

El Latinismo y sus Bellos Colores Voices of Latina and Latino Buddhists

Compiled by Rosa Zubizarreta

Interviewing the teachers and practitioners whose stories comprise this article has been a moving experience. Within the uniqueness of each story, common themes have emerged, resonating deeply with my own experience. One theme is the diversity of who we are as Latinas and Latinos.

Because of the differences among us, those of us who practice Buddhism in the United States may not fit a particular stereotype. We might be mixed-race, or light-skinned; or middle-class; or non-Spanish-speaking. Many of us share a profound sense of being “between worlds,” not completely at home in one or the other. This experience of being a “bridge person” can be both a challenge and a gift.

Another shared theme is the journey of assimilation and reconnection. At some point in our lives, many of us have distanced ourselves from our roots, often in a futile attempt to avoid the sting of racism. In many cases, our Buddhist practice has been a part of our journey of return, as we renew connections to our language, childhood experiences, ethnic communities, and countries of origin.

The relationship between Buddhist practice and lived experience is another thread in these stories. Living with suffering and oppression can deepen insight into Buddhist teachings, while our practice helps create a container within which we can hold and transform our experience. Of course that is true for all of us, regardless of ethnicity, but the Dharma takes on a particular flavor as it embodies within a cultural tradition. And each flavor, in turn, becomes a gift to the larger whole.

All of us, whether European American or Latino, African American or Jewish, share a common need. If we are to dedicate our lives to solidarity and service, we need to come to terms with both our privilege and our wounds. Along those lines, may these stories of Latinos and Latinas on the path be of benefit to all beings.

Margarita Loinaz

I was born in the Dominican Republic and emigrated to the U.S. 30 years ago at the age of 19. On my mother's side, my greatgrandfather was a theosophist and I began meditating as a young teenager. My father had grown up in the country and has remained very connected to animals and nature. I grew up with a mixture of a visceral connection to nature and exposure to spiritual life.

In the U.S., I became involved with Oscar Ichazo's Arica teachings. Through friends, I met Kalu Rimpoche in the late 1970s, took refuge with him, and began Tibetan practices.

I was very affected by the quality of his presence and a connection that remains unchanged to this day. Yet by the early '80s, I was exposed to Vipassana and that has become my main practice.

In my early years here I found myself as a single parent. Having taken just a few business college classes, I worked as a secretary. After being promoted to the manager's position of a medical research unit, I won an affirmative action fellowship that paid my tuition so I could finish my bachelor's degree. I had dreamed of being a doctor as a child, but it had seemed impossible. Somehow, I managed to train as a physician and I have worked with Health Care for the Homeless in San Francisco for the past 10 years.

The healing work of medicine and Buddhist practice seems very similar to me these days. I teach medical students at the University of California, and am part of a research team studying the effect of mindfulness practice on stress. Through the Homeless clinic, I taught a similar class in Spanish and English, and in the past few years I have begun teaching more traditional Vipassana practice. Soon the issues of racism and the need for diversity work within the sangha became very pressing to me and I joined with others who were doing this work. In 1999, I helped teach the first People of Color Retreat at Spirit Rock Meditation Center.

Recently, I have been on leave from work because of illness. During this time, I've found myself turning inward, in quiet contemplation. Many memories have come up from my early years, in particular of one woman, Damiana, who lived to be 104 years old. She was someone who was very much "of the earth." She never wore shoes, and lived in a hut with a pounded dirt floor, walls of palm wood, and a thatched roof. Yet she was one of the most generous people I have ever known. She often gave me some of the roses and chrysanthemums that grew around her hut. She baked a wonderful bread of cassava. When people visited, they often left with gift of a chicken from her yard.

I think these memories of Damiana are showing me a need to return to a more indigenous view of connection with the earth and life. I had become so busy with so many things, that although positive, were causing me to lose something essential, something that I am still trying to regain and understand.

During the first People of Color Retreat I had an amazing experience. Every night during council practice, I listened to the pain of discrimination and racism that was part of most of the group's experience. As a teacher, I felt wide open and able to be with all that was finally being expressed. Yet one night in particular, the level of pain was so excruciating that I couldn't imagine how I was going to be able to stay with it. Then, for the first time in my life, I felt Green Tara come into my body. All of a sudden, there was an incredible openness and strength. I had not been thinking about her or calling on her—she just came! I feel hesitant talking about this; yet it may be useful to share and validate the non-ordinary ways we are sometimes helped in our practice.

