

## SECTION II:

# STAKEHOLDERS—WHAT WE BRING FORWARD

# BRINGING OUR WHOLE SELVES: A THEORY OF QUEER DHARMA

Radical Dharma emerges from a lineage of insurgence that is about bringing our whole selves. We can't marginalize others or ourselves as part of our pursuit of liberation, personal or political. We couldn't have arrived here without a fuller and fuller fullness. The leaders of antiracist movements have always included people of many sexual and gender orientations. Throughout our conversations, the deep connection between personal liberation and social transformation is increasingly clear. It is embodied. In the following, we share testimonies and dialogue on the dharma of sexuality and gender identity and how they have been a part of our own practices of personal liberation.

## TESTIMONIES: QUEER IS AS QUEER DOES

### TESTIMONY I: JASMINE

I was six years old when I decided I was a unicorn. Recess was canceled that day because it was raining. We all sat on the floor in the dark as a rain storm pounded the roof of our kindergarten classroom. On the TV/VCR they played a movie about a restless unicorn who, though she was happy, found herself alone—the last of her kind. My six-year-old self identified with her isolation and trembled at the moment she had to leave the safety of her forest to begin her journey to find and eventually free others like her held captive somewhere far away. Those who saw her for who she was could see her power was immeasurable, a thing of hope and healing, but to most she appeared a thing to be hunted, domesticated, traded, and controlled—dispossessed of the ability to wander far. Her journey to free

the others required her transformation. It wasn't a strategy she chose, but rather one that chose her. While she did not change willingly, in order to survive she had to accept the new forms she found herself inhabiting. Watching that movie in the same classroom where earlier that year I'd been reprimanded and forcibly punished for the flirtatious act of competitively flashing another Black girl on the playground weeks before (show me yours and I'll show you mine!) somehow clued me in, if only subconsciously, to the kinds of transformation my own coming into being queer might require should I attempt to embrace my new form, desire, damage, doubt, and all.

I could not embrace it all at once. Over time, almost by accident, desire began to displace my fear of my freedom. Far before I learned to theorize it, liberation leaped up out of ordinary moments and shook loose the shy, shamed, and shaking trappings of useless labels, conventions, and identities. Dancing became a way to actively disorient my relationship to myself, my sexuality, my story about my desire. I was not looking for liberation when transformation chose me. I was looking for the others and found myself becoming queer—what started as an innocent mistake began to feel like magic. Desire could not stay static. I chose to let its propensity for transformation choose me, leaving space for mere feeling to jump the rules of time and become for an instant immortal. It was not pretty, or kind, or convenient. It was honest and healing and humbling. I wanted to learn the art of liberation in a book, or on a cushion—in the isolation of my self-reliance rather than in the messy company of others. But the ethics of desire could not be attained in the absence of the pressure proximity so queerly produced. Alhamdulillah!

## TESTIMONY II: LAMA ROD

When I say queer, I am remembering the first time another man touched me, how my body convulsed, being consumed by its own appetite. Or remembering *Giovanni's Room* and wondering if another man would ever crave me like Giovanni craved David, wondering if James Baldwin was born only to sing to me. Or like remembering falling in love with other boys, knowing that even if that love was never returned, it was so much more than never knowing how to love at all. Or remembering as I grew older, learning the potential of love beyond gender or sex. Or remembering

when Audre Lorde said *the erotic* to the mothers and daughters, how she at the same time ransomed my body out of lands of men yoking me to simple gifts between their legs.

Then remembering Essex Hemphill whispering how I could be a revolution without bloodshed. And remembering coming out, saying the words, opening the door that I could never close again. Saying my secret name to the world, bringing my loving, aching, and craving for other bodies and minds like mine into language, and how the world noticed me for the first time, curtsied, but then greeted me in a friendship that often felt like acts of psychic and physical violence. Or remembering meeting the Dharma and how it held the trauma of my struggle to love through my sexuality warmly and kindly, how compassion meant realizing that I was not the only battered one in the world. Or remembering when I surrendered to my love of radical thought and action, knowing that queerness, radicalism, and Dharma were all acts of remembering myself as the *beloved* wanting to be free in the world and that it would be by my will and hands that the world would become home. It is remembering me, saying my own name, wanting me at the end of the day. This is what I mean by queer.

### TESTIMONY III: REV. ANGEL

Queerness paved the way for my entering the dharma. Rather than trying to colonize, commodify, or compartmentalize it, I could let it enter me. I could let painful truths that had been hidden away emerge on my cushion because through choosing queerness I had already had practice *choosing* to be free. I knew that it meant allowing myself to be seen and that fully accepting myself is an inherently binding agreement of allowing others to be fully themselves.

Letting my bisexual lovers be who they are rather than insisting that they choose was a practice of queer radical dharma because it meant finding where I was threatened by a sense of inferiority when stacked against men and the potential loss of love that raised. When I realized that queerness couldn't be limited to sex and sexuality, that to choose queer expressed something more profound about who and how we are, I had to shift my worldview to one that sees beyond binary truths handed to us to yoke

ourselves into a system of control. To hold queerness as a practice is to be in active radical acceptance of everyone and all things as they are.

## DESIRE AND THE DHARMA

**FEMALE SPEAKER:** I've been practicing Buddhism for a couple years now. Sometimes I get conflicted by the traditional ways of thinking: Can you be sexually liberated and still be a Buddhist? I feel as if sometimes it's shunned, like taking our bodies as desire. What is it about dharma and sexuality that connects and why? How would you describe the complementary of dharma, minority sexuality, and minority race in the U.S.? Thank you.

**JASMINE:** Yes! I was really struck in reading all of our testimonies at how irreverently sensual they were; I was really enjoying that. It is not something that I associate with sitting on a cushion.

**REV. ANGEL:** Fundamentally one of the questions at the seat of Dharma is desire. So it is very interesting that desire, in terms of sexuality, is rather seldomly spoken about. Everyone is navigating desire as part of their practice. I think it is a fundamental aspect of being human. People who are claiming heterosexuality have the privilege to leave that conversation aside, though. They have the privilege of leaving the conversation about their desire and what is going on with them sexually outside of their practice. They don't have to present themselves through a conversation about their sexuality in the way queer people tend to as a way of being seen and known. People who are queer do not have the privilege of not naming or claiming their queerness on the path to being whole.

**LAMA ROD:** We have been traditionally silent around the expression of sexuality. When I came into Dharma, one of the first things that I had to work with was how I was taught to relate to my own body and thoughts on sexuality. I started breaking through into this tremendous woundedness that I had been denying. This was the radical piece, but for me the queerness and radicalism and Dharma really started to feed into one another. So Dharma is queerness, and queerness is Dharma to me and all that is radical. Dharma is essentially the training to be free just as radical and queerness is the training to be free. My identification with queer is very conscious

because I was put on the spot and felt that I couldn't make different choices. As a gay man I had really narrowly defined kinds of attractions. So identifying with queer has kind of opened the space up completely even though it was social, political. It was just the space I needed to explore transgression in a way that I couldn't when I only identified as a gay man.

I wanted to love beyond attachment or fixation to certain kinds of bodies. James Baldwin came along and actually reading his words, I realized that being gay was much more than the sex, it was about intimate connection to other men. It was very difficult for me to experience because I was struggling to develop a relationship with my own body to feel good. Great sex was fun, but there was more that I wanted. It is a bit difficult for me to articulate, but as I get older it is about connecting to people and finding that connection to be attractive, just that basic connection that is beginning to transcend sex and gender. Within attraction, sexual desire is part of the experience but not the totality of the experience for me. I had to begin to make that choice to transcend the basic appetite and desire for body where I find myself being at odds with other gay men. It is about liberation. It is about awareness and about an understanding of who and what we are. It is important for me to honor the teachers that I had before the Buddha and before the Dharma came along. James Baldwin was my teacher; Audre Lorde was my teacher. Essex Hemphill was my teacher. These are the writers that first helped me to eventually find the Dharma through leaning into myself as a sexual being, and these are the teachers that helped me love my sexuality and my sexual expression.

**REV. ANGEL:** I was invited to sit with a circle of white folks that were teachers and administrative leaders of a sprawling Buddhist community in the region. One of the questions they asked was, "What do you see?" I have the unique privilege of visiting different traditions and lineages. I get to take a bird's eye view.

Queer people of color appear to be the fastest growing demographic entering into Buddhist communities. I find that striking. I'm sure that's not true everywhere, but if I mix the whole thing together, from what I hear rumbling on the ground, that seems to be reasonably true, and it makes complete sense to me.

There is an article that was written years ago by Dr. Christopher Queen. He talks about B. R. Ambedkar, who was Gandhi's contemporary, who was

born Untouchable. For all intents and purposes, he's a Black man in terms of his caste and his rank and society, and there's a whole side story about his challenge and push back against Gandhi. But he ultimately came to the conclusion that Untouchability was fixed within the Hindu religion. So he would find another religion, and he did a great deal of study.

He was the writer of the [Indian] constitution, so he was very intelligent and well-educated and bright. He had to really work at this effort of studying world religions and, strangely enough, he ended back in [the] religion that originated in his own homeland: Buddhism. The reason he ended up there was because the teachings expressed the most openness to accepting anyone as they are. So it's embedded in the teaching and the feeling space of Buddhism to be spacious and allowing of who you are as you are. That has been since obstructed by human intervention and foible. But I think that's what we're seeing. Difference fits.

**LAMA ROD:** In my tradition, I've felt a lot of freedom to enter and reimagine a self that was very liberatory. There was this space where queerness wasn't so important, but rather it was the intention of my life and how I used these identities to help people and to help myself. I was being really taught that attachment to identity is another way in which we are fixated on this sense of self. I was taught a lot of space around queerness that was deeply healing for me. Tibetan Buddhism was made for queer people. The pretty colors, the iconography, the deities are really gender queer. I mean, you can't figure out the gender of these deities. Look at a *thangka*. Men wear dresses. There's pageantry and ritual. It's like a parade. [Laughter]

**REV. ANGEL:** I'm going to have to interrupt because that was the opposite for me. Zen was the only thing that was going to get me in a dress. [Laughter] And we had gender-neutral terms, so I got to be a priest, not a priestess. This is in contrast to the messages that many of us received if we grew up in Christianity. There are so many explicit messages against being queer or even expressing sexuality.

