting and widely networked national BASE community. If you already live in a house or apartment where everyone has a dedication to service and a meditation practice, you might consider recognizing that you, too, live in a BASE community. It would be nice to know who and where you are.

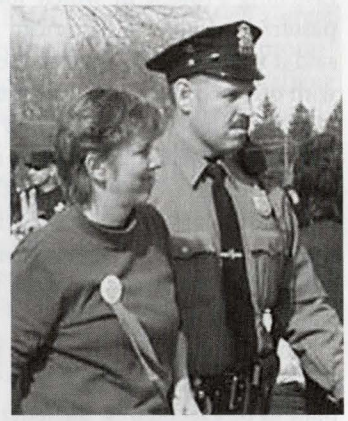
Other BASE news includes interest in forming several new BASE groups in the Bay Area, Boston, Providence (RI), Austin (TX), New York, and Vancouver. The *BASE Handbook,* which offers information and suggestions on how to start and run a BASE group, is now available on the BASE Web site, *www.bpf.org/html/current_projects/base/base.html.*

Upcoming BASE programs in the Bay Area include the formation of a group to work directly with the Berkeley BPF office programs and an exclusively Spanish-language group. If you are interested in these programs or any of the others please e-mail me at <base@bpf.org>. ❖ *—Tempel Smith*

BPF Chapter & Activist News

Boston BPF began monthly Walks for Peace back in October. In March, with war seeming imminent, members participated in three walks. For two of them the chapter joined larger gatherings hosted by United for Justice with Peace. For the third, they joined the final day of the Wake Up Peace! Walk Across Massachusetts initiated by the Nipponzan Myohoji Buddhist Order of Leverett, MA. Though BPF Boston did not have an official presence at the March 29 New England-wide Peace Rally and March, many members turned out and several volunteered to be peacekeepers at the event, adding yet another challenge to engaged practice. Members continue to take part in weekly peace vigils in downtown Boston, some sitting while others do walking meditation. The chapter has also had a series of meetings with special guest speakers on peace and justice issues. We held a BPF day of mindfulness and reflection in May and plan a fundraiser in June that will feature theater, jazz, and traditional Nepalese music performed by Boston BPF members and friends.

BPF members from the **Pioneer Valley** chapter in Western Massachusetts participated in an action just after the war began. Maia Duerr wrote: "I'm out on bail, going to court tomorrow for arraignment. We blocked the road into Westover Air Force Base in Chicopee. Fifty-three of us got arrested and we all had a great time as we were held in the Chicopee police station garage (no holding cell big enough). We sang, had council circles, made new friends.... It was a very empowering experience."



Maia Duerr's first arrest, Westover Air Force Base, Massachusetts. Photo by Charlie Jenks

The **Seattle** chapter organized a week of silent interfaith prayer/meditation vigils in conjunction with "Emergency Response Plan" rallies put on by Seattle's peace coalition. Throughout the week some 200 people joined one or more of the vigil sessions, often in the wind and rain, creating a continuing presence of peace in front of the city's Federal Building. On the first and last night, vigilers sat throughout the night. The chapter arranged for teachers from different faiths and traditions, including Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim, Christian, and Native American, to speak each evening (visit *www.bpf-seattle.org* for photos of the event).

East Bay BPF and **San Francisco BPF** have been sponsoring a daily meditation vigil for peace under the BPF banner at the San Francisco Civic Center. The vigil took place at lunchtime every day for a month after the war started, thanks particularly to the devotion of Chris Wilson. People came every day to meditate, and passersby expressed gratitude at

Robert Aitken speaks his mind at a Hilo peace rally. Photo by Sean Halloran

the infusion of this peaceful spirit into their day. East Bay BPF, with a coalition of other groups, held an Interfaith Action at the Federal Building in San Francisco on March 28, and every week for the next several weeks, as a "time of mourning for all those who have died, and a call for an end to war-making and the suffering it is bringing to Iraq and to our own communities." About 350 people came to the first of these interfaith actions, along with press and TV. After meditation and prayers from various traditions, 83 people, including many BPF members, participated in nonviolent civil disobedience by sitting in front of the main entrance, and were detained by federal marshals. Smaller numbers of people were arrested for nonviolent civil disobedience at subsequent interfaith actions. East Bay BPF also sponsors twice-weekly vigils in Berkeley at the west gate of the university campus. They have held nonviolence trainings, passed out information at the Oakland post office on tax day, participated in marches and in the day-after actions on March 20 in San Francisco, and practiced peaceful intervention to promote nonviolence at marches, protests, and demonstrations.

