

SECTION III:

THE CONVERSATIONS

GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER: HISTORY OF THIS PROJECT

Radical Dharma emerged from kindred wisdom traditions and prophetic voices passed on generation after generation from all the peoples of the four directions. It emerges now as a collaborative response to a collective call from the American Buddhist community for new ways to talk about the presence of white supremacy in our centers, practices, and lives. The call initially came in late summer of 2014 when Lama Rod and Rev. angel were asked by their colleagues at *Buddhadharma* magazine to talk about their practice of radical dharma. The ensuing dialogue gave them a chance to collaborate for the first time and begin to practice what they found was a level of vulnerability and love between two teachers of color—voices that are rarely heard in this conversation together.

This has been a process Rev. angel and Lama Rod have found to be a privilege, an honor, but also a challenge. “As teachers sometimes people don’t allow us to struggle and to connect to some of these things we’re all still working out,” they have said. To sit as Buddha dharma siblings and friends and comrades and co-conspirators is the beginning of the practice of collective liberation. It is modeling what radical dharma practice can look like in our *sanghas* and our communities—the kind of courage, openness, and camaraderie needed for talking about race and the woundedness that many of us experience in the world and in our spiritual communities.

Radical Dharma began as a conversation on race, love, and liberation motivated in part by the mass mobilizations against the state-sanctioned killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. The dialogue between Rev. angel and Lama Rod struck a chord within the Buddhist community. A video of the conversation was released online the very day the country was reeling from the no-indictment verdict in the case of Michael Brown. The Eric Garner decision shortly followed. By Buddhist standards, the video went “viral.” So Lama Rod and Rev. angel got to talking about the uniqueness of where their own experiences called them to—to speak in

terms of the dharma. Their own histories and own experiences as dharma practitioners and teachers differ and are both distinct from many of those of the teachers we have seen for the first five decades of Buddhism in America.

The impetus to turn this initial conversation into a book was very much inspired by the Black oral tradition. And so Cornel West's and bell hooks's *Breaking Bread* immediately came to mind as a model. Published in 1991, *Breaking Bread* is what has been called a "talking book." It was a pivotal book and groundbreaking at the time. It examined the diversity of perspectives that make up the prophetic tradition; in so doing it centered two Black intellectuals. At the time it was not an expected discourse. The book followed a series of conversations recorded between them, as well as some essays. So we thought, "Wouldn't it be powerful to have something like that for Buddhism?" To make it as organic as possible, we thought, "Well, we'll just go have the conversations." We ultimately chose four venues where one or more of us was already rooted: Atlanta, New York, Boston, and Berkeley. We wanted to bring the history and legacy of the Black prophetic voice into the American Buddhist community and reframe this call for conversation about race, love, and liberation as part of one many folks of color have been having with each other for decades.

We strongly believe that now is the time for us to begin having this conversation about the responsibility of the Buddhist community to confront white supremacy in our *sanghas* and in our communities. We recognized that this particular moment calls for a particular kind of conversation about and attention to what has been missing from our dharma practice—an integration of the ways we are present or not to the issues of race, love, and liberation that shape our collective awakening.

We went on the road and visited various kinds of communities across the country. In Atlanta we visited with Shambhala Meditation Center and Charis Books. In New York, it was Brooklyn Zen Center. In Boston, we met at Harvard Divinity School, which Lama Rod attends. And in Berkeley, we hosted the conversation at the Center for Transformative Change, which was founded by Rev. angel.

About the journey, Lama Rod said, "I don't see our time together as dialogue; I see it as sharing—as loving one another. I see it as making love."

In each venue the participants represented a spectrum of ethnic and racial backgrounds, ages, and relationships to the dharma including folks who had a *sangha* and a practice to those with a practice and no *sangha* to those for whom formal dharma practice was completely new.

THE SHAMBHALA CENTER AND CHARIS BOOKS, ATLANTA, GA

Atlanta was perhaps a very unlikely first site of Radical Dharma. Lama Rod grew up outside of Atlanta and is familiar with the area. With Lama Rod's closest friend Jamie Ferguson working with Jasmine, we were able to secure two venues. The first was at the Shambhala Meditation Center on Saturday, March 21, 2015. Located in the Decatur area of Atlanta, the center is a cluster of buildings with a main building housing the large beautiful meditation hall arranged in the style that the tradition's founder, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, most appreciated. The next day, Sunday, March 22, the second Radical Dharma dialogue was hosted by Charis Books located in the Atlanta neighborhood of Little Five Points, famous for its alternative culture scene. Charis Books itself is the oldest feminist bookstore in the South.

