

On American Sanghas and Race Relations —

Dear Editor:

We are long overdue for some discussion of the racial and ethnic insularity of North American Buddhist meditation groups in general, and of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship in particular. So I am grateful to Cate Gable for raising the matter in the last issue of *Turning Wheel* (“American Sanghas: Too White?”), and I particularly appreciate the extent to which she was willing to expose her own feelings and thought processes on the subject. The article seems like an excellent starting point, for the manner in which the questions are framed, and the assumptions underlying them, tell a great deal about what the real problems are, and even point to some solutions.

The general predicate of the article appears to be that “American Sanghas” are “too white.” But most practicing Buddhists in the United States are not white — they are Asian-Americans (notably Japanese-Americans) and refugees from Asia (including Thais, Cambodians, Laotians, Burmese, Vietnamese, Sri Lankans, etc.). Certainly this is true in California, where both Cate Gable and I practice. Granted, they are not all “meditators,” but I believe deeply that underlying all of our Buddhist sects is the same fundamental understanding of birth and death; of suffering, origination, cessation and The Path.

It seems to me that a fundamental practice of Buddhist meditation is to stop falling for it — that is, to accept all of the silly and necessary distinctions we make, but to cease our reflexive belief that there is any meaning in those distinctions. In some areas — like the difference between living and dying — this is very hard indeed. On the other hand, the idea that the Dharma is only the Dharma if it comes in the right kind of package presents a wonderful opportunity for letting go of the sort of habitual thinking that keeps us enslaved. I would even suggest that it is the same sort of thinking that leads to the racial and ethnic divisions among us.

So the first two steps, I think, are to expand our field of awareness, and to be open to the possibility that neither we ourselves, nor our particular sitting groups, are the totality of American Buddhism. And what is the next step? If we are troubled by the experience of practicing with an insular group of affluent white folks, how can we change it?

Perhaps the most facile answer is: You could go practice with Buddhists who are not affluent white people. You could go to a monastery in Asia, in which yours will assuredly not be the dominant language or culture. Without leaving California, however, there are any number of Asian teachers — like Maezumi Roshi in Los Angeles, or the wonderful Burmese vipassana teacher Rina Sircar in the Santa Cruz mountains — who are likely to have more “non-whites” in their groups than Cate found at the Toni Packer retreat she speaks of.

I like this approach better than the one implied in Cate's article, an approach that asks: "How can we make our group more accessible to poor, suffering black people?" I would suggest that within that well-intentioned question is the very ethnocentrism that would discourage all but the most resilient minority person from wanting to join "us." Particularly when we are just beginning to learn the practices of an ancient Asian religion, as passed on by countless generations of Asian teachers, it is not helpful to come at the question of our own insularity by thinking like missionaries.

Still, I think it is also too glib to say to Cate Gable (or to myself) that the only appropriate step is to go practice somewhere else. One of the hallmarks of Buddhism is its willingness to shed its packaging and take on whatever cultural form is going to be most accessible to suffering people. As they say, "Dharma gates are boundless"; if the best entry point for you is studying with an exceptionally talented westerner like Toni Packer, or with a Jewish Zen master, then I believe that it serves all living beings for you to follow that route.

What I propose is that we start from where we are and make the obvious and helpful connections with our dharma sisters and brothers. Perhaps one way would be to visit the temples of other, "ethnic" Buddhists; I suspect that you will generally be well received there.

Perhaps this does not seem to respond to the deep concern implicit in Cate's article, a concern which recent events have brought to the fore of most everyone's consciousness: how to bridge the poisonous gap that separates most "white" people in America from most African-Americans. I can't really answer that. I do believe, though, that a start can be found within the core of our practice, by learning to drop our own habits of ethnocentric thinking and by not being fooled by the illusions of "us" and "them." This is hard, but I think it is more productive to start right where we are than to display an interest in the "black woman with three children" or the "Iranian who runs the corner grocery" that is based solely on their race or ethnicity. I have faith that to the extent that we really practice the way of the Buddha, we will open to and experience a truly wide range of people — Asian, black, white, Native American, impossible to classify — as part of our sangha, as reflecting jewels in Indra's net, as ourselves.

—Albert Kutchins, Berkeley, California