Sharing our stories is important on many levels. We all suffer, yet we suffer in different ways. As immigrants, we often have difficulty understanding the pain of racism and

discrimination experienced by the first and second generations in this country. By the time I came to the U.S., my ego had been already been formed and things roll off of me a lot easier than they do off of my daughter who was born here.

As a physician, I've thought a lot about why we suffer. I believe that the biggest source of human suffering is how we treat each other. Yet since I've started working on diversity issues in the Buddhist community, I realize how a preference for transcendence can create an ongoing aversion to looking deeply at the ways in which we hurt each other.

On the first day of the opening retreat at Spirit Rock, a number of Mexican and Guatemalan laborers were working outside of the meditation hall. We could hear them talking, and the teachers were trying to figure out who spoke Spanish so that someone could ask them to be quiet. I felt caught in a knot. I appreciated the gift of being able to sit, yet the workers outside seemed like the "other" and part of my heart was outside too. During a walking period, I went out and spoke with a couple of them. I explained that this was a silent retreat. They immediately understood, and spoke in whispers after that. Having made that connection, I was able to go back to sitting and now I was only aware of the sound of the pick as it intermittently hit rock on the ground. As the sound came, I was aware that "I" was hearing. When it was silent, the "I" also disappeared. Now it was present, now it was gone, coming in and out of existence. I was seeing both sides, and in that moment, I realized I had no preference.

There are so many traps in the practice, just as there are in society. A preference for the absolute, unconditioned state can be one of the major obstacles to dealing with racism. As long as we have that preference, we are chasing after some kind of ideal state. At the same time, it is the insight I get from practice that is showing me the traps! And so I continue to be dedicated to my practice.

Of course, all of this takes place within a cultural context. Our society is so into overcoming and mastering. The melting of surrender is foreign to this culture. Often, we only come to a place of surrender if we've been pounded on by life, been forced into a humble spot. Then, at last, humility allows receptivity to emerge, so that we can begin to see differently, so that we can begin to be taught by anything.

José Luis Reissig

I grew up in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and came to the U.S. to study when I was 19. After returning home with a Ph.D. in genetics, I worked as a scientist in Chile and Europe, and then came back to the U.S. in 1967.

As a typical young person in Argentina, I was involved in political activities. It was inconceivable to me that I would not be concerned with how a country is run, and most of my fellow students felt the same way. While a freshman at the university, I spent a week in an infamous detention center in Buenos Aires where many of my fellow inmates were tortured. Like others of my generation, I developed a strong dislike for oppressive military dictatorships. I saw the world as divided into "us" and "them." Such an attitude

may seem justified in view of the record of brutality towards ordinary citizens that we witnessed and experienced.

I first came into contact with the Dharma in the early '80s, receiving teacher's training from Christopher Titmuss in England. I have been teaching since 1990. The Dharma has helped me to learn not to see the world as divided between "us" and "them." At the same time, understanding how we perpetuate separation does not need to make us insensitive to political issues.

As a foreigner, I have experienced the sense of being different in language, culture, and attitude. I see now that I have often made my own difference invisible, and have cultivated a sense of separation to hide my vulnerability. The Dharma has helped me to peel off these layers of concealment, including concealment from myself. I have allowed myself to feel the bitter taste that comes from feeling separate. I have also started to see that this separation is not imposed on me, but rather something which I have had a hand in making.

Recently, I was looking at some old photographs, including some group pictures of former classmates. As I looked at the pictures, I focused first on myself then on each of my schoolmates, recalling their names and personalities.

Then it dawned on me that this perspective, in which each person was a separate entity, was just one way of seeing. Another way would be to see the photograph as a holographic plate. Such plates have an unusual property: a small part of it contains the whole—you, me, everyone. But if you just take a small part of the plate and use it to create an image, you get a blurry, ill-defined picture of the whole. If you wish to have a sharper, richer rendition of the scene, you need the whole plate.

And that is one way to understand the value of diversity, as helping us have a much clearer and sharper image of the whole. I see our differences as an asset to all of us—even if at times they involve withdrawal or disharmony. Just as we learn through Buddhist practice to pay attention to all parts of ourselves, our collective sangha needs to incorporate the rich ethnic diversity of our communities. For me, both these objectives are served every time I have the opportunity to teach in Spanish and bring to life the flavor of the culture of Latin America.