The dialogues were the first time Rev. angel and Lama Rod sat together as formal teachers and were the first time Lama Rod met Jasmine. Participants at both events were eager to talk about the challenges of inclusivity and racism in their *sanghas*. What was also special at Charis was the presence of Professor Jan Willis, who is not only one of the first Black female Buddhist scholars but an important scholar in American Buddhism.

BROOKLYN ZEN CENTER, BROOKLYN, NY

The Brooklyn Zen Center (BZC) is located in the Gowanus section of Brooklyn. It is an urban center with a sense of serious practice happening right within a busy, trendy, and ever-gentrifying neighborhood. BZC practices in the tradition of Soto Zen Buddhism and seeks to offer practice

that is in tune to the diverse and demanding lives of practitioners. The center can easily be called contemporary—not a contemporary that discards tradition but a contemporary that embraces tradition and moves boldly forward into the present, integrating what is important for practitioners now with what practitioners need from tradition. The center seems to be located in an older remodeled factory building. The meditation takes place in a large warm room with wood-paneled floors and walls made of exposed brick painted in white as well as drywall in white. New York is where Rev. angel grew up while Jasmine moved to the area as a teenager. The center is a teaching home for Rev. angel in New York. On Saturday, April 18, 2015, the third Radical Dharma dialogue between Rev. angel and Lama Rod was facilitated by Jasmine. It was one of the largest gatherings for Radical Dharma. Participants were diverse and mostly not affiliated with the center. The conversation was lively and characterized by several white participants naming their own struggle with whiteness.

HARVARD DIVINITY SCHOOL, CAMBRIDGE, MA

The Braun Room in Andover Hall at Harvard Divinity School is a symbol of academia. With its conservative décor of wood-paneled walls, tall windows, portraits of several notable professors and deans (mostly white), a large fireplace, and one wall of shelves covered with books, it was perhaps an unlikely venue for a Radical Dharma dialogue. However, one of the tenets of Radical Dharma is to take the conversation into spaces that need the conversation and especially into spaces that represent a kind of academic elitism that is also an expression of traditional white supremacy. The space is used for community gatherings and special events, including talks by visiting lecturers or visits by notable figures such as His Holiness the 17th Gyalwang Karmapa. Lama Rod is a student there in the Master of Divinity program. On Thursday April 30, 2015, it was the site of the fourth Radical Dharma talk with Rev. angel and Lama Rod, facilitated by Erika Carlsen, one of Lama Rod's colleagues at Harvard Divinity School, who stepped in for Jasmine. Close to one hundred people were in attendance, bringing with them what seemed to be more of an intellectual approach to the dialogue of a liberatory Dharma.

CENTER FOR TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE, BERKELEY, CA

On Wednesday, June 17, 2015, a young white man gunned down nine Black church folk at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in Charleston, South Carolina. On Friday, June 19, we gathered for the fifth Radical Dharma talk at Rev. angel's center, the Center for Transformative Change, in Berkeley, California. The night was charged, for it was not only two days after the massacre, but also June 19, a day celebrated in communities across the country as Juneteenth, the day in 1865 that the last slaveholding state, Texas, received word that the war was over and that President Lincoln had emancipated slaves two years prior. We assembled in the small practice hall located on a separate structure in the back of the center and nestled in a small Japanese-style garden. The moderate Bay Area summer offered a kind of lightness that helped in holding our collective mourning and hurt. This talk was different. Our realities of being marginalized and oppressed bodies experiencing psychophysical trauma was upfront and heavy that night. We began the evening with a formal memorial ritual evoking the names of the victims while remembering the words of Dr. King and evoking the transcendental wisdom of the Heart Sutra. More than any other gathering, we needed to evoke liberation.

FLOW OF THE EVENING

Each evening began with introductions and a dialogue between Rev. angel and Lama Rod that went on from thirty-five to forty-five minutes to whet everyone's palette and seed the conversation. We then opened up the dialogue to the larger community and really allowed ourselves to have ample opportunity for interaction with what was present for the community.

While there were no hard rules for engaging in the community conversation, there were some key guidelines the teachers offered at each convening. The first was an invitation from Rev. angel that we leave niceness aside. She made a careful distinction between what it means to be kind to each other, rather than trying to be nice. Rev. angel reminded us that

“this is a conversation that is long overdue, and we should take the opportunity of us being in the room together, but you’re also welcome to challenge us. Please don’t regard the fact that we are teachers as meaning that we can’t be challenged. And we give good push-back. So please do just bring your full heart and your full voice, and I trust that your being here means that you are rooted in love, and that’s what you can bring to this conversation.”