**LAMA ROD:** I think we have more questions. But there's no affirmative action in our tradition. I wasn't accepted into training because I was Black. Even though I am one of the first Black lamas in my lineage. And with my teacher I had to do everything that everyone else did: I had to learn Tibetan. I had to do 100,000 prostrations. I had to sit in the box for three years. I had

to hold vows. And people don't get that. They see me, they think, "Oh, you're cool." [Laughter]

We have to interrogate this body shame, this sex shame that we're born into. And we have to learn how to liberate ourselves even from that. How [do] we practice sexuality with the changes that we're making? Are we allowing people to make the changes they need to make to be happy, to do what feels good but which doesn't hurt themselves or other people around them?

## GET WHAT YOU NEED

**LAMA ROD:** The *sangha* is very important because it can reflect the things that we're missing, that we're bypassing.

When I talk about *sangha*, I talk about it as the space where we're rubbing against each other and we're coming into contact and there's conflict. This conflict isn't normal conflict, it isn't worldly conflict, because when we enter into sacred community, we have a different obligation. We see our interactions as pointing us back to things we need to look at more closely. We're being reminded to practice patience and kindness. Practice vulnerability.

**JASMINE:** I just didn't want to join a Dharma community until I found one that reflected my identity, and not because I simply needed to see reflections of myself everywhere all the time, even though more often than not that would be nice. I think that for those of us who are absconding—from the church and elsewhere, there has been a kind of compartmentalization of spirituality and sexuality. When I found a *sangha* that was full of women of color, mostly queer, it was suddenly OK to integrate the two in ways I had never experienced before. It was very healing. The idea that shame isn't a productive feeling in the work of liberation has been healing. The practice of lovingkindness, for example, asked me to look at the ways I was harboring an intense amount of anger, shame, and frustration for myself just because of who I wanted to be with or found myself attracted to. Of course that gets reinforced with personal reactions with people who are struggling with it themselves. At least having an intentional space to fully integrate all of who I was in a community of



people, who are also doing that same work and are trying to heal together—I think that is absolutely transformative. I had a very unique experience for sure.

**REV. ANGEL:** Relationships to emotions are manipulated often in dharma communities by, in particular, not allowing, or squelching, anger as an expression.

**LAMA ROD:** Well, because it's ultimately uncomfortable, and in certain communities there's not a lot of inclusion. You have people of certain differences coming into the space, and they're angry, and all of a sudden I think a lot of white practitioners take responsibility for that and say, "I must be the cause of this. I don't want to deal with this." I think it triggers guilt in people.

And ultimately, we don't have strategies to work with our anger. Within radical activist communities, which I'm a member of, there's a worship of anger as being vital for community change. Now, I always have to go up against them and push back on that because I see people destroyed in anger and in rage. I have to go into the communities and say, "I think we have to acknowledge anger. We have to honor our anger, but we don't have to ground ourselves in anger as a momentum to create change."

I experience a lot of anger, but I'm not involved in activism because I'm pissed off. I'm involved because I want people to be happy. At the same time I admit that I experience anger all the time. And yet, I'm also motivated by trying to love in a way that's authentic and open. I'm struggling to see the nature of anger and to transform that anger into something that's about creating, not destroying.

**REV. ANGEL:** What would you say to practitioners who are entering into spaces that are predominantly white, and they're expressing their anger? Not necessarily rooting in it, but expressing their anger as part of conveying their experience?

**LAMA ROD:** There has to be the space for that. That's part of our experience. It's not that you're reacting to the anger, it's that you're connecting to it, which is very different than acting out of it for me. I look at anger, and I think: Anger was the first material I had to work with. Anger was so integrated into so many parts of my life that it took a lot of practice to uproot it. Under that anger was a lot of despair. I wasn't just pissed off

just to be pissed off, I was pissed off because I was in so much despair and so much hopelessness.

I think for many communities of color, you get rooted in that hopelessness. There are no possibilities. There's no potential because we've been put in a certain place, and no one excels beyond that. We don't know how to contact that despair, until *sangha*, until people came to me and said, "Rod, I think you're pissed off." Then I would be like, "What in the hell do you know?" There was a lot of denial. That's how unintegrated rage was for me. It was under the radar. I was like, "I'm not angry. I'm not pissed off. I don't know what people are talking about!"

Then you're forced to look at it more and more. I began to see it. Over time, I began to own it as part of my experience. It wasn't this extraordinary thing that only I was experiencing. Everyone was going through anger and despair and everything else. I wasn't so special.

I think what has helped me so much in my Dharma practice over these years is understanding that everyone is going through this. They may not be talking about it, but everyone's having similar experiences, because we all have mind, and mind has these experiences that we don't really know how to work with. If we did, the world would be a lot better place right now.

**REV. ANGEL:** The cultural value in this society has been if you don't know how to work with something, suppress it. Not only suppress it in yourself, suppress it in others, because if you don't suppress it in others, then it reminds you that you're suppressing it in yourself. That's part of what we're experiencing in the dharma communities—the suppression of emotion. Suppression of anger, in particular, is a way in which folks are not actually being controlled in terms of expressing their anger because they want to control you; it's that they want to control themselves.

One of the extraordinary things about liberation is that you do not feel the need to control things when you're free. And the freer you get, the less you feel the need to control. Because the illusory nature of control becomes clear to you. It's like, "I'm just making this up! I'm not actually controlling anything."

It's like your closet. It's not really clean in here; I just stuffed all the things in the closet, but now I'm anxious because the closet might burst open. I feel aware of the fact that there are things that are rotting in the closet, and they're causing a stench, and that stench is coming out. You may

not even notice the smell, but I'm anxious, and I'm carrying and living under the burden of the anxiety of you becoming aware of the way in which I have put all of this stuff away. You know, when you're really hoarding, it's not just your furniture, your papers. Your shit is in there. So your shit is making a stink and you're anxious and you can't relax in your own skin. You feel triggered by someone else's presence. Not because they're doing something. It's because you have so much shit in your closet that you're holding back.

Having these conversations is liberating for us all. It's just opening the closet and saying, "OK, you know what is there. At least I can relax because now we know it's there and I don't have to be so on guard and fearful."

We're not talking enough about the fear that white folks hold as a result of race. I'm not talking about fear of colored people or fear of Black people. I'm talking about fear of one's own self, because you don't know how to have the conversation, because you feel shame about where you're located in that conversation, about how to locate yourself. We all feel shame when we're sitting on the cushion and stuff pops up in our head. We come to realize everything we think when no one is looking. What's liberating is once we are like, "This is what's going on. Now I understand my behavior, which seemed inexplicable at the time."

That's what happens; we get trapped. We behave in some way that's unconscious—unskillful behavior. Then we have to make meaning of it. If we don't make meaning of it, we'll be crazy, right? And we don't want to just think we're crazy, so we put words to it: I did that because you deserved it, because you showed up in a certain way, because you said something, you did something. You didn't behave the right way, and that's why I acted out.

What we're really saying is, "I don't know how to make sense of that behavior at all. That's frightening because it exposes the degree to which I'm out of control of myself. And that's way too scary to get involved with. So I'm just going to shut you down to shut it down, and then it's all shut down." There's no liberation there.

**LAMA ROD:** Many of us are really unstudied, unexamined, unquestioned. We're kind of operating on the sense of what we think we're talking about. We're not located within our experiences; we're not embodied. Because

that really takes opening the closet and owning what's in there and being vulnerable around that.

I see that as work that everyone has to do, not just white folks. As a person that embodies a certain difference, for me there's been a practice of actually examining the parts of who and what I was that I habitually repressed. And I've had to connect to the sense of never feeling good enough. I've had to learn to create a language around that and to be vulnerable around that, because, at the end of the day—let's just say white supremacy is completely eradicated—that's great, but I'm still going to experience this sense of inferiority and this woundedness. I think we get distracted with trying to end white supremacy and oppression and racism, but there's still this work of healing that needs to be done for everyone, and we need to bring more attention to that piece.

Healing can be started now. I get pushback from people who say, “No! We need to end oppression. Or we need to end all these systems.” I think that's how we get lost and distracted from the work of healing. I'm working to end racism and oppression, but at the same time I want to be liberated. I want to thrive. I want to be happy. How can we bring that ethic of healing back into our communities, into our *sanghas*, into our households, into our relationships, into our organizations?

**REV. ANGEL:** This is something that is challenging for people to understand—the notion of transforming society from the inside out. We're so in a framework of dichotomies that many people are like, “We have to do it outside first.”

Understanding that part of our capacity to make change outside in a way that's actually generative comes from having done work inside so we can actually have empowerment that doesn't have to do with external conditions. We actually have models for it on the grand scale. All people admire Nelson Mandela for his refusal to be imprisoned in his own being, which enabled him to come out of prison after twenty-eight years, which then gave room for a level of change to happen on a social level.

So I'm not saying that we should only just work on ourselves and not do any work outside. But I think it's an immature view that believes “I have to do all of the external conditions and have them all change before I can be happy.” I'm not willing to have my happiness wait for what might happen out there.

We have to commit to our own liberation regardless of what happens outside. And paradoxically, that gives way to change happening outside. If I were having this conversation about anger and fire and brimstone and kill the whiteys, then I wouldn't be here, frankly. This is not what people would be invested in as a conversation. Certainly none of the white-run organizations would be. It's already a stretch that they're inviting us at all. [Laughter]

**LAMA ROD:** I was just thinking about my own experience. But I better be careful. There are things I can't say if I want to get invited back. That's going to be the follow-up book to this project. [Laughter]

I'm thinking about my own liberation. I mean, I'm not liberated. Liberation is a process, and I think one of the first important things I had to do is stop believing in my inferiority. I had to actually stop believing what the world was trying to tell me I was. And I had to develop an experience of who I was on a very fundamental level through meditation practice. That's how I rebooted who and what I was, and so I have people in here from all parts of my life: childhood friends, high school friends, college friends, new friends. [Laughter]

There was a period where I just kind of crashed. And I made a choice: Do I restart with all the same old stuff, or do I restart and let go of what I don't need? Can I wipe the slate clean and then trust—and we find the same language in Christianity too—my life to a higher power? And that higher power for me was dharma.

I didn't have to wait for oppressive systems to be eradicated or overthrown. I made a choice, because I hit rock bottom. That I'm radical and anarchist follows many of those ideals and philosophies. That thing gets me as excited as listening to old speeches from Malcolm X and James Baldwin. James Baldwin was always advocating love and transformation. Those voices have somehow been lost.

So we have to start taking those teachings and writings seriously, because there's truth in that for us. We can have this rhetoric of overthrowing oppressive systems, but we have to balance that with the work of overthrowing the oppressive system operating internally that actually keeps us enslaved.