Most BPF chapters have made their antiwar presence felt and are continuing to wage peace. **East Hawai'i Island** members joined the global days of action and held weekly vigils, engaging in sitting and walking meditation. In their meetings they have included presentations and held discussions on the prevention of war.

Sacramento, CA, BPF participants have unfurled their banner at local peace rallies. In other activities, they provided prisoners with zafus and zabutons through a prison outreach program and also held a fundraiser for children in transitional housing.

On April 13, 24 Buddhist activists gathered in New Hartford to organize a **Connecticut** chapter of the BPF. It will serve as a network for smaller affinity groups based in several cities to address local issues, and as a means of linking these groups for issues of statewide, national, and international concern. It will also serve as a liaison between the Buddhist community and other peace and social justice groups in the state. Several of our members are already involved in social action projects, including nonviolence education, a prison meditation program, a community mediation project, an urban community gardening project, and a Burmese ecological project. We look forward to learning from each other and helping water the seeds that have already been planted.

Boston chapter members Craig Richards, holding sign, and Christine Aquilino, holding flowers.

BPF member/author/poet/activist Ken Jones of the **UK Network of Engaged Buddhists** writes to us of joining "the historic million-strong march in London on 25 February, in which some 300 Buddhists participated. We carried a banner, with a picture of Kuan Yin with her ear to the cries of the world, and walked behind a huge BUDDHISTS FOR PEACE banner. I got lost (as usual) in the vast moving forest of humanity, and ended up marching with fellow poets, following (also as usual) the Way of Haiku." (See sidebar, page 52.)

Our activist Buddhist friend Gillian Coote writes to us from **Sydney, Australia,** that she and Glenys Jackson, calling themselves the Mandala Sisters, have been creating peace mandalas on sidewalks, streets, and museums, some drawn in chalk, others made out of coffee, tea, spices, or rice.

Glenys Jackson, her daughter, granddaughter, and friends, with the peace mandala in Sydney, Australia. Photo by Paul Jackson

Some Thoughts on "Winning" the War

On the BPF online listserve, Alan Senauke invited all to share our feelings about the war's being declared as "won." He also asked for our input on how we could move ahead toward a peaceful world.

Speaking of the **East Bay** chapter peace group, Bob Lyons wrote: "We had all com-

Left to right: Pippa Bobbitt, editor of *Indra's Net;* Joyce Edmond Smith, chair of the UK Network of Engaged Buddhists; and Ken Jones, marching in London, February 25, 2003. Photo by Phil Henry

A Wind from the Thames

Haibun (haiku with commentary) by Ken Jones

"Poets for Peace"
our "p"s and "o"s hollowed out
to let the wind blow through

Every time I edge closer to chat with my fellow banner-bearer, our message (above) gets convoluted. And so a couple of spare poets have been inserted to hyphenate us. We sway to a rhumba band behind us, which is itself getting entangled with "Oxfordshire Pagans Against the War." We walk in the shadow of a huge anonymous banner with spidery black lettering: "The Sleep of Reason Brings Forth Monsters."

"Dykes Against Blair," ranged atop a bus shelter, give us a rousing cheer. And we are joined by an ancient bearing a homemade placard that reads: "Old European." Another is waving, on the end of his walking stick, a papier-mâché effigy of the head of President Bush. The head nods genially to the crowd.

The march winds for several miles. From time to time, for no apparent reason, there passes along it, like a gust of wind sweeping through grass, a convulsion of exultant sound—shouts, horns, and whistles.