Marlena Willis

What draws me to Buddhism is the trust in the practice of being present. There is something in the practice that heals what needs to be healed and guides us toward freedom. I think that social change requires an intense amount of clarity, and clarity requires an intense amount of spiritual practice. I see Buddhism as one of the places where people are practicing seriously.

I am, at this point, homeless by choice. I am based in Oakland and earn money primarily by cooking at Spirit Rock Meditation Center. Vipassana is my main practice, but in the

last few years I have also been doing a lot of Vajrayana and shamanic practice. I look at my practice as being a weaving of different traditions, like a Guatemalan or Peruvian weaving.

My dad was from Costa Rica, and I have an English last name. He was a Willis-Gonzales, and his mother's family was from Colombia. So I'm light-skinned and mixed. I grew up with a lot of the assimilation problems typical of the '50s.

Last summer I attended a two-day training for people who are or will be teaching Vipassana in Spanish. Of the Latinos and Latinas present, the majority were immigrants, people whose first language was Spanish. My sense was that they were predominantly from privileged backgrounds. Two of us in the group had grown up in the U.S. with a Latin American working class background. Both of us struggled with our Spanish because we had experienced early shaming around it, and both of us questioned whether we belonged in this group or even belonged in teaching.

It took a three-month meditation retreat for me to understand why I experienced a wall of fear around speaking Spanish. My friend Teresa gave me a lot of support, encouraging me to say "No te vayas" ("Please don't go") to her as if she were my grandmother. I realized that when I began to speak in Spanish as a child, my white grandmother shamed my Latina grandmother, who didn't have the confidence to stand up to it and went away. I learned that if I spoke Spanish, the only person in my family who had been kind to me would go away.

The year before last, I worked and lived at a Catholic Worker House. Many of the people there were refugees from the struggles in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico. One staff woman came from a very large family in El Salvador. My first week there, I learned that half of her family had been killed. Yet her surviving family is very warm and loving, and she was basically a happy person who had endured living for years in a refugee camp on the Honduran border. At times, it was hard for her to understand one of our guests, a 19-year-old Chicana woman from a dysfunctional family who had just given birth to her third child. This is just one example of how the particular hurts that can happen growing up here in the U.S. are different from the experience of Latinos who grow up in predominantly Spanish-speaking countries where their sense of identity is more strongly affirmed.

Jose Cuellar

I have been living for the last 20 years in Grass Valley, California. There are not many Latinos here—the number of people of color in the county is about three percent. I think that is part of the reason I originally moved here, to escape! Now, 20 years later, I am interested in reconnecting with people of color. I am currently in the Community Dharma Leader program at Spirit Rock, and also work there as a manager.

My parents are from Mexico. I grew up in the barrio of East L.A., in Lincoln Heights. For the last 20 years, I have been practicing Buddhism and focusing on psychological work

and healing myself. I have had a number of meditation teachers and attended numerous retreats. The people at Spirit Rock, as well as my sangha in Grass Valley, have been very supportive. Their compassion has helped me with my healing process.

After high school, I joined the Air Force. For many years, I tried to “fit in” to the majority culture. I have lived in many places where I was the only Latino. My journey has been one of being aware that I am different, and at the same time, finding a way to just get along with people.

I have encountered plenty of discrimination. I’ve been called names many times, and have tried to understand it as coming from ignorance. I am just now coming to terms with the truth that there is subtle, unconscious prejudice all around. For many years, I denied this, as it was too painful. Now, I see myself as an advocate of bringing these subconscious mind-sets to light. And Buddhism has been a big part of this change.

Back in the days of the civil rights movement, many of my classmates were into “Chicano Power.” Yet since my parents were ashamed of being Mexican, it is no surprise that I would feel the same way. When I was 18 and was offered a full scholarship to San Jose State as part of their Equal Opportunities Program, I felt there was a price tag attached and that I would have to be a “representative” and take on the role of “Chicano.” I turned down the scholarship and chose the military instead—that’s how strongly I felt about it.

