

Partaking in Diversity

By Marvin Robinson

Planning a meal, talking with a new friend, and reading the new report from the Diversity Working Group about diversity efforts in the Shambhala Mandala. All of these experiences lead me to reflect on prejudice and how it continues to affect us.

Working my way through the day, I reflected on my conversation with Andrew, one of the newest community members here at Karma Choling. He wanted to know how I feel being the only black person at KCL and prior to coming here, whether I questioned if I would be accepted.

Many of us believe that we are not prejudiced. When someone without a handicap meets someone with a handicap, they notice a difference. When a white person meets a black person, they also notice a difference. When a white person meets a white person, or black person meets a black person, they, too, notice a difference, even though they share the same skin color. The difference between the two scenarios is that when people of obvious visual differences meet, they are more likely to identify their differences based on superficial characteristics. When people are “prejudged” on superficial characteristics, it causes suffering at various levels.

I believe that the single underlying cause of prejudice is ignorance. As I was planning a festive Caribbean dinner for the participants of Level III, I wondered how many of us have shared a meal with a person of a different race. How many have shared a meal with a physically challenged person.

As we seek out ways to diversify our mandala, maybe we could start at our own dining tables. We shouldn't underestimate the power of inviting someone to partake in one of the most essential practices—eating. Despite claims about the nutritional benefits of zero carbs, protein richness and low levels of cholesterol, I personally believe that what is most important about a meal is not what you eat, but with whom you eat it.

When you invite someone to share a meal with you, you are partaking in your shared humanity. In doing this, we begin the process of overcoming institutional “isms.” When we take the time to get to know others, we get to know ourselves. Each moment is an opportunity to educate ourselves and work toward economic and social justice.

How many of us walk through doors or climb stairs without thinking how someone physically challenged is unable to enjoy these activities? How many heterosexuals enjoy the freedom to adopt, to marry, to express love in public and even to divorce, without contemplating the lack of these **privileges** for same sex couples? Having heard that more people of color are in prison than in institutions of higher learning in the U.S., how many of us are aware of the effects of this division in our local communities? Enlightened

society should not be constrained to our Shambhala Mandala, but reach everyone we meet.

Andrew shared that despite having taken a class on diversity at Naropa [University] and understanding his own advantages and the disadvantages of those affected by prejudice, he still experienced fear seeing two young black men walking down the street. This experience of fear that many of us go through is a great opportunity for meditation in action.

So, next time the opportunity presents itself, be daring and invite someone different than yourself to dine with you. At this basic level, we can begin to understand that our differences are only superficial. From this vantage point, we can enjoy each others' basic goodness. Our journey to greater awareness of others can begin with one meal.

Bon Appetite!

*Taken from Karne Choling Summer 2006 Newsletter.