My principal teacher is Norlha Rinpoche, who is in his late seventies. He's a Tibetan from the generation of the Dalai Lama, that same generation

that either escaped Tibet when the Communists invaded in 1959 or who was interned in concentration camps. My teacher was, in fact, captured and interned in a concentration camp and escaped. So my teacher has an understanding of what it is to be oppressed, to escape genocide.

Being that I was one of his first Black senior students, he was always a step ahead of me. Meaning that, he's always been like, "You have an obligation to work with people who are like you. Because if you don't, you're wasting this opportunity to help people."

I'm so fortunate and privileged to have a teacher who's able to push me in that direction. Instead of saying, "You don't need to do that. You don't need to talk about race and sex." I go back and I say, "Rinpoche, you realize what I'm doing? I'm talking about all these things!" He was like, "Sure. Whatever."

**REV. ANGEL:** My experience of my teacher is very different than yours. I think that that's true for many people. Your teacher's Tibetan, and his relationship to racial constructs is entirely different, I'm imagining, than my teacher, a white lesbian in New York City.

And I was not having the "let me trust my teacher to point out what I need to know in order to fully experience myself." [I had] the opposite experience of feeling that my teacher was out of the place. And, given the immersive nature of racist constructs in this country, we're pointing out the things that she needed to point out in order to maintain her safety and her not working with what was there in the room. So I wanted to make sure that that's also clear. That it's ideal that we have teachers like yours, and if we don't, that we still are responsible for ourselves.

I had to make a choice to get my pointing-out instruction someplace else, to actually recognize I'm not getting pointed out to me what I need for my liberation, for my happiness—to actually unhook enough from my attachment to "this is my teacher and this is how it should be," to get what I needed.

Even though I had a lesbian teacher, I was still getting a white heteronormative frame of the Dharma. It didn't allow for a radical Dharma, and it let me, compelled me, or positioned me, I would say, inside a certain kind of privilege. Inside of that privilege one cannot be radical. It is like inside that privilege, that is the basic question to me about radical Dharma, and the theory of radical Dharma is that you have to let go of your

privileges and turn the lenses of Dharma on the full scope and expression of your life. Not just inside of what your particular privilege is, whether that is whiteness or straightness or if you are in a dominant queer culture, which is maybe a privilege too. All of those things, so that was a live question for me. In this moment in history, our attention is rightfully turned to the history and ongoing policing of particularly Black and brown bodies. It is expressing itself as the state policing of these bodies, but it begs the question of where does the policing come from. Police forces are acting out a specific mandate of a social construct that we live inside of. The question we need to ask is where does this policing, whether it is policing queerness or Blackness, where does it come from and how does Dharma allow us to let go of an orientation that, because it is about acceptance, inherently undermines policing?

# REMEMBERING LOVE: AN INFORMAL CONTEMPLATION ON HEALING

*by Lama Rod Owens*

*You've got to learn to leave the table  
When love's no longer being served.*

—NINA SIMONE

*Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word "love" here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace—not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth.*

—JAMES BALDWIN, *THE FIRE NEXT TIME*

*Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well? ... Just so's you're sure, sweetheart, and ready to be healed, cause wholeness is no trifling matter. A lot of weight when you're well.*

—TONI CADE BAMBARA, *THE SALT EATERS*

## REMEMBERING

When people ask me how I'm doing, I feel a little confused and pause for a moment. In my mind I want to talk about this deep sense of heaviness and despair that feels like mourning with and for the world. I want to say that a part of me doesn't feel good enough, that this was a feeling I was born into,



trained in, and encouraged to accept—that I do not remember an experience before this.

Growing up, no one had ever talked about sexuality or sexual orientation. The boy knew he was gay by his mid-teens but did not have a language to express it. Even if he did, there was danger in saying the words.

After fifth grade, the boy had transferred to a mostly white school. He made white friends for the first time and began to notice that the white kids dressed better, always had money, had two parents at home and drove nice cars, took vacations, went to summer camps, could afford special study programs and tutors, were not in the free and reduced-price lunch program, and lived in multistory homes and nice neighborhoods. At that time, he lived in the projects with his mom, did not wear all name brand clothes, had gapped teeth; for the first time, he felt both poor and Black.

The boy hated riding the school bus home. Often he had to stand in the aisle, as the bus was always too crowded. As one of the younger students on the bus, he was bullied and harassed by older kids. Once someone jammed a pencil between his buttocks as if trying to penetrate him anally. Once, after an older student tripped passing him in the aisle, the student rammed his elbow across the boy's lower jaw. Though not in much pain, the boy wanted to cry. The only physical violence he had ever known was from other Black boys. He did not understand how anyone could feel safe around them.

One other afternoon the teen stopped at a convenience store to buy a snack. By the time he was walking out, the cops were waiting on him. The cashier had reported him as matching the description of someone who had been shoplifting there. The cops asked for ID and were respectful. The young man kept thinking how he didn't do anything to deserve this. Afterward the boy raced home, paranoid, and locked himself in his room. He had no idea what was wrong with him. He was sobbing, terrified, and ashamed for being both.

The young man had been larger bodied most of his life. He was labeled "fat" in the gay male community. Because of this, he felt judged, marginalized, and devalued. He felt unattractive and undesirable. He felt that he was not thin or handsome enough to be loved. Those he was attracted to were not attracted to him. Once, after chatting with another man online using a profile picture portraying him as thinner than he was, he met

him in person. The man took one look at him and explained bluntly to the young man, “You need to be honest with yourself,” and walked away. It took the young man years to love and trust his body after that.

He was new to Buddhism and was sitting his first ten-day intensive retreat. During the question-and-answer period after a dharma talk, he explained to the white male teacher that he felt lonely and marginalized in the *sangha* as the only person of color. The teacher suggested that this was something the young man struggled with outside of the *sangha*. The young man agreed. The teacher advised him to just sit with what he was feeling. The young man wanted more and did sit with the feelings and knew that the *sangha* and that teacher were not safe for him.

I want to say how much I am feeling my personal trauma compounded from lifetimes of psychological and emotional violence endured and held not only by myself, but by many generations before me and passed on to me without my consent. I want to say that it breaks my heart that we have to tell little Black boys they will have to survive being Black and male in a time and place that chooses not to hold them warmly or kindly.

*And then there was that afternoon when Velma had done her best. As a brown-bodied woman engaged in the work of social change, she could not continue any longer. Activism, racism, misogyny, marriage, and work had taken its toll. The struggle for mental, physical, and spiritual liberation had left her body worn, spirit weak, and her mind sick and trembling. As a reward for her efforts to take her own life, she found herself barely wrapped in a hospital gown, waiting for hands to be laid on her.*

*Minnie came as healer. Velma resisted. She couldn't decide if she was ready to be healed. Finally, Minnie checked in: “Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well? ... Just so's you're sure, sweetheart, and ready to be healed, cause wholeness is no trifling matter. A lot of weight when you're well.”<sup>2</sup>*

On Thursday, June 18, 2015, I woke to the mourning of nine slaughtered Black bodies in Charleston, South Carolina. The brutality of the massacre was an act of terrorism in my own heart, breaking it into a million little pieces of aching. I felt that Toni Cade Bambara's classic novel, *The Salt Eaters*, was reading me. I was feeling a little like Velma in the novel, lost,

frustrated, and resisting. Broken. I held onto Minnie's appeal to Velma as if she were speaking to me. I wanted and needed healing. I craved for Minnie's hands to be laid on me. I needed to be liberated. This morning I wanted to be whole. I wanted the privilege of the weight of what it meant to be well. I wanted to know what it meant to be healed.

When did I decide I wanted to carry this weight?

## DESCRIBING TRAUMA

If I am to speak of healing, then I must first speak of trauma. When I speak of trauma, I speak of experiences that impact how we relate to ourselves and to others around us. These experiences, mostly related to our emotional capacities and also called woundedness, hurting, aching, or pain, refer to both the subtle and gross experiences that make it very difficult to feel confident, safe, or to experience happiness, well-being, and balance. In this understanding of trauma, trauma can be healed. Through the cultivation of awareness practice, we can learn to identify our traumas, accept them, investigate them, and learn to let them go in concert with sustaining heart practices such as lovingkindness (*metta*), taking and sending (*tonglen*), and compassion practices.

In my experience, trauma is the creation of a context that does not privilege my deepest desire to return home and inhabit my own agency and body, but instead triggers disembodiment and a loss of awareness of the body and its experiences. Thus, trauma becomes a cyclical experience of continuous unfolding, of continuous movement through places without consent as it perpetuates terror, despair, hopelessness, and disconnection. It is a voyage that never docks at any port, but is suspended, unexamined. When I am feeling my own trauma, I find that I am also seeking some way to find ground, an anchor.

## GIVING VOICE TO HEALING

Healing is difficult for me to talk about, to neatly conceptualize in a language that communicates my relationship to what I consider a process of slow but intentional liberation. I am nervous and anxious to speak of healing in spaces and places that are suspicious of what it means to heal. I know that sometimes we distrust healing because it means that we have to imagine a different way of being in the world beyond our anger, woundedness, or despair. Moreover, we believe that to move beyond these hurts means that we can no longer be attuned to the suffering of communities and people struggling for justice, equality, or basic visibility. Or maybe because we feel that healing means forgetting that we have been hurt, oppressed, and that there is an oppressor who should and must be held accountable for their violence.

Perhaps we think healing means weakness, that we are no longer strong when we are healed or that healing zaps our super-human ability of being pissed off and agitated, which we think keeps us conscious and present. We have learned that anger is a part of the work of social liberation, that being angry is what motivates and drives us. To a certain extent this is true. However, I believe that the true blessing of anger is how it can indicate an imbalance in our experience and in the world around us. But we have to be very clear: Anger is not about creating or building up. That is the work of loving.

Or maybe we believe that the right to healing is only for those who have been hurt and oppressed, and we are upset to consider that the one who hurts and oppresses is in just as much need of healing. It is hard for us to consider that if the oppressor is healed, then maybe he or she would not reproduce so much violence.

When I hear folks' distrust of healing, especially in marginalized and traumatized communities, I hear the subtle and nuanced workings of internalized oppression that distract us from imagining liberation that is not about struggling against systems and regimes but about transcending the trauma of struggling and residing in the nature of who we are as people who can be psychically free though physically bound. For when I define healing as freedom, I mean to interrogate how I am slave to my own self-depreciation fueled by internalized oppression.