Traffic lights
engulfed in a river of peace
green—amber—red—green—amber...

mented over the past weeks how incongruous it was, in the face of the impending war, to feel so energized, and to feel such a strong sense of community and shared purpose, as we were organizing and demonstrating and writing and chanting and getting arrested...and as long as we had a clear focus, this seemed sustainable. Then upon the start of the war, our focus shifted to maintaining vigils and interfaith spiritual gatherings to express our own grief and indignation, to pray and meditate together, and to do civil disobedience and be arrested.

"But now Baghdad has fallen, and all the energy and focus has dissolved, and for me, anyway, it has been replaced with sorrow and gloom that is weighing on my limbs. Even as the war proceeded, there was a hope that the policies of the Bush administration would be shown, somehow, on the battlefield, or in the international community, or in the court of American public opinion, to be wrong. But now victory is declared and support for the war among the American public is over 70 percent, and this could rise even further as we congratulate ourselves on a job well done.

"So it is appropriate that we pause and feel what we are feeling. But then we resume."

Maia Duerr: "Here in the **Pioneer Valley** chapter, we've been laying the groundwork, along with our local interfaith coalition, to start forming 'listening circles' in churches, synagogues, and other spiritual communities. We feel that it's important to put our energy in the direction of opening up connections with people who think differently about the issue, and most importantly, we want to try to decrease/prevent the polarization and dehumanization of the 'other' (those with whom we disagree) that is already happening. The BPF National Office did a version of this project after 9/11.... We're planning ours in the same spirit.

"And we continue to educate, organize, and encourage each other. I believe that there is so much room in the peace movement for the kind of engaged, centered presence that BPF members, along with other 'spiritual activists,' bring.... Everyone is needed in this effort."

Roy Money: "One thing that seems critical is to realize that we [peaceworkers] have not 'lost,' and that what we have done has already become part of the heritage that we and countless others will draw on in the future for inspiration and guidance—sometimes without even being aware of the influence. I have reflected often over the last few months on the widely seen photographs of the Civil Rights movement in the '60s, and the courage and determination that was evident in those pictures will not leave my memory." ❖

—compiled by Elizabeth Cheatham

Vigil in Seattle in March. Photo by Eric Higbee

Announcements & Classifieds

ANNOUNCEMENTS/ CLASSIFIEDS

Tea Circle: Full line of supplies and arts for Japanese tea ceremony. Visit our Web site *www.tea-circle.com* or call 707/792-1946 or 415/499-8431.

SW Nicaragua. Nonprofit seeks eclectic practitioners-investors/participants for diverse projects/development. Gorgeous region. Much potential. <dianebeatty111@yahoo.com>.

Experiential Teacher of Religions. I would like to include meditation in teaching world religions, so students can see the value of the religions themselves. I have an M.A. in Contemplative Religions and lots of wonderful experience. Please call with possibilities for work, and to share ideas. Todd Rambo: 415/550-1142.

Stop the War Makers: Hands Around Livermore Nuclear Weapons Lab. Nonviolent rally and march at Livermore nuclear weapons lab, Sunday, August 10, 2003. Rally 1:30 PM at Robert Payne Park; 3:00 PM march. Sponsored in part by BPF. For more information, call Livermore Conversion Project, 510/663-8065.

The Conch-Us Times: Journal of the Grateful Buddhists of America focuses on the Grateful Dead, spiritual, political, and environmental issues, socially engaged Buddhism, music, art, poetry, etc. $8/year (USD $12 foreign), payable to Ken Sun-Downer, P. O. Box 769, Idyllwild CA 92549; <conchustimes-@yahoo.com>; *www.conchustimes.org.*

The Faithful Fools Street Ministry Presents *The Witness,* directed by Martha Boesing and performed by Anna Brown Griswold. *The Witness* tells the story of a young woman's journey through poverty and homelessness in search of compassion and enlightenment. The 50-minute presentation is available for touring and can be performed in your home, church, meeting hall, or school. Fees negotiable or by donation. For more information, call Martha Boesing at 510/530-6188 or the Fools Court at 415/673-1027.