A second guideline for holding this conversation in a good way came from Lama Rod, who echoed the importance of being kind but also invited us into being messy, because we create much more damage in our communities and our relationships when we are always editing everything. Lama Rod placed this in the context of the current culture of silences and hesitations to speak our truths regarding race, love, and liberation, both in our dharma communities and in our everyday lives.

“I think so many people are afraid to actually express how they feel because it’s so uncomfortable. A lot of my work is around really working with the wounded, the trauma in people, bringing these really difficult things into the practice. And it’s really not comfortable as Rev. angel said. I want people to have a sense of agency, and I need people to feel as though they’re a part of the transformation. Not just sitting there and trying to get something from me.”

We began by thinking together about what truths this conversation of race, love, and liberation bring up for us. We asked what came up for the community in their own experience, in their own practice, in their own centers. What we heard was the radical expression of dharma. It brought truth into the room through their questions, their curiosities, their frustrations and wonderings. We asked folks to reflect upon how they understand folks of color to be central to our practice. What we wanted to do was generate a new protocol of truth-telling in regard to race, love, and liberation.

MEAL GATHA⁴

We express our gratitude for this food that comes to us from the lives of plants and animals, from the light and warmth of the sun, the earth's fertile soil, the heavenly rain, the labor of farmers, the work of transportation and the services of merchants.

Considering where this food has come from and the many labors that have brought it to us, we resolve to strengthen our body, to awaken our mind and to enrich our spirit.

Reflecting on all those who are in need of nourishment, we eat this food.

Resolving to think good thoughts and to do good deeds, we eat this food.

Committing to serve all those who strive to break their addictions and transform their delusions, we eat this food.

Vowing to attain our Way, we eat this food.

May we exist in muddy water with purity like a lotus, thus we eat this food.

DINNER DIALOGUE

REV. ANGEL: When I was twenty-two, I would go and visit the Buddhist corner. It was sort of strange because as a queer person I was never in the closet, but I was a closet Buddhist! It felt odd to be a person manifesting in this body looking at that path. But it called me enough to go and visit a dharma center in the village in Manhattan. There was a lesbian woman teacher there, so that made it easy. This is often how we find church, right? In no time at all, though, I realized I was a little bit different. Not just by age, which was striking—at least ten to twenty years' difference between myself and nearly everyone else. I also stood out because of my color. There is no dearth of people of color in Manhattan, so at first I thought I was just coming on the wrong night. You know how that is—a “colored

folks night” or something like that.... But I tried all the nights and it was the same. I even tried coming early in the morning. I didn’t think it was really true: the folks of color were really going to be there, but they weren’t.

And yet there was nothing after a few weeks that the people there were saying that seemed so strange or foreign-tongued that folks that I knew and loved couldn’t get it. In fact, that *sangha* was profoundly helpful. The first thing that they do often at centers is get you to have some type of position. So they are like: “Oh, angel, you’re here again. Would you like to do the drum tonight?” I thought, “Oh, OK ...”

LAMA ROD: Repeat the rhythm.

REV. ANGEL: Yes, “Give the Black folks the drum.” And I was all kind of offended until I realized that they always give people the drum first. And frankly, not everyone was given the drum, and they preferred to wait for me to do the rhythm. I felt the striking sense like I was different and that I was alone in that difference. And I so unfolded my life within Buddhist practice with the profound sense of aloneness and yet a simultaneous sense of having found home.

LAMA ROD: That echoes my experience as well. I came into dharma after coming out of a really severe period of clinical depression, and I was taught meditation to work with that condition. It was the most successful of the strategies I’d tried, and I actually emerged from that experience going back to church and singing in the choir. I found Jesus again, but he wasn’t necessarily talking to me. And so I began to turn my attention to Buddhism, partially because my housemates were practicing it. And so it was like my tradition was picked for me, and I entered into that practice understanding that this is exactly what I was supposed to be doing in this life. And this is an experience many people don’t have. It was like I had made these choices before. I had written the script and now in this particular location I was just playing my rightful role.

My teacher at the time gave me a picture of her two teachers, two, very attractive men, one older and one younger. They looked like father and son, and I was like, wow. This must be the lineage of beautiful people. *That’s where I belonged!*

REV. ANGEL: Does anyone know anything about the teachings of attachment? [Laughter]

LAMA ROD: You call it attachment. I call it blessings. I call it motivation. I call it excitement. I was like, where do I sign? Eventually, I learned that this taller young man was named Karmapa and the shorter older man was Tai Situ Rinpoche, who was one of the head lamas in my tradition. I felt pulled toward these teachers, and sometimes we need a hook. It's a karmic hook, and I used it to draw and invite myself into this profound relationship.