I want to say that these days when I see dead Black men on TV, I see myself; watching bombs being dropped on communities of brown people

anywhere feels like bombs falling on my head. I want to say that sometimes the experience of my skin color is one akin to a desperate need to rip off a burning outfit.

I speak about healing because I need you to know that if it were not for healing, I would not be alive. I would not have survived my own intersectionality in a time and place that struggle to hold difference warmly or kindly. Identity is wounding only because we survive in places where difference remains invisible instead of being seen and celebrated. Not only that, many of us do not know how to celebrate our difference because we have been taught to repress difference in an effort to gain social privileges or, to put it another way, access to the master's house. Because I survived my intersectionality, I am showing up a survivor of conditions that were not set by me but that I still must endure. Yet, for this to be understood, we must be shown what is required to make the possible possible.

## WHAT IS LOVE?

Whatever we think love is, love often isn't. It took me years of practice to understand what love was. I had always heard about it and had often been told of its importance. I knew that I was still alive because of the love of my mother and others. But love was often something I associated with fear. Once, a friend confided that self-love was something their mother had taught them wasn't possible and that my friend should just learn to live with that truth. When I heard this, something inside of me rebelled and I felt sad. I felt upset hearing that my friend believed this from their mother. I felt upset as well because, though I believed in self-love, I knew that there was more self-hate than love for me at that time. In that moment, I vowed to learn to love myself through what seemed like thick folds of self-hate.

Love is the wish for myself and others to be happy. Love transcends our need to control the recipient of love. I love not because I need something in return. I love not because I want to be loved back, but because I see and understand love as being an expression of the spaciousness I experience when I am challenging my egoic fixation by thinking about the welfare of others. I go where I am loved. I go where I am allowed to express love. In loving, I have no expectations.

Healing is being situated in love. Healing is not just the courage to love, but to be loved. It is the courage to want to be happy not just for others, but for ourselves as well. It is interrogating our bodies as an artifact of accumulated traumas and doing the work of processing that trauma by developing the capacity to notice and be with our pain. If we are to heal, then we must allow our awareness to settle into and integrate with the pain and discomfort that has been habitually avoided. We cannot medicate the pain away. We embrace it, and in so doing establish a new relationship with the experience. We must see that there is something that must be befriended. This is the true nature of our experience, and in finally approaching this experience we contact basic sanity.

Too often love has meant violence in the form of our manipulation and control. Many of us have learned at an early age that we are only lovable if we meet certain conditions and expectations. The message from our environments has been something like, “You can only be loved if you do \_\_\_\_\_ or if you are \_\_\_\_\_.”

Because love is conditional, we develop the art of performing in order to get the love that we need without understanding that we, by nature of having been born, have a natural right to love and receive love. We are controlled by others when we are dependent on their love and thus struggle to meet the demands that they place on us to receive that love.

When we attempt to love out of our woundedness, then our loving is only violence. Love needs spaciousness in our minds to manifest and endure. If there is no space, it is very difficult to experience a sense of confidence and trust in our own bodies and experience. When none of this is present, our movement and interactions in the world are limited and selfish. Our hurt is our deep identification with a self that can and is experiencing pain. When we are identifying like this, then our actions are more about protecting ourselves than generating authentic concern for others. We see the world around us as antagonistic. Everything becomes a threat. Because of this perceived threat, we often find ourselves in a heightened state of responsiveness, always reacting and attacking. In this way, we are protecting ourselves against others and further acting out of a frustration of never feeling comfortable. Our acting perpetuates suffering for others and thus violence is reproduced.

## COMING OUT AND RISKING LOVE

Many of us have come out multiple times, in many ways. There are always risks with coming out. Often that risk is losing the love from others. When I think of coming out, I am always reminded of coming out as a gay person. When I came out to my mother, I was twenty-four. She was the first family member I came out to. I had been living in Boston, in therapy, and nowhere near being interested in practicing dharma. With my therapist, I had decided to formally start coming out to family. I had started coming out to friends at the end of high school and was completely out in college, but I had not made it a priority to officially come out to family. I figured if they found out, they found out. If not, oh well. In any case, I had decided with my therapist that I would tell my mom the truth during my visit home.

The time chose me strategically. We were on our way back from church one afternoon. We stopped at a red light and something said, "It's time." So, I stepped over the ledge and hoped the net would catch me. I told her that I wanted to tell her that I was gay because I wanted her to know. There was a pause and then a question from her as to how I knew. My response was about my natural attraction to and loving of other men. Upon arriving home, we observed the great Black folk tradition of sitting on the front porch as she simply said that nothing had changed between us and that she still loved me and that she just wanted me to be safe. I think the greatest fear we have coming out about anything is the possibility that we will not be loved by those we need love from. There would have been significant woundedness if my mother said that she could not accept me or love me because of my sexuality. I was very fortunate to receive love from a mother who, in that one instant, chose not to commit violence by restricting her love but chose to love more intensely, thereby becoming an agent of my further healing.

## HEALING AND SHOWING UP

When I suffered severe depression, the easiest thing to do was hide it. You become quite skilled in distracting others from focusing on you and your suffering. This is possible because most people are not interested really in

how others are suffering and certainly not interested in their own suffering. There's no judgement here. Suffering is difficult and tough.

It's complicated and very uncomfortable. Most of us master the game of distracting ourselves and avoiding vulnerability. I kept my disease to myself and found myself quietly slipping away, disappearing. Not many people noticed.

Healing is movement and work toward wholeness. Healing is never a definite location but something in process. It is the basic ordinary work of staying engaged with our own hurt and limitations. Healing does not mean forgiveness either, though it is a result of it. Healing is knowing our woundedness; it is developing an intimacy with the ways in which we suffer. Healing is learning to love the wound because love draws us into relationship with it instead of avoiding feeling the discomfort.

Healing means we are holding the space for our woundedness and allowing it to open our hearts to the reality that we are not the only people who are hurt, lonely, angry, or frustrated. We must also release the habitual aggression that characterizes our avoidance of trauma or any discomfort. My goal is to befriend my pain, to relate to it intimately as a means to end the suffering of desperately trying to avoid it. Opening our hearts to woundedness helps us to understand that everyone else around us carries around the same woundedness.

And while I continue to heal myself, I continue to hurt myself. Using racism as an example, though I struggle to use my practice to bring awareness of internalized oppression manifesting as racial trauma, I am also struggling to see how I am also an agent of white supremacy as I unconsciously value white bodies as aesthetically pleasing and cleaner, while simultaneously seeing my body and other brown and Black bodies as less attractive. How my internalizing of white supremacy urges me to be on guard when passing another Black male on the sidewalk, to be embarrassed when other Black or brown bodies are acting out in public spaces, or to hide my rage and despair in order to keep white people cozy.

In my healing I am also mourning. Sometimes I am in despair. Mourning and despair are very private matters. It is my acknowledgment that there is suffering. It is my honoring of my discomfort as well as the discomfort of everyone else in the world. One of the blessings of lovingkindness practice is that the heart remains raw, sensitive, and open to pain. As I am mourning,



I am remembering my commitment engendered in my bodhisattva vow, not just to achieve enlightenment to free all beings, but to hold the space for the pain of beings in my practice as I hold my own. When we begin to confront our trauma, we give permission for others to do the same. This is the work of the contemporary bodhisattva. Ultimately, holding the space for the pain to be present in our experience and our capacity to do this eventually inform the effectiveness of our healing and will make us the healer.

## HEALING AND LINEAGE

The most profound practice I have ever been taught by my teachers is simply letting my shit fall apart, developing the courage to sit with all of my rough edges, the ugliness, the destructive and suffocating story lines I have perpetuated about myself, and letting go of the same suffocating storylines others maintain about me. It is this practice that sometimes involves sitting in my room alone and letting the tears and pain have their way. But it is also the practice of learning to smile and lean into the hard stuff, allowing it to wake me up to make better decisions.

There is healing through lineage. Sometimes I cannot describe what I mean by lineage. Yet my experience of lineage is about being received and held within a field of continuous loving-warmth, kindness, and compassion. It is about the transhistorical gifting of unconditional acceptance. It is the inheritance of permission to transcend the silliness of living out of the confinement of the ego-bound self. It is the permission to sprout wings and take to the sky as others have before me. Their example becomes the heart of the legacy you will leave behind.

My lineage is also intersectionality. It is evoking and honoring all the little pieces of who I am, that which inform the way I show up. I summon my identities like I summon the ancestors and demand that they speak truth to me because if they do not, I am a living lie. To be a lie is to go against my purpose as a body who holds and shares dharma.

Before I give a dharma talk I am usually in silence for some period of time, feeling into the community, leaning into what those present are projecting, trying to hold the space for my fears and anxieties. It is a tender period for me. I need to know that I am being held by lineage. I need to

know that before I open my mouth, I am speaking lineage. I take the time to call upon my dharma lineage, evoking the names of the great masters such as Tilopa, Naropa, Milarepa as well as the living-flesh teachers I am devoted to in this life.

I also evoke the blessing of Tara, the female Buddha of compassion, to support me as I lean into my own discomfort so that I can lean into the suffering I sense around me. Often I imagine the essence of my lineage in the form of Tara descending into me like I am possessed.

I *am* possessed by Tara. It is moving and poignant. Through the blessing of Tara and my lineage, I am there, with people, in my body, being with and loving all the parts of my identity because these parts have taught me how to be kind, passionate, fierce, and tender at the same time. Tara holds this Black queer body in such compassion that I do not feel the need to apologize for anything. She is the woman holding my hand so that I may hold the hand of those who have come to me to be held. At some point I become the woman, the mother. This is when lineage is moving in me.

## TAKING, SENDING, AND RECEIVING AS HEALING

*Tonglen* means taking and sending, or can be described as replacing our selves for others. It is a transformative practice. We could say that this practice is one of radical expansion in which we are challenging the boundaries we erect and giving permission for these boundaries to be dissolved in our increasing care and concern for others around us. This care and concern is the deepening of our own inherent compassion, which is both the recognition of suffering in ourselves and others and the aspiration to alleviate this suffering. *Tonglen* allows me to enter into a kind of intimacy with my own woundedness and offers me a way to stay connected to my experience. When I am in tune to my discomfort, I am less likely to avoid your discomfort. Or to put it another way: when I am able to show up to my suffering, I can also show up to yours.