Now the wheel has turned and many years later, I am at the same point again. I am being offered this job at Spirit Rock as part of their “equal opportunity program” because I am Chicano. And now, I choose to embrace it. The Dharma has made the difference—it has given me the strength to sit with the pain that I had avoided for so long. I have cried many tears about how painful this wound has been, and now I am in the unique karmic position to take responsibility for doing something with this opportunity.

The last two People of Color retreats at Spirit Rock have been very transformative for me. Being part of the council there was the first time I was able to speak about my shame and pain around issues of race.

At the beginning of the second retreat, I was asked to sit next to the teachers, because there were no Latinos among the teachers. At the final council meeting, I was the last student to speak. Everyone else had finished, and I felt very moved and close to tears. When my turn came, I intended to thank everyone and bow gracefully. Just then, one of the teachers said, “Let us bow and thank Jose, for all his work managing this retreat.” I was taken aback, and didn’t want to take it in. He said it again and I broke into tears.

When I was finally able to speak, I said, “You are all my teachers.” I really believe that people of color are my teachers, especially in this context, where I am just learning. I hope my sincerity is part of the gift I can offer. I hope that as all of us open to the pain and suffering caused by prejudice—not only racial prejudice, but prejudice of all kinds—we will truly learn how to come from a compassionate heart.

Teresa M.G. Navarro

As a child, I was a practicing Catholic. I prayed for the well-being of my family and community, including the Pope, and spent long hours in meditation and contemplation. What I found in Eastern thought was the invitation to think consciously about my own consciousness. There were many years where my Buddhism and my Catholicism overlapped, and that was not a conflict for me. The beauty of finding a path in Buddhism was that I found worlds of people dedicated to the questions I had about the nature of reality, suffering, and liberation. I found a language for the inexpressible.

I took refuge in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition with His Holiness the Dalai Lama when I least expected it. And although I have traveled and studied in Asia, I still don't like to call myself a Buddhist because I often find that I don't match whatever definition the other person has in mind! For many years, my practice was extremely personal and solitary; it is exciting to see my path becoming more expansive and inclusive.

I was born in Mexico and both of my parents are Mexican. When I have to use categories, I describe myself as a person of multiple heritage, of both European and indigenous descent. I grew up in an "interspace" of cultures and languages, North and South, old world and new. As I become more international, my appreciation for this wild vortex of cultures increases. As Latinos, we find ourselves in this "blessed predicament" of having to integrate a complex history into our sense of identity. I've had to look at myself through the eyes of both the colonizer and the colonized. It is an intense burden; only in retrospect do I feel it as a gift. Eastern philosophy, meditation, and the Buddhist exploration of the ultimate nature of reality have helped me to integrate seemingly irreconcilable universes.

When I was growing up, I didn't think of myself as being white. As I looked around me, I saw a sea of shades from butter to bronze. Yet by the time I was nine, I was shocked to realize that most of the people on Mexican TV looked like me, fair-skinned. Why weren't there any people who looked like my mother, the woman I loved most in my life? It was extremely painful that I could not find many images that reflected the darker-skinned members of my family and friends—not in television images, posters, calendars, billboards, or even in the statues at church, except for La Virgen de Guadalupe. And then there are indigenous people, who were left out completely. I know that most indígenas do not call themselves Latinos or Latinas.

In the United States, I found that most people of European descent saw themselves as the norm, the standard by which the rest of the world was supposed to measure itself. This was oppressive not only to the outer me, but to my inner sense of balance. Yet I was blessed to have my parents and my grandmother, who were able to rise above this oppression through the thin gold thread of unconditional love. I learned from them that I was a child of God, that I belonged fully, without conditions or restrictions.

There was a time in my life when I would not have come to a Latino Buddhist gathering because it was precisely through my own practice that I was able to rise above the suffocation of labels. It's important to remember that people have valid reasons for not wanting to be labeled one thing or another. There are many wounds that get revisited when we hear certain names, or even the word "Latino."

Now I am better able to stand in multiple spheres—the smaller categories as well as the transcendent ones. When we create subcategories of identity and experience, it is not for the purpose of separation. It is rather so that we can bring as much of our experience into consciousness as possible, so that we can bring all of who we are to the table, in order to transform. Only we can give birth to ourselves, but we need each other as midwives.