At the same time, I was also the only Black person going through this process. From the outset Rinpoche said, "I don't see race. Do you understand?" I was like, "Yes," because what he was really saying with that statement was, "I know that you're going to start running some games with me about how you deserve more because you're the only one. But you have to do exactly what everyone else has to do because that is what will make your experience meaningful." I understood that at the moment.

REV. ANGEL: Were you planning on running some games?

LAMA ROD: Well, I was used to it. I'm used to being the only one. You get to do certain things because you need to represent a group: "Oh, we need some color here." Maybe you'll get in in the pictures and end up on the website! There is a tendency to use brown people to make statements. I've had to develop self-awareness of when I'm being used in that way.

REV. ANGEL: The relationship between race and privilege is complex. Definitely colored folks have privilege that sometimes gets bestowed upon them exactly because of their race. And yet we're told, "You're not going to be treated special." It's an ongoing dialectic that rarely offers liberation. I remember once attending a retreat with fifty other people, forty-seven of whom were white. One woman looked at me and asked, "Do you know that they're going to have a *Martin Luther King Day* retreat here?" She put great emphasis on "Martin Luther King." The color of my skin was both something to be called out and yet something to be utterly undealt with.

LAMA ROD: She was trying to make you feel special and welcomed into the space.

REV. ANGEL: I'm sure she was. I was not feeling welcome, that's for sure. The real question remains: How can we address the barriers for people like me when the predominant culture cannot acknowledge its privilege? We are born into a particular body, and this can be a great source of pain, depending on how society views the identity [associated with it]. And yet,

communities in power pretend the difference, and the pain, is not there, which causes the individuals in that skin to question our value.

LAMA ROD: So those who are being devalued—whether it’s because of race, gender, economics, sexuality—are the ones forced to articulate that experience of being devalued, in essence reflecting that truth back to those who have the privilege of doing the devaluing?

REV. ANGEL: Right. And there is woundedness all along this line. And there are strange, relative roles within power. I’ve had to realize I have privilege around being fairer and having Eurocentric-type hair!

LAMA ROD: Good hair.

REV. ANGEL: Yes, good hair. Most Black communities call it good hair. I had curly hair and spoke the King’s English, as I like to say. I was told I was articulate so often, as if it were unusual. So I’m moving through the world with a different set of privileges than my darker brown-skinned, kinky-haired brothers and sisters are. I unconsciously kept this power dynamic in place, partially because I got benefits from being special. We are all caught in this crazy web of dysfunction and disconnect as a result of where we sit along the spectrum of color and other forms of marginalization. It’s an important entryway into the potential for healing when we start to recognize we are all participating unless we’re interrupting. The momentum of the dysfunction of how privilege operates in this society is such that if we’re not interrupting, we’re actually participating in it.

4. *Meal Verse* by Bernie Glassman Roshi, cofounder of the Zen Peacemaker Order. Based on the traditional Soto Zen Meal Gatha. *Gatha* is Sanskrit for “a short verse.”

RADICAL DHARMA: RACE

the great fraud of the construct of whiteness is that it has coerced and convinced most white folks to no longer see their own oppression: by men over women, by straights over LGBT, by hetero fathers over their sons in arbitrating their masculinity, by capitalist values of personal acquisition over the personal freedom of one's soul. white folks have been duped to trade their humanity for their privilege. the most insidious lie is that racism is a Black problem or colored folks problem. white folks wake up: not only oppressed people are complicit in oppression. it's your problem, too.

—REV. ANGEL KYODO WILLIAMS, SENSEI, DECEMBER 2014
(FACEBOOK POST)

BUILDING THE COMMUNITY

MALE SPEAKER: I've seen other people that actually come on Tuesday nights that are people of color.

FEMALE SPEAKER: What I'm talking about is people coming to commit to building the community, not just coming now and then.

FEMALE SPEAKER: We have people of color who come on Tuesday nights, but you don't see them come back consistently. They don't feel like they're a part of this system.

Oftentimes, people of color don't see anybody at the door—they don't see anybody sitting up there on the mat who looks like them.

[As a person of color], people come to me and ask me questions about little things that they wouldn't dare come and ask a white person.

REV. ANGEL: Well, it's pure survival. We have been attuned to how to survive the experience of a racist society. Those kinds of subtle things that

may not seem like a big deal, “I’m brown, so I’m going to find folks that look like me,” are actually survival skills that people of color learn and have to utilize every day. As human beings, we look around and we say, “What works? What’s safe?” because too many white spaces turn out to not be safe.

I think that will change once communities are having more conscious conversations about the realities that people are facing and experiencing and not merely trying to change the decoration in the room, because that is insufficient.