When I practice lovingkindness, I need to remember that I am cared for. I need to remember that my feelings of being lonely, isolated, and unlovable are essentially the illusions perpetuated by my ego fixation. When I am practicing, I wish to experience the deepest well-being and happiness, and

gradually I begin wishing that others experience the same thing. In this way I begin the courageous and great work of loving myself and extending that same love to as many people as I can.

## EPILOGUE

But I was very lucky because as I slipped away I began waking up more to what was happening and refused to disappear. My journey led me into meditation, Buddhism, nutrition, physical fitness, and the world of alternative healing. I'm lucky to have cured myself with the help of healers and my teachers, and I'm lucky to be alive. I only write this because many of you are suffering and feel helpless and stigmatized. Many of you will not articulate your suffering and will not seek help. I especially write to Black folks who historically suffer from many forms of mental illness that remain undiagnosed. We have to start talking about our struggle, especially in light of managing and/or transcending this suffering. I also write to remember everyone who didn't make it and are not making it. But yes, I have survived depression. I'm not ashamed to say that. If you need help, I'm here.

In the end, what I have survived is not myself but people, systems, and institutions that have used physical, emotional, spiritual, and other forms of psychic violence to insist that I should be something other than myself. It is not my particular intersectionality that has been my suffering, but rather the suffering that comes from my intersectionality not being honored, accepted, or even celebrated. I am a survivor of perpetual invisibility, which has often resulted in me doubting my self-worth, integrity, and general health. Thus, part of my trauma has been believing that I do not matter and that the world doesn't care. In my experience, invisibility becomes a kind of murder. For communities I identify with that are struggling to be seen, it is genocide.

I want to say that I will continue smiling at police folks. And understand that when you blame me for your unexamined issues, I will still want you to be happy. When you call me a name meant to hurt me, I will try not to take it personally as you are also trying to express your own despair. I want to say that I am tired of struggling and am practicing being where I want to be. In my mind, I am saying all this, but I haven't figured out how to get this across. I apologize for my confusion.

In the end, my healing has been learning to see myself and to celebrate myself. It is interrogating the stories about how I do not matter and choosing to let go of those narratives and engage in the necessary and

revolutionary work, self-love, and liberation. Through self-loving, I can know my aching and choose not to show up in reaction to the aching, but to show up being informed by my aching in a way that wakes me up to the reality that everyone else around me is aching as well. I am not alone in needing to be seen.

But I also want to say that despite my uneasiness in the world, I'm OK and that I'm fine with feeling angry and sad because that's a part of my humanity and I am learning to have more space to be human. I want to say that I try not to blame others so much and that I am trying to lean into the heaviness and despair, that I'm trying to stay open and not shut down. I want to say that my speechlessness in reaction to the ugliness around me is slowly giving way to a choice to honor life with silent contemplation.

In the end, I am no longer the little boy having to hold the potential violence of those in stress around him, or the little boy who is afraid to claim his love for other men, or the pre-teen who is challenged to make meaning out of race and class, or the young teen terrified of riding the bus, or the young man othered because of his body type, or the man who is told that his feelings of marginalization are his issue not the issue of a *sangha* steeped in white-supremacist cultural norms. I am no longer these people, but I remember their stories. They made me who I am. Because of them, I have earned my dharma. I have been blessed with a testimony.

Again, I remember Velma. I used to be Velma. Minnie came to me not once, but many times over. Her words were always the same: "Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well? ... Just so's you're sure, sweetheart, and ready to be healed, cause wholeness is no trifling matter. A lot of weight when you're well."

Perhaps what I have come to understand, finally, is that somehow I have become the one I have always wanted. This is why I do the things that I do. There is a fierce love that wakes me up every morning, that makes me tell my stories, refuses to let me apologize for my being here, blesses me with the capacity to be silent, alone, and grieving when I most need to be. You have to understand that this is what I mean when I say healing.

May all beings be seen, held kindly, and loved. May we all one day surrender to the weight of being healed.

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2. Toni Cade Bambara, *The Salt Eaters*, *1st Vintage Contemporaries ed.* (New York: Random House, 1992), 10.

# RADICALIZING DHARMA DREAMS

*by Jasmine Syedullah, PhD*

*On truth's path, wise is mad, insane is wise. In love's way, self and other are the same. Having drunk the wine, my love, of being one with you, I find the way to Mecca and Bodhgaya are the same.*

—#302, FROM RUMI'S *KOLLIYAAT-E SHAMS-E TABRIZI*, EDITED BY  
BADIOZZAMAN FOROUZANFAR (TEHRAN, AMIR KABIR, 1988)

*All that is deeply true is a paradox.*

—REV. ANGEL KYODO WILLIAMS, SENSEI

*Why not sit? Why not stop the Ferris wheel only to sit on a rainbow-colored steel horse for a while? Neither people-watching nor waiting, but just sitting? To find peace? To escape the hustle and bustle of this life? Its rushed hours and heartbreaks? Its delusions and disappointments? Perhaps because in the act of sitting there is nothing to be attained?*

## STRANGERS AT THE GATES

There came a time in my own practice when the lofty dreams and abstract ideals that originally compelled me toward a cushion, a mat, a *sangha*, or tradition of wisdom teachings, began to dissolve. I didn't find nirvana on my cushion. I did, however, find something, in the depths of the night, surrounded by police, sitting on a cushion while holding vigil with thousands before the gates of a federal prison. It was the evening of

December 12th. The year was 2005. I had traveled with my *sangha* from Oakland to the foothills of Marin to participate in a talk led by Rev. Angel and Jack Kornfield at Spirit Rock. At that point it was the most racially mixed, densely populated Buddhist gathering I'd ever seen. After the talk several of us bundled up with blankets, hats, scarves, and warm jackets with our meditation cushions in tow and headed to San Quentin in protest of the state-sanctioned execution of a man named Stanley Tookie Williams. Williams had been arrested, convicted, and sentenced to death in the early '80s. He had spent more than twenty years on death row. He had entered prison the co-founding leader of one of the most notorious gangs in America, the Crips. By the time of his execution he had become a Nobel Peace Prize nominee five times over for his violence-prevention efforts with urban youth. He was globally celebrated by noteworthy public figures and respected by national progressive organizations. That night he was to suffer death by lethal injection.

We heard the chants before we saw their faces. Hundreds packed the vacant streets that led to the prison gates. The shouts cut through the cool nighttime air, calling us all to come together. We rolled in chanting. Bathed in the intermittent light of hard flashes from the big local news cameras and the flickering glow of white-stemmed candles that cast an eerie light across a sea of unfamiliar faces, we, the urban *sangha*, joined a motley crew of anarchists, preachers, politicians, white liberals, Black Muslims, communists, hip-hop moguls, and blue-clad Crips. We were flanked by quiet rows of surprisingly passive police. We were flowing together like a river toward the gates of the prison. *We are*, I thought silently, *the strange bedfellows of the next social revolution*.

Our walking meditation winded along a seemingly endless pathway until we arrived at a clearing, lines of protestors spilling out of formation and pooling in dense crowds before the police-lined and barricaded West Gate of California's oldest institution of incarceration, San Quentin State Prison, home to the state's only gas chamber and death row.

We were there for Williams. Not because, like Troy Davis, we believed he was innocent. Though many believed he was not guilty of the crimes for which he had been sentenced, and, though I had no doubt he had contributed violent acts, I was also certain those actions should not cost him his life. The propensity for violence for which the law held him accountable



was not his alone to own. The historical conditions of its formation rose alongside the globalization of the U.S. empire that sowed the seeds of 9/11 —arming Afghan mercenaries with military weapons and training them to fight Soviet soldiers in a war without end. Williams was no saint, but like many of us he was invested in healing himself and the community he had helped to harm. For the last several years of his incarceration he spent his time writing children’s books, giving public talks, and creating online educational resources designed to prevent young men like him from following the path he himself had chosen. Tookie’s was the hard-won kind of auto-correct that reflected our own need for another chance, for forgiveness, for something with longer-term visions of justice than retributive violence can afford, for something beyond the cycle of punishment, exile, and annihilation we erect around those whose presence poses a clear and present danger to our sense of safety.

The evening felt surreal, like midnight might strike and some old tension might break, give way to the improbable. Maybe a miracle. Posters bearing his words and his face filled the air. The voices of the few capital-punishment supporters were consumed by a sea of Williams’s advocates, drowned out by our fiery calls for his immediate release from death row. We placed meditation cushions in a circle on the concrete pavement and sat in the midst of the crowd. Bringing stillness into the roar of five thousand from the coolness of the ground.

In the silence I could feel it all. The grief. The rage. Injustice has a flavor, a smell. It chokes the breath and burns the gut. It rises through the body like poison, like fire. I sat until I couldn’t sit any more. My wavering voice joined the others. At the eleventh hour, phone in hand, I scrolled the news updates in search of the latest, a sign that the fate of the condemned may still be stayed. “Without an apology and atonement for these senseless and brutal killings, there can be no redemption,” a quote from then Governor Schwarzenegger read. I braced myself. Tookie was being punished for dedicating his children’s book about the danger of gangs to political prisoner George Jackson and Black Panther Party leader Huey P. Newton. He was being killed as much for his affiliation with enemies of the state, as he was for choosing self-defense over violating the trust of those who put their trust in him. Rather than informing on the internal affairs of gang life, he was choosing to align himself with the nameless—those with no selves to defend from the threat of death row. I clasped hands with strangers. We

wrapped each other's rage up with our voices. We stood as one terrific body of dissent against the cold and death, armed with nothing but the fullness of our attention, our witness, our whole selves.

In the earliest hour of morning, more than half an hour past midnight, it was announced. Stanley Tookie Williams had become the twelfth person to be legally executed by the State of California since the reinstatement of that brutal and dehumanizing practice in 1978. Though his personal transformation was not enough to convince Governor Schwarzenegger that his life was worth saving, it was not an event that passed unnoticed.

Self-defense, in this context, is, like violence, never an individual act. Self-defense becomes possible through the cooperation of many forces, people, ideas, movements, and wars. Instead of the image of self-defense we are used to, something like a high-noon standoff at the O.K. Corral, it might be more like a scene from a horror movie, something like a zombie feeding frenzy. An early scene. A mob attack in a populated area. The frantic funneling of senseless force against an immediately imposing and clearly eminent threat. Are they mad or just hungry? Everyone fears the zombies. No one suspects the humans are zombicidal.