We can give each other a safe space to explore where we have come from and where we want to go, a space where we can take risks and move through the layers of mistrust. We need to honor the uniqueness of each story, so we can get to know ourselves and each other. It is important to begin by examining the many assumptions there are around being Latino. Otherwise, we will trip over them and solidarity won't happen, or if it does, it will take place on false ground.

From a social justice perspective, we need to look at many issues. But if we aren't able to see how we fit into the bigger picture, liberating everyone from the delusion of separation, then we will not have a valid anchor for our work. We need our practice to help us with this.

Rick Ramirez

I've never been interested in Buddhism as a religion, but after my first Vipassana retreat, it struck me that meditation offered a path of spiritual growth that helped bring me back into my body.

Culturally, I'm half Puerto-Rican and half Anglo-Saxon. I was raised in Baltimore in the '50s and '60s, with no Hispanic community outside my own family. My father, much darker-skinned than I and clearly part Indian, has always chosen to identify with the highly educated, European side of himself. My grandfather, who was a sugar cane farmer in Puerto Rico, loved being in the country, getting muddy, and working with his hands among the plants and animals.

One of my earliest memories of visiting Puerto Rico is of my first horseback riding lesson. My grandfather put me in a bulky leather seat atop the huge creature. I remember my father astride his own horse, gazing at me with concern. He modeled how to control the animal firmly with the reins—a little too harshly, it seemed to me. I'm sure that my dad's chief concern was for my safety, but now I realize that there was a deeper cultural assumption being passed on to me in that moment. That is, my first "lesson" about horseback riding wasn't about the delight of being with that magnificent creature; it was more about "using" the animal for my own purposes, about "staying in control."

A few years and many rides later, I became enchanted by the Black Stallion books of Walter Farley, stories about the empowering love between a boy and a mysterious, fierce Arabian stallion. Recently, during a long retreat, I had what seemed like a mystical encounter with a real black stallion while walking in the countryside. The lesson from this experience and from my childhood memory was that the horse represents everything irrational about myself: my passion, imagination, emotions, and sexuality. The black stallion, in particular, represents the enormous power of these energies which are not easily subject to rational control, but which I can learn to respond to and flow with.

I've gradually come to understand how my early social conditioning and my Western education served to split me off from these energies, these essential parts of myself. Part of my meditation practice has involved recovering the disowned parts of my father and my culture, including the ability to feel myself as an integrated part of the natural (and supernatural) world within and around me.

As a bicultural meditator, I perceive that the North American convert Buddhist experience is strongly shaped by the beliefs and attitudes of the predominantly liberal, highly educated, middle- and upper-middle-class white people who make up those communities.

As a Latino member of the North American sangha, I stand—politically and spiritually—for values and practices that reconnect us with our bodies, with the earth, with the cycles of life and death, and with the unknown. Meditation is one of those practices, and one which is essential to our collective survival and to re-creating sustainable cultures. Another essential practice is “giving back” something for all that we have been blessed to receive. My own work now is as a therapist at Centro de Bienestar, a mental health agency in San Jose, California.

I also want to provide opportunities to myself and others to feel connected to what we've been educated to see as “other,” whether that is defined as nature, women, people of color, the unknown, or the parts of our bodily experience that we've been conditioned to feel separate from. I feel the need to keep doing things that remind me that the “other” is part of who I am. That is a challenge, after being conditioned so profoundly to control instead of “be with” my experience.

Hilda Gutiérrez Baldoquín

When I first became involved with Soto Zen 11 years ago, some of my family were concerned. I was raised as a Roman Catholic with a strong emphasis of spiritism and with deep awareness of Santería. My family, who are first-generation Afro-Cuban immigrants (to this day, most of the elders are still monolingual Spanish speakers), worried that I had fallen prey to some strange California cult.

I remember attempting to dispel these concerns during a long-distance telephone call with my tía Lola. I decided to talk to her about the Four Noble Truths and about this man named Gautama. “The first insight,” I told Lola, “is that life is suffering.” She

quickly interrupted me and smugly replied, “Ay hija, entonces yo he sido budista toda mi vida, pues eso yo siempre lo he sabido, no me tienes que decir mas nada.” (“Oh, my daughter, then I’ve been Buddhist all of my life for I have always known that! You don’t have to tell me anything else.”)

