

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.

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.

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 Pharaoh. 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.

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, 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?

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 make-up of our sanghas, and begin to consider becoming more diverse. Only then can we hope that individual freedom and cultural unity may be attained. v

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