## INTRODUCTION TO MEDITATION

So why sit? It couldn't save Stanley. It didn't start a revolution. At the beginning I picked up sitting as a means to an end. Another way to achieve. The best way to arrest what Augusto Boal calls the cops in your head. I was using meditation to police the police so to speak, adopting their instruments of surveillance, punishment, exile, and control in service to my own liberation. It was not working. It gave me a reason, a purpose, a way out of my head but not a way out of my habits of self-isolation, the deepest lie of this heteronormative hero-obsessed culture, believing that the only one I could rely on to save me was myself. What was first a refuge became its own prison. After sitting with those who stood for Tookie, my deep and abiding suspicion that prisons cannot keep us safe and that criminalization was not in the common interest of justice became more than a cause. It became a calling. Being fully in the stillness was not about self-isolation or self-help but about standing in radical relationship with all that stillness

holds, with all the grief, all the loss, all the loneliness, and for a moment no matter what, standing *with* it rather than rushing to reason it away, arrest it, lock it in a box, and throw away the key. Nothing can be truly destroyed this way. Not even the dead stay buried.

When I first came to Rev. angel's *sangha* and the fearless-warrior practice she was developing, it made me so uncomfortable that she had to teach it to me about ten times. The instruction to keep our eyes slightly open rather than completely closed was not just difficult to remember; it was irritating. I preferred instead to seal myself off from the world, content that the dharma dreams that danced behind blissfully pulled-lid screens were what was working for me. It took months to unlearn the habits of sitting in isolation I had picked up from the academy. Even after much instruction, I was struggling to notice what I was doing, stop, and start again. In order to embody the practice of sitting in meditation as if I were on the edge of a battlefield awaiting my cue to combat rather than atop a mountain in the clouds, I had to come to see what all I feared to face in my practice, in myself.

The older practices were not wrong; they were, however, alibis in my own desire to appear unflappable, while actually managing to be still hiding from myself. The meditative stance of the fearless warrior was not that of the Christian monk, nor the Eastern ascetic. She was fearless warrior living in a city, not a monastic alone on a mountain. Her senses were poised for action, fully present, alive, relaxed, embodied, alert. Thus, her eyes remain slightly open and cast down at a forty-five-degree angle with the ground, gazing gently ahead in order to maintain detached connection with the world and an attitude of readiness to rejoin it whenever the need arose. In the practice we move in response to bells rather than bullets. In the service we learn to invite the sound of the bell as an extension of the practice, not as an anxious exit strategy. We lead the chant because a strong, steady pace must be set and a container for others must be held, not because we excel in mastering protocol and serving up convincing performances of leadership.

There can be an implicit shadiness in the retreat to monastic life within the cosmopolitan exigencies of urban existence. A kind of entitled solipsism and air of self-righteousness that can accompany the dharma talk that romanticizes the merits of meditation as a priority and thus as justification for withdrawing from direct forms of engagement with things as they are —

with injustice, inequity, pain, injury, disease, violence, apathy, ignorance, neglect. When we move as one in the practice hall, we are peaceful. This is not necessarily so when we leave it behind for the hard ground of public protest. The fear of mob mentality in our modern, civilized culture is a curious one. We can trace it back to Cold War anxieties or fear of slave uprisings. At the end of the day, the assumption that crowds acting in concert need to be controlled taints our everyday connections to feeling each other—to feeling interconnected. It makes us fear those we learn to call strangers. It makes us strange in the presence of the unknown.

A sitting practice is about more than seeking peace. It is self-defense, more than a dream state of good intentions that are “useful” for becoming less wound up in the spin cycle of day-to-day life. It is also the most powerful weapon in the face of insurmountable horror, a way to stop even the cops, in the midst of everything and stand at the gates of the prison as the many made one to confront the coming threat head on. We might not save anyone. We might have to bear witness to an execution. But we were there. We were taking note, paying attention, and, because we were there, it was not a moment that went unnoticed.

“Do you want to be asleep or awake?” the teacher asked, and the student allowed her eyes to open slightly. She drew them down. Gently casting a forty-five-degree angle with the ground, already more steady, more present to herself, ready to meet whatever might arise. In following the instruction, I dared my dharma practice to wake up, come out of isolation and become animated, to come out of a space of suspended good faith, to become a practice that lived both on and off the cushion, bringing me more present to myself and closer into the world. The fearless warrior practice trained me to sit with all my internal cops and unconscious prisoners, the guilty, the innocent, the ghosts, the saints, and the monsters. It gave me a chance to see all their strange and idiosyncratic machinations and take note of their marionette-like possession of my sense of self, my disgust, my shame, my self-preservation.

I began to study the waxing and waning of my own prison-house of selves like a beloved guardian until my own attachments to their coming and going became increasingly more familiar and less startling to me. The steady routine of my own punitive reactions to my missteps became more readily recognizable over time as a discrete series of feelings and activities I

rely on and engage for real reasons instead of a set of crimes to be controlled and corrected. The tendency to police becomes less compulsive, more conscious with practice. Abandoned pieces, places and people cut off become inhabitable, hospitable, less hostile. What if we went there? Away from reliance on police, cuffs, kill shots, and cages? What if we flocked? What if we crowded conventions of justice with conduct becoming a more collective vision of freedom. Do we police because we fear we can be savages? Do our barricades from each other belie the blinds that keep us strangers to ourselves?

## ANY GIVEN SOMEDAY

It is not enough to know we want freedom. We have to practice it. We have to be able to live it out together. Remind each other how messy practice can be but rally each other to keep going for it. It might not make sense. It might not appear reasonable. Knowing we want freedom is a practice in presence not fortune-telling, not story-telling. There are no guarantees. No gold stars for having arrived on the other side perfectly unscathed. No chance of anyone nailing a perfect landing anyhow.

The skillfulness required to still all forms of policing, punishment, and separation we typically bring to our practices of liberation is not a matter of mastery. Our individual attempts to brace ourselves from the presence of each other are messy, angry, and hurtful. We throw up borders of separation to keep ourselves safe and somehow manage to find ourselves more miserable.

So often the ways I hear folk talk about practice and represent its value are wrapped up in the idea that freedom is a means to an end, especially within the U.S. context, given our particular historical relationship to freedom being legally and morally bound up in discourses of property, entitlement, mastery, exchange, dispossession, and exclusion. What if freedom is not a means to an end full of more comforts than this moment, right now? We may yet be further inconvenienced along the way.

In January 2015 I sat in a *zendo* at Brooklyn Zen Center. It was nearly MLK Day. We chanted the words of his speech, *A Time to Break Silence*, in unison. Calling out in one voice his words, “True compassion is more than

flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth ... and say, 'This is not just.' ... The Western arrogance of feeling that it has everything to teach others and nothing to learn from them is not just. A true revolution of values will lay hands on the world order and say of war, 'This way of settling differences is not just.'"<sup>3</sup>

Singing together "We Shall Overcome" gave me great hope, because it was clear that here in this space we were claiming the dream of liberation as something other than a good intention or a romantic destination. The navel-gazing attention on the self I had come to expect to be fractured was being very explicitly redirected to a call for wholeness and an end to injustice. In Rev. angel's talk that day she reminded us all of the importance of not getting caught up in the hand-wringing that comes with worrying over what we ought to do with the obstacles to our liberation. That we stop checking out, check in and work together to try to do things in ways we might not yet know how to is more important than knowing the right thing to do. Bodies are dropping while we're debating. She said the incessant preoccupation with trying to name the first thing to do can be itself a hindrance. Radicalizing dharma dreams of liberation into political practice is no guarantee that we'll be free from spaces of confusion, pain, separation, and suffering. We must begin to practice sitting together to stand together.

The teacher also talked about remembering to make room at the table of our suffering and sadness for joy. Deep in my heart. Someday. I believe. Singing the song of uncertainty in this instance was anything but reason for misery or resignation. It was a triumphant testament to the glory of love, a way of making room for that which we can't yet know and can't wait for any longer. Love is liberation, and liberation is love. Especially when you are pretty sure you cannot win. We can still wrap each other up in our chanting voices, add our radical love to the feelings of despair. Keeping our eyes open, senses alert. You never really know what might happen. This is how I want to learn to want to be free. Not in search for a perfect monastic mountaintop far away from the problems of the world, but on the ready, among the many, singing each other's radical wisdom, waking up to ourselves, our dead, to their hearts and hunger, to their dreams of someday, I believe.

As an activist academic I often cringe at such touchy-feely sentiment. There is no time for feelings. The endless crunch of priorities punishes me for stopping long enough to notice my rage wreaking havoc on my body. It is not an accident. In the rush of the endless ways we find ourselves lost, late, behind, functioning beneath our best intentions and expectations; “I didn’t sit today” does not generally rise to the top ten list of reasons we find ourselves lying awake in the middle of the night. So, why sit?

A friend wrote me the other day, telling me of her upsetting encounter with egoism in the academy, and she said, “I don’t know if I can last long in this world.” I responded not with blind optimism, but with the improvisational spirit of one for whom liberation from suffering is not an entitlement but a practice. “What if the thing that has to go, because something’s got to give, is anxiety itself?” I said. What if managing the fear of falling off this Ferris wheel—or anticipating its flying off its supports—is just too exhausting? Instead of propping one’s self up on lofty expectations or dropping the ball on our responsibility to ourselves, to our work, to being present, to caring for each other, what would it look like to cut off our attachment, that hardwired sense of obligation to staying stressed? The Ferris wheel can’t stop, won’t stop, but we can. We can just sit on a rainbow-colored steel horse for a while and just watch the wildings of fear wreak havoc on our sense of safety. Ride and watch. Witness and wilding.

“We are experimenting with new strategies for survival,” I told my friend. “Their efficacy is necessarily not reflected in dominant culture, and yet throughout history we hear stories of folks refusing competition in precisely this way and daring to walk together to another rhythm. The fact that this bluesy fugitive rhythm does not ‘work’ in this world is proof of its success. We just have to remember we are not alone in this journey. We sit to practice being with ourselves so we can better sit, love, and live with those who will show up and help us along the way.”

We are not yet drones. We can still clear some cobwebs, tend to some wounds, and invite our bodies into practices of looking. We can cut through all that separates us from ourselves and ourselves from each other with a breath, maybe two. We can believe, broaden ground, offer new direction. Even under slavery I am told the people could fly. As Dr. King says in the closing lines of his speech, “The oceans of history are made turbulent by the ever-rising tides of hate. History is cluttered with the wreckage of

nations and individuals that pursued this self-defeating path of hate. As Arnold Toynbee says: ‘Love is the ultimate force that makes for the saving choice of life and good against the damning choice of death and evil. Therefore the first hope in our inventory must be the hope that love is going to have the last word.’”