FEMALE SPEAKER: Well, this is what I had hoped would happen tonight. I’m hoping that people of color will come in and be inspired to have some thoughts that they can share with the community.

JASMINE: How do we navigate the reality of race specifically in this room—a predominantly white room—as we talk about race in this country? What is the work of white folks? What is the work of people of color? What is our work together? How do we get to a place where we can acknowledge our role in the change we seek, with love but also with clarity?

REV. ANGEL: I think the history of this country has not been honestly spoken, and many people of all races don’t know the true history. Because of this, we have a lot of disease in this country, one of which is white supremacy, as well as the ignorance of the benefits of being Caucasian in America.

With many illnesses, if we don’t take the scab off and let the pus come out, we can’t heal. So I’m happy to be a part of this conversation with a mixed [group] of people, because I don’t think a lot of people realize that it’s a disease. Some people still say they don’t see color, which isn’t realistic. Being a Black woman in America, I’m very conscious that I can’t express myself as freely as someone who might not look like me or be the same gender that I am.

If we don’t look at this disease honestly, we’re not going to be able to heal.

Zen tradition doesn’t have a centralized structure, but they have power structures. Marginalized people are largely challenged by the power structures. Of course, once you’re deeply inside, you may know that there’s ways to reorganize your own mind in relationship to that power, but you

have to get inside, which is why we see the experience of people coming and leaving. I have the benefit of being invited to different communities. And all white-dominated communities have slightly different permutations of the same thing.

Zen is single teachers. Once the teachers get to be teachers, they get to do anything they want, which is the only reason I can exist and be of use at all. It happens to be built into Zen that now that I'm a teacher they can't say anything really to me.

On the other hand, in non-decentralized structures, teachers of color are threatened with their participation and existence. It's subtle, but they're not as vocal. It's not because they don't think the same thing I do. I'm having the same conversations with them, but the structures that exist and the way the power is disables their voices. That creates a ripple effect. People of color that come go, "OK, this is great. But every time I look up there, once again, I'm being told that the only people that can tell me something about myself and help me to learn and understand myself is someone that has no shared conditional experience with me."

Human beings are about communication, so there's a communication in the power structures themselves. So who's sitting here says something. All my life, this is never who was going to be sitting up here. That meant that I had to, as you said, weather it—stick it out. As the demographic changes and people are more empowered in their own lives and finding power in their own lives, they're more and more unwilling to stick it out.

So as we have more people that are ready and open to different teachings outside of the traditional, conventional religions that they grew up with, they're simultaneously politicized in such a way that they're not willing to subject themselves to what many of us subjected ourselves to for a long time. They've had enough.

BEYOND "A STARBUCKS *SANGHA*"

JASMINE: In the classroom, I often have to remind my students that racism is in the air we breathe. There's no getting out of being implicated

by it. We're all affected. Acknowledging it is part of what we can do to fight it.

REV. ANGEL: I have this theory that racism is required in order to keep capitalism in place. There is the form of capitalism that we have—and I'm not mad at trade and exchange and barter and all of that—but cancerous capitalism, hyper-capitalism, parasitic capitalism requires racism in order to keep it in place. It requires a division of peoples so that we can have the people that consume, the people that are producing what is consumed, and, frankly, the people that are consumed.

Not only is racism in our society at large, but it's actually in many ways the format that we are presenting our spiritual offerings in. That channel, that vehicle, that lens of competition in a Starbucks *sangha* means, in many ways, that we have also then taken up the same ways of keeping that in place and making sure that we compete well. We can't compete well if we have a white upper-middle-class *sangha* and they start letting brown and Black and queer people in. We won't compete as well on the level of comfort as the *sangha* that's down the block that looks healthy and white.

FEMALE SPEAKER: I grew up in Utah in a white suburb, mostly surrounded by white people. And that is the social group in which I've always felt the most comfortable because that's what I knew. I've lived all over the country and related to people in different ways, and obviously there's assumptions made based on how I look. There's always been this feeling of longing to fit in, in one group or another.

In that process, there are these moments where you learn what not to say, and how not to be. It feels like all of those moments start to pile on you like a solid lead vest. And you carry that with you. And the process of taking off this really heavy lead vest feels like such an effort. There's also some sort of comfort in that vest, because you've learned how to wear it.

Those moments often are very pregnant. There's a realization of, "How should I be?" And the vest is on, so sometimes I'll just keep wearing that. I'm really curious about that space when there's maybe an opportunity to act or say or voice whatever's really resonating for you.

REV. ANGEL: At some point you said, "Based on how I look." Would you say what that means to you?

FEMALE SPEAKER: Sure. I'm a fair-skinned Black girl. And