

People of Color Retreat

New York Shambhala Meditation Center

May 25-27, 2007

By Mabinti Dennis

In the past I'd signed up for meditation workshops and then cancel at the last minute. But I never had any doubt about participating in this program. I knew this was different.

At the public talk... Black, Latin, and Asian folk gathered in the reception area, soon filling the entire space... Eagerly awaiting the first course to feed our souls, we chatted with one another. Everyone was smiling. I didn't have to count this time, I was with others like me who had felt the destructive acid of prejudice.

Reverend Ryūmon opened the program, her face beaming with love and light. Ryūmon remarked that prejudice was only painful because we allowed it to be painful, and invited us to just sit with those tumultuous emotions that arise over such situations. This spoke volumes to me that only my tears could describe. With change inevitable, she encouraged us to work with our shin (heart-mind) and through nonattachment and—as Acharya Ferguson [said], through intimacy—...we will connect to these changes.

With the dharma talks focused on social justice, occasionally I'd hear from around the shrine room an “um-hum,” or “yes, yes.” These responses were all too familiar to my church upbringing, when something [would] resonate deeply. Throughout the program I felt as though electric currents were steadily flowing through my body, sometimes spiking, triggering emotions, recognition, common threads, similar pains, and moments of letting go.

Over the last six years I've read the teachings of Chögyam Trungpa, Sakyong Mipham, and Pema Chödrön. Every single word spoke to the depths of my soul and quietly awakened my sense of humanity. Then that human side yearned for a place to share this experience. I never felt shunned at Shambhala, but never truly felt welcomed. Everyone was always very nice, but I felt invisible. (I wonder if that is why I wore a very loud shirt to the New Year's celebration at the center? Yet I was still invisible.)

This weekend was not just about being seen; it was about being heard, being felt and bringing all that right to the cushion. I'm reminded of the church saying, “Leave your troubles at the altar.” Well, I didn't experience leaving anything at the cushion. Instead, there was a sense of leaving with something: skills, encouragement, support and community.

This is part of a letter written by Damien Taylor of New York City to describe his experience of Meditation in Action: A Contemplative Retreat for People of Color, led by Reverend Ryūmon Guitérrez Baldoquin, a Soto Zen priest of Suzuki Roshi's lineage, and Acharya Gaylon Ferguson.

During the 2005 Vajrayana Seminary, participants discussed barriers to inclusiveness at the at their Shambhala centers. Based on those conversations, Babo Harrisons and Tal Varon, co-directors of the New York Shambhala Center, decided to sponsor their first people of color retreat. Over the next two years, Babo worked with Bill Auerbach and I, and the contemplative retreat took place last May.

Eighty-one participants came from Puerto Rico, Canada, the United States, and various Buddhist lineages. The entire program was taught, staffed, and coordinated by people of color. In their closing evaluations, participants repeated requested more programs like this. A specially designed committee plans to follow up with participants and meet to practice dharma and discuss a future retreat.

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