So we sit. We chant. We wrap each other’s pain in a unity of voices and sing.

Deep in my heart, I do believe, we shall overcome someday.

The greatest threat to crowd control is our individual yearning for something better. Maybe it is in the clouds, but it is definitely in company *with* each other. We are not hungry for the brains of the living—we have our own, thank you very much. We are yearning to connect with others, to be engaged in collective action. The greatest source of our self-defense against the mob mentality of law and order politics is each other. This is not a romantic notion of connection. It is not about connecting as couples or nice, neat households. Not because we are friends or lovers or because we share a common social network, but because we know and share a common knowledge that the personal is political, but the impersonal is powerful. Our greatest liability is thinking we have to go it alone. That we should trust no one. That no one gets us, or our struggle. That we are surrounded by those who will misread and abuse us. No doubt they are. No doubt they will. No doubt they are legion. But they are not the end of our world. Even if they kill us. Chances are they all have their own struggles too. Strength in numbers is not only about meeting the might of the opposition with everything we got. It’s about each of us finding strength in ourselves we never knew possible at the side of another we don’t have to share blood or fluids with to feel. It is about fellowship within the fray of friction. We might not all feel the same for the same reasons, but we don’t have to. We are not mercenaries. We are defending ourselves against the modern threats of mass disposability. We are not just hungry, we are starving. We could become one rather than scramble to defend *our* stuff and *our* families. Together, there are no individual selves to be defended. Together, self-defense is collective transformation.

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3. Martin Luther King Jr. and Lewis V. Baldwin, *"In a Single Garment of Destiny": A Global Vision of Justice* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012).

## IT'S NOT ABOUT LOVE AFTER ALL

*by Rev. angel Kyodo williams, Sensei*

*We have witnessed the way in which movements for justice that denounce dominator culture, yet have an underlying commitment to corrupt uses of power, do not really create fundamental changes in our societal structure. When radical activists have not made a core break with dominator thinking (imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy), there is no union of theory and practice, and real change is not sustained.... It is precisely because the dictates of dominator culture structure our lives that it is so difficult for love to prevail.*

—BELL HOOKS

*Without inner change, there can be no outer change, without collective change, no change matters.*

—REV. ANGEL KYODO WILLIAMS, SENSEI

I have been mulling over the role of love in movements for well over two decades now. I felt a sense of calling to activist work—ushering in the third wave of feminism and changing minds about the so-called apathetic Generation X. Our cross-country voter registration drive felt significant, and I felt like I was part of something making a difference. Not too much later, after I dropped anchor in a spiritual practice, the conflicting ideas that seemed almost normal became increasingly apparent.

Like many activists, I was alarmed by the destructive behavior of my comrades and colleagues, and confounded by how it could be possible we would ever create the world we wanted to live in if we could not be the

change. Although we were young women with good models for kindness toward each other, much of our work was driving against this or that, and to drive so hard and fast required fuel, and that fuel was anger.

## VEHICLES TO FREEDOM: WHAT'S YOUR RIDE?

Starting out five hundred to six hundred years before the Common Era, the historic Buddha taught for over fifty years. His teachings naturally evolved over his own lifetime, and he died leaving a significant wealth of discourses. By the fourteenth century, what was referred to simply as the teachings of the Buddha had virtually disappeared from the land of its birth in India. As the teachings found themselves in different countries stretched out over hundreds, then even a thousand years, different aspects were focused on.

### First Turning—Hinayana, Smaller Vehicle

#### *Arhat Ideal: Codes of Conduct and Liberation for One's Self*

Not long after finding my place as an activist for social justice, I came up against the need for not just reacting to what was happening in the world, which gave me a sense of purpose, but developing a way to look at what was happening, which provided a sense of meaning. I found a second home in cultivating a spiritual life. Though I didn't originally think of it that way, my formal Zen practice and training were teaching me to find a more restful place that I could abide in within myself despite the chaos and calamity that living in an unjust society meant we were constantly surrounded by. It also gave me a way to be in response to sometimes overwhelming situations that could just lead me to a downward spiral of anger and negativity. I didn't know a lot, but I knew that I didn't want to live a life driven by anger and rage. I could see that many activist elders and now my younger counterparts had fallen into that vortex, and it seemed difficult to get out once you were caught there.

## THE WAKE-UP WARRIORS

### Second Turning—Mahayana, Greater Vehicle *Bodhisattva Ideal: Compassion and Liberation for the Sake of Others*

But the Zen community I eventually became engaged with did not frame its cultivation of peace as a passive practice because we had a set of vows that I took to heart. In fact, the reason I decided to make a home with these particular folks was precisely because, as the Zen Peacemaker Order, they were explicitly committed to social action.

I was captivated by the bodhisattva ideal. The most prominent *Avalokiteshvara* is “he who looks down on” and is embodied as female in Chinese, or “the one who hears the cries of the world.” In *bodhisattvas*, I saw Sojourner and Ella, Ambedkar and Malcolm. In their infinite wisdom and boundless compassion, they responded to the cries. Even though liberation is available to them, they hold it off until every person can be awakened, too. What I didn’t hear is that I need anger to drive my response.

I lived by this ideal for many years; I extrapolated and built upon the concept of the “awakening warrior,” as I’d heard it translated in Tibetan teachings. Strongly influenced by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche’s teachings on the enlightened society of Shambhala, and the qualities of warriorship needed to achieve it, warrior-spirit became a central theme of my work. I advocated for this more balanced approach to fiercely address injustice from a place of empowerment as a warrior—but one that was ultimately committed to peace rather than aggression. This path recognized the clarity and resilience brought about by cultivating one’s inner life and recognizing the ego as the ultimate foe to be vanquished. I saw this as a more sustainable path, especially for Black people, whose road to victory in the external landscape would likely be a long one given the deep entrenchment of the forces of oppression set against us.

In response to the events of September 11th, I wrote what became known as the Warrior-Spirit Prayer of Awakening. The verse became an affirmation of how I wanted to be in response to the challenges of the world and

eventually became the penultimate call of the practice community I eventually founded.

## *Warrior-Spirit Prayer of Awakening*

योधात्मनः प्रार्थना बोधनस्य

*yodhaatmanah praarthanaa bodhanasya*

May all beings be granted with the strength, determination and wisdom to extinguish anger and reject violence as a way.

सर्वे मानवाः आप्नुवन्तु शक्तिं निश्चयं प्रज्ञां च

क्रोधं प्रणष्टुं हिंसां परित्यक्तुं च सदा

*sarve maanavaah aapnuvantu shaktim nishchayam pradnyaam cha*

*krodham pranashtum hinsaam parityaktum cha sadaa*

May all suffering cease and may I seek, find, and fully realize the love and compassion that already lives within me and allow them to inspire and permeate my every action.

सर्वबाधाः विरमन्तु च मृग्याणि आप्रवानि

पूर्णतः अनुभवानि च प्रेम करुणां च पूर्वमेव

मयि स्थिते च मनुमन्यै ते विश्वसितुं व्याप्तुं

च मम सर्वकर्माणि च

*sarvabaadhaah wiramantu cha mrigyaani aapnawaani*

*poornatah anubhavaani cha prema karunaam cha poorvameva*

*mayi sthite cha anumanyai te wishvasitum wyaaptum*

*cha mama sarvakarmaani cha*

May I exercise the precious gift of choice and the power to change that which makes me uniquely human and is the only true path to liberation.

योजानि अमूल्यपारितोषिकं वरस्य शक्तिं  
परिवर्तितुं च यथा मां करोति अद्वितीयत्वेन  
मानवं चास्ति एकः एव मार्गः मुक्त्यै च

*yojaani amoolya paaritoshikam warasya shaktim  
parivartitum cha yathaa maam karoti adwiteeyatwena  
maanavam chaasti ekah eva maargah muktyai cha*

May I swiftly reach complete, effortless freedom so that my fearless, unhindered action be of benefit to all.

गच्छानि पूर्णस्वातंत्र्यमनायासेन यथा  
ममाभयानवरोधकर्माणि सर्वेषां हितं कुर्वतु

*gachchhaani poornaswaatantryamanaayaasena yathaa  
mamaabhayaanawarodhakarmaani sarveshaam hitam kurwamtu*

May I lead the life of a warrior.

मम जीवनं योधस्यास्तु

*mama jeevanam yodhasyaastu*

## BEYOND ALLIES

### Third Turning—Vajrayana: Indestructible Vehicle *Liberation in This Lifetime*

As I began to feel as powerful as the bodhisattva was, not only compassion was enough; I wanted also to confront the things that existed in my self that got in the way. I wanted to go to the heart of change by cultivating indestructible qualities.

By this time, I had read bell hooks's earth-shattering book, *All About Love*. I was inspired to take up the investigation of love more rigorously. My experience with Zen—in fact, with most of the expression of the white Western-convert Buddhism I was in contact with—was that, though compassion was an ever-attending partner to wisdom, love was hyphenated into a concept that felt more neutral. Lovingkindness, a common translation of *metta*, promoted good behavior but lacked the fire of fierce love I knew and felt in my colored upbringing. Even the joy that was considered one of the Four Immeasurable Qualities was denatured, and the Zen folks, myself included, seemed to prefer the last Immeasurable Quality, equanimity. I found the warmth of love, if not always the word, expressed in Tibetan teachings, in Advaita, with my yoga tribe. bell's work brought me back to a more explicit naming of and focus on love as a motivating force for change.

## Fourth Turning—Mitrayana: Friendship Vehicle *Liberation by Collective*

My intense interest and eventual certainty about the connection between inner change and social change led me to go beyond studying what made change possible in people and think about how deeply powerful change could be scaled to movements to affect many people—by reaching a critical mass of change-makers who could, on their own terms, cultivate indestructible qualities, but, all working together, could create movements that weren't about a small handful of individuals doing things on behalf of the many but enrolling people in the deep project of their own liberation.

## MEETING SUFFERING

The thing about our pain and our suffering is that until it is met and seen for what it is, it doesn't go anywhere. It's like the dark places in your refrigerator, things hidden in little containers that you refuse to open because you don't quite remember when it got there. So instead of opening and facing the smelly containers you find, you ignore them and eventually run into an infestation, an overgrowth of mold and spores and bacteria and

things that can kill you, because you didn't want to deal with them when they were just plain stinky.