Teaching Dharma in Spanish. Help create a network for coordinating Spanish-language Dharma teaching in the U.S. and Latin America. Meeting (in Spanish) September 21, 2003, Shambhala Meditation Center, 118 W. 22nd St., 6th Fl., NYC. Sponsored by CEMVE (Círculo para la Enseñanza de la Meditacíon Vipassana en Español), Casa Tibet Mexico, and SF Zen Center. For more information, contact José Luis Reissig, 141 Lamoree Rd., Rhinebeck, NY 12572; 845/876-7963; <reissegol@aol.com>.

Attention Prisoners: Precious Dharma teachings on beautiful altar-sized cards: Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path, The Four Immeasurables, and Eight Verses for Training the Mind. Mail request with 3 first-class stamps if possible. For Resource Directory, send 4 first-class stamps. Naljor Prison Dharma Service, P.O. Box 628, Mt. Shasta, CA 96067; 877/277-6075.

Sacred Language Glossary of the Earth by George Kayer and Canadian poet Gitta Bernauer. Wit and wisdom from over 400 authors. "A work of tremendous scope, a broadminded, wide-eyed guide for all seekers."—Gabriel Fields, SFZC. $10 for e-book; $25 postpaid. Make checks payable to Gitta Bernauer, 2230 E. Morrow Dr., Phoenix AZ 85024.

BPF publications: *Making the Invisible Visible,* writings by people of color and their white allies about healing racism in our Buddhist communities. *Safe Harbor,* ethical guidelines, process, and resources for Buddhist communities. $7 each (includes postage), available from BPF, 510/655-6169; <bpf@bpf.org>.

GROUPS

Green Sangha: Spiritually Based Environmental Activism. Groups in Oakland and Marin County. Form a group in your hometown. Call 415/459-8610; *www.greensangha.org.*

Sangha for Buddhists of Color meets monthly in the San Francisco Bay Area for meditation, Dharma talks, and mutual support. For information, call 415/789-8359; <boc_caretakers@hotmail.com>.

Mindfulness, Diversity, and Social Change Sangha, blending mindfulness practice in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh with social change work, meets weekly in Oakland. Contact Olga at 510/540-0141; <mindful@rightbox.com>.

The Untraining is designed to help you "untrain" the subtle programming of white liberal racism. Put your meditative awareness to work for all beings. Ongoing groups: 510/235-6134.

Art, Buddhism, and Social Change Group. What does it look like when creativity emerges from a Buddhist practice? How can the process of creating art be an act of socially engaged Buddhism? If you are interested in creating a space to meet (once or twice monthly), discuss, and explore these and other related questions, contact Tiffany Sankary, 510/532-9656; <tiffany@prisonactivist.org>.

VOLUNTEER/DONATIONS/ SPONSORSHIP

Quaker prisoner, Washington state, M.A. work completed, seeks financial help for Ph.D. program. Send donations and/or biographical request to Faith Adams, 412 1/2 NW 42nd Street, Seattle, WA 98107.

Help Ven. Suhita Dharma, social worker and Buddhist monk, create a community center in Mt. Vernon, NY, to serve at-risk youth, people with HIV, and prisoners. Send checks payable to "Mettavihara Monastic Community" to Ven. Suhita Dharma, Desert Zen Center, 10989 Buena Vista Rd., Lucerne, CA 92356-8313; <kalibhante@yahoo.com>.

Prison Dharma Network (PDN) needs your donations of dollars and used Dharma books to continue making the Dharma available to prisoners. If you are interested in forming local or regional chapters to facilitate contemplative prison ministry, contact: PDN, P.O. Box 4623, Boulder, CO 80306-4623, 303/544-5923; <pdn@indra.com>.

BPF volunteers, wanted, needed, loved. Call us: 510/655-6169.

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San Francisco, CA 94132
415/522-7473
www.buddhistaidsproject.org

Burma People's Relief
c/o Hal Nathan
P. O. Box 1018
Inverness, CA 94937
415/669-1954

Gay Buddhist Fellowship
2215–R Market St.
PMB #456
San Francisco, CA 94114
415/974-9878
www.gaybuddhist.org

Karuna Center
Paula Green
49 Richardson Road
Leverett, MA 01054
413/367-9520
www.karunacenter.org

Lesbian Buddhist Sangha
Carol Osmer-Newhouse
510/222-7787
www.lesbianbuddhistsangha.org

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