Part of my journey in Buddhism has been connected with my journey as an immigrant. I have always felt like an “outsider.” The experience of “looking in” and being “kept out” has been a great gift, for it has allowed me to learn how to move in and out of multiple worlds, even when I am not expected to exist in that world. The question of what an “outsider” is has been very central to my life, and has a lot to do with the work that I do.

The best way to describe this work is that it is about liberation. I assist individuals and groups to get in touch with the social hurts, personal wounds, and oppression that they have experienced, in order to generate options for moving to a healing place. Because after all, we can’t make change effectively in the world if we haven’t addressed our own healing process.

The work that I do encompasses the fields of conflict resolution, multicultural organizational change, and managing diversity. I have done this work as a senior consultant and a trainer for 20 years. Many aspects of each of these areas resonate with the Dharma. Effective conflict resolution practices must include understanding and learning about forgiveness, making amends, developing compassion, and opening the heart. Organizational change embodies impermanence. Often organizations have forgotten about the truth that “change is the only constant,” and this creates suffering if the structures, programs, and policies do not take into account the behavioral and cognitive impact of change. Managing diversity encompasses the teaching of interdependence, for the process opens a window into the illusion of separation.

I carry three Dharma teachings close to my heart. The first one I received from my teacher, Zenkei Blanche Hartman, some years back. She once told me that Katagiri Roshi used to say, “What a monk offers others is fearlessness.” The second teaching came to me from Robert Aitken Roshi. He wrote, “Not knowing is most intimate.” And then there is my Dharma sister and friend, Shosan Victoria Austin. At a time of great pain for me during a practice period at Tassajara, Shosan gave me spiritual balm in the form of a story: A teacher is asked by a disciple, “What is the teaching of a lifetime?” The teacher answers, “An appropriate response.” I want to live my life according to these teachings.

When dealing with issues of race in a Buddhist context in the United States, I think it’s important to remember Siddhartha Gautama. Siddhartha was a man of color. He left his comfort zone behind and abandoned all of his privileges in order to understand and experience the real suffering of the world. We need to be as radical as Gautama. It’s important to point out that there are many different kinds of diversity work, and if the diversity work that we do does not address issues of power, privilege, and oppression, it is just a Band-Aid, and perpetuates the status quo. As my friend and colleague Dr. Valerie Batts reminds me: “Most of our U.S. systems have a vested interest in not changing the status quo. Though they may pay lip service to “diversity,” they are not committed to adequately funding organizations and programs that truly empower people and systems to change the fundamental nature of how we do work and how we resolve the power imbalance in our world.” When we begin to think of diversity work in these terms, then we shift the conversation to a different level of possibilities for human peace.

Just as our Buddhist practice can be painful, physically and emotionally challenging, and require courage of us, I strongly believe that diversity work needs to have those elements too. And it needs to be undertaken from a stance that is not in pursuit of simple self-interest, both for the practitioner as well as for the organization that wants the intervention.

I also think it is essential for us as people of color to heal our internalized oppression. Zazen has been a very valuable tool for me in this area. Zazen has opened my heart. This has been my lifeline, especially as a Black Cuban woman, for I have historically been and continue to be the target of multiple oppression. Unless we do the work of addressing internalized wounds resulting from a legacy of racism in this country, we will feel a continual pull to look towards white people, wondering what they are up to, and expecting them to change. In truth, the only one that I can be responsible for is my own being—and that, in itself, is the work of this lifetime.

Daniel Terragno

I was born in Chile in 1947, and grew up in an upper-class family. I came to the U.S. to attend college when I was 20 years old. I arrived in San Francisco in 1967 and fell right into the antiwar and hippie movements. I took part in various political events—the San Francisco State strike, the takeover of the mayor’s office, People’s Park—all the time wondering where I belonged. “Am I a peace activist? A socialist? Should I march with the peace people, with the more radical folks, or with the Latinos, the Raza [as it was called then]?” I identified a little bit with everything!

At the same time, I didn’t quite fit in with the Raza. In Chile, the upper class is very racist in a certain way, and I didn’t even realize that I had a residue of a certain attitude toward people with dark skin. Whenever I met Raza folks in the antiwar movement, I’d speak Spanish and they pulled away a little. I felt that we couldn’t connect, like I was trying too hard and they didn’t trust me.

When I first came to this country, I was standing on the solid ground provided by my background and my upbringing. But by some point in the early ’70s, I didn’t know who I was any longer. Everything I had grown up with I couldn’t stand anymore. I didn’t want that to happen, but it did.