## BE WITH THE SUFFERING

The very first thing the Buddha taught, the First Noble Truth, was that we have to come to terms with the fact that the nature of life is to experience confusion and discomfort. That by the fact of our birth, old age, sickness, and death are in our future, and we are thus inclined to suffer.

In our culture, so much is oriented toward moving away from that experience and finding ways to deaden it, whether that's through addictions to Facebook, television, drugs, or alcohol. You have to figure out:

*What place are you not feeling?*

*What part of you are you rejecting?*

*What aspect are you not loving?*

*What truth are you not willing to accept?*

In my experience, whatever we're not facing about ourselves is never as bad as the ideas we are referencing ourselves off of. The funny thing is that somehow when we get caught in our stuck ideas about ourselves, we create better images of who we are and we simultaneously believe worse images of who we actually are. So we create fantasies and we believe fiction. Neither of these things abide in truth.

It's easier to leave these parts aside, at least to our conscious mind, than to even begin to consider if we will be able to survive the grief of facing them. It's easier to just claim our progressiveness, to claim our enlightened hearts and spirits or our radicalness and commitment to the struggle—so you can't possibly be racist, or sexist, or transphobic, or think your spirituality is more real, or you're just better—than to actually have your despair show up for you. In truth, we have to integrate our wounds into our understanding of who we are and what we are really capable of so that we can be whole human beings. Only from there can we begin the process of



healing the brokenness, the broken-heartedness within ourselves that is then the foundation for beginning to heal that in our larger society.

We cannot have a healed society, we cannot have change, we cannot have justice if we do not reclaim and repair the human spirit. We simply cannot. Imagining anything different is to really have our head buried deeply in the sand of hundreds of years of a culture of domination, colonization, the theft of this land, the theft of a people from their land, and the continued and ongoing theft and appropriation of peoples and cultures on a day-to-day basis that every single one of us is colluding with and participating in consciously and unconsciously.

Learning to be with suffering as an experience is part and parcel of what it means to live, and it radically alters our relationship to all of life and to the suffering of others. If you are invested in alleviating suffering, whether as an activist or change-maker or someone who's committed to life because you hear the cries of the world, it's important to understand that you can't even recognize the suffering of others without fully acknowledging the despair of your own suffering. It turns out that far from dragging you down, one of the most liberating things you can do is to come to terms with the fact that some form of your suffering will always be there. To really be present with that unhooks us from the constant anxiety of trying to make it go away. Paradoxically, once we release the proposition that we are going to get rid of the suffering, then the potential to alleviate the suffering becomes possible.

## THE GRAND CENTRAL STATION OF PRESENCE

The most important thing to unpack is what would draw people into this ever-deepening path. What could be both the motivation and the destination?

It seems to me that for people to develop any of the qualities that were important for nurturing people's inner life—their sense of commitment beyond instant gratification, the long-term investment that it takes to dismantle such daunting and interrelated structures of oppression—we had to use a new approach.

We keep trying to approach things from the vehicle of “other,” as in what people should do for “the other” and what we end up doing is othering. But when shit hits the fan, we run the other way and create more distance. The question is: how do we allow people to be deeply in touch with themselves, and allow them to become deeply in touch with others?

They have to cultivate their capacity for presence. Presence is Grand Central Station and the place people arrive from wherever they’ve originally come from—fear, anger, disappointment, anxiety. Through the practice of being present to their situations, to the suffering that they felt as a result, not to mention the power of being seen as others are present with them, they can then travel on to compassion, to courage, to caring, to love.

We don’t have to fix people at all. We have to trust the evolutionary draw that is. What pulls you forward is presence. Presence is what motivates people and what you get out of it. As you choose to be more present, you are more present. What does presence allow? It allows us to see ourselves and others. By choosing presence we learn to let go of our own discomfort, and experiencing ourselves in a trusting way allows us to trust others more. As a result, we are drawn deeper.

## EVERY BODY HOME

Predatory capitalist greed has deeply ingrained a self-worth confusion into our psyche. We associate our value as human beings with our financial worth. Our relationships are governed by the shadow game of acquisition. We can never have enough. The result is a devastating disconnect to a felt sense of our experience.

Even with meditation, we remain mesmerized by the elusive possibility of one day becoming the elite. We contort our bodies and fling our values into suspension in the air between the seat of our soul and the elusive brass ring. How can the core remain intact if the appendages are hyperextended into the posture of overreach that consumption lust seduces us into?

I introduced embodiment practice to invite people back home to their felt experience. To disrupt the disconnect among head and heart, aligned thought, emotions, and action that a no-longer citizen, but consumer

society, fosters. I believe anyone engaged in the practice of liberation must actively discover it in their own being, and having a body-based or somatic practice is a direct way to reclaim connection to their psychophysical connection to themselves.

## THEORY OF A TRANSFORMATIVE SOCIAL CHANGE

Transformative Social Change as applied to efforts and just change was the way in which I tried to speak to, articulate, and concretize something that I knew intuitively. It is a theory of change, so it is living.

In order to not just organize people against a this or that only to fall away again, it seemed important to support people in a recognition of the potential for liberation.

Transformative Social Change applies to what used to be called Liberation Spirituality, but I insist we not limit it to spirituality and look at it as an emergent movement. Agnostics, atheists, or even humanists can go through this process. History is there (Gandhi, King, etc.), but this new iteration is unique in that both Eastern and Western views are being held by an individual, and it's no longer associated around a singular or dominant spiritual, religious tradition or cluster (Abrahamic, Dharmic, etc.) or even of any religion or spiritual tradition at all.

On the one hand, Transformative Social Change is inherently spiritual, but not in the sense of a particular tradition. To call it merely spiritual is arrogant as it suggests that we have a corner on the market of what is spiritual—and by association, what is not. It is naive. Spirituality, by its nature, has a whole expressive range. Transformative Social Change looks specifically at “what is the trajectory?” and “what is the vehicle?” of the desired change.

Spiritual tradition is comfortable with paradox, whereas many political movements are not. But all truth is paradox. What it is to live in a space of transformative change is to engender greater and greater comfort with paradox. So that paradox becomes something that we not only acknowledge but also live more truthfully. We discover that Truth *is* relationship. And relationship *is*.

## THE LANGUAGE OF LOVE

The theory of Transformative Social Change was designed to do exactly what bell hooks speaks of, to unite theory and practice, providing an identifiable yet adaptive, concrete yet flexible, rigorous yet permeable path to breaking with dominator culture through direct experience. Through praxis. But having folded behavior, motivation, community, suffering, presence, and embodiment into a theory of a truly transformative change, I was still challenged by a phenomenon I couldn't quite make sense of.

### WHERE'S THE LOVE?

My life is full of rich relationships to white people. I have been in community with and traveled among many of them, and know of many more who would fiercely claim they are motivated by love. I'm speaking of my fellow Buddhist teachers and practitioners, tribes of yoga practitioners, even legions of progressive activists who focus on change in "rights" and entitlements but shy away from justice, which would impact the positioning and access to those things that are inalienable to human thriving. Most painfully, they are not sufficiently motivated by their sense of love to courageously confront capitalism and its white knight of supremacy as a systemic purveyor of mass suffering. Neither are they willing to see their own belief in the superiority of whiteness play out in everyday interactions as unconscious bias, micro-aggressions, and a tendency to exert control over cultural norms and space. They find a never-ending litany of excuses to maintain power over rather than power with—to dominate.

They are not experiencing love as an earthy, grounding power to be wielded for justice, sometimes with attending fire that burns through whatever may obscure truth, as I believed would be most natural. Rather, they hold it as a more air-like element, one they are certain of the need for, the one that is sustained by and benefits from breathing in deeply, but that is an ultimately private affair expressed only on the interpersonal realm. This is the first window into solving my dilemma: no one wants to be told they do not love, nor, short of being a sociopath, would it be accurate.

It wouldn't be fair of me to say that they were not committed to love, and yet, they are not activated into responding to the obvious, pressing injustices of society.

What dawned on me is that not only has white supremacy robbed red, Black, brown, and yellow people of the spirit-given human right to life and liberty, it has also so thoroughly programmed and policed white people as to who and how they could love—determining entire groups of people unworthy—that the entirety of our descended culture suffers from a severely atrophied relationship to the most animating, enlivening, equalizing force gifted to the human experience.

*The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference.*

—ELIE WIESEL

How else could the imaginably decent, moral, ordinary white people stand to live in proximity, much less partake, in open-market slavery? Generations of people allowed their children to witness the sale and degradation of other human bodies. This most unnatural of arrangements, executed for nothing more aspirational than the privilege of financial gain, required the compulsion toward compassion for other beings to be systematically uprooted and replaced with widespread indifference. This has continued into post-slavery lynching, Jim Crow denial of legal entitlements, systematic mass incarceration, prison-to-school pipelines, and so on. All of this has occurred while white folks gained from the resulting wealth, presumption of entitlement to fare better than colored people, and, most insidiously, a belief that meritocracy has been at work all along, shielding them behind a cloak of ignorance and innocence while they cash their spoils at the bank.

For generation upon generation, white America has traded its humanity for privilege.

The tax, though, has been on love, which peace pays the premium for. In personal, interpersonal, and social spheres, our worlds become smaller, potential thwarted, possibility more limited when the creative force of love is reigned in.

Even our great social currency of language is anemic when it comes to expression of love. Sanskrit, the language of dharmic religions, has ninety-six words for love. Persian, eighty. It has often been shared that Greek, which we borrow from, has six words that can help us make distinctions: agape, eros, ludus, philautia, philia, and pragma; but most of us cannot recall them, much less have an active understanding and practice. The politics of respectability and the hidden rules of politeness that silently govern white belonging to “proper society” demand that love remain personal. The further the love is from some norm, the more behind closed doors, in the closet, relegated to corners of guilt, laden with shame it must be. The result of having “privatized” love is we are not comfortable with its raw, unabashed, unapologetic, unmitigated expression. Love for one another, especially across lines of difference, has been taboo for the overwhelming part of our national lives.

The answer to my inquiry about the apparent lack of love manifesting on behalf of justice seems clear: People don’t know how to apply love in the great sphere of society.

## THE MEASURE OF JUSTICE

*Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public.*

—CORNEL WEST

*The only thing white people have that Black people need, or should want, is power—and no one holds power forever.... And I repeat: The price of the liberation of the white people is the liberation of the Blacks—the total liberation, in the cities, in the towns, before the law, and in the mind.*

—JAMES BALDWIN, *THE FIRE NEXT TIME*