When I returned to Chile in 1969 for the first time since I had left, I attended a big dinner with family and friends at the large country house where I grew up. I made a comment, to which a friend of mine responded, “Daniel, do you realize that what you are saying goes against everything that you are? Your family, here, all of this?” I remember it really scared me. I said, “Do you think I am doing this just because I decided to? It comes from inside, it’s an existential thing, it’s not easy. I wish I could forget about everything and keep on going with what I thought I had, but it’s collapsed, and I have to find something.” Everyone noticed I was serious and shaking. It was painful to see that I was so alienated from them and from life.

And so I became actively involved in pursuing a quest. At first, I thought about becoming a Trotskyite or going to Cuba to cut sugar cane. I even fantasized about joining the Weather Underground. Yet there was something that I was running away from. I had already started to experience a spiritual awakening, but I resisted at first, thinking that going wholeheartedly into a spiritual path would be a cop-out.

When I came back to the U.S., I became involved in Gurdjieff work. I started getting a real education about the inner world while learning my trade as a cabinetmaker.

I began formally practicing Buddhism in 1985. Today, I teach at Rocks and Clouds Zendo in Sebastopol, California, and also I travel to Ohio to lead to lead sesshins and teach. Once a year, I lead a sesshin in Buenos Aires, Argentina. I am a Dharma heir of John Tarrant, who in turn is a Dharma heir of Robert Aitken Roshi.

I remember when I first felt a need to become more engaged in my practice. Several of us were at a dinner for Robert Aitken, and I was telling a friend, “You know, Gregory, I’m feeling that I need to go out there and do something as part of my practice.” Gregory, who had AIDS, put his hand on my knee and said, “Daniel, why don’t you help me die?” It was a very powerful moment I will never forget. I said, “I’d love to help you die.” And that was it! I became involved with organizing his care, and then I started with the hospice training and did that work for a few years.

Currently, I teach four times a year in a meditation and recovery program for folks recovering from drugs and alcohol. I am familiar with that condition, having abused those substances in the past. I enjoy doing this work, because I have the capacity to talk about meditation without using dharmic terms, just using street language. I’ve always felt a strong connection with homeless people, and I’ve also done prison work, teaching meditation at the San Francisco jail for a few years.

In terms of my own identity, I am finally coming to a deeper understanding of the limbo in which I live. At this point in my life, I have lived in the U.S. for a long time. When I go to Chile, I love to see my family, I love the geography and the food. Yet I don’t feel at home there anymore. At the same time, I am a foreigner in this country. I don’t think about it constantly, but at the same time, I know I’m definitely not American.

When it comes to racism, I prefer not to speak about it in the abstract, but in terms of my own experience. The first time I realized the subtle ways that I still carried prejudice within me was about 12 years ago, after a wonderful trip to Nepal where I fell in love with the country and the people. At the time, I worked as a bartender, and I was friendly with several young Mexican men who were regulars at the bar. I’d ask them about their lives and friends. When I returned from Nepal, I noticed that these young men seemed completely different to me. Then I realized that they hadn’t changed, but that I was seeing them differently. It was like I was really seeing them for the first time.

It’s embarrassing to talk about this, because at the time I thought I didn’t have those prejudices anymore, that I’d been in this country too long for that. I did not discriminate against anyone, I could be very pleasant and act in a normal way. Yet in hindsight, I realized I was subtly dismissing dark, Latino-looking people and not being fully open to them. Now, something had opened my heart, some unconscious prejudice had melted away. I hadn’t even known that my heart was closed before, but now there was a totally different quality of feeling present.

As Buddhism arrives in the West, it has the potential to make a significant difference with regards to issues of diversity. Whether we can always see it or not, there is beginning to be a greater opening to diversity in our sanghas—not just People of Color, but lesbians and gays, women, young people. It’s truly remarkable, and quite wonderful.

Rosa Zubizarreta first took refuge with H.E. Tai Situ Rinpoche in 1987, and currently practices in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh. She worked in bilingual education for many years, and is now studying organizational development.

Any Latino or Latina practitioners interested in having their stories included in a future book, and/or joining an e-mail list for Latino/a Buddhists, are welcome to contact Rosa at <rosalegria@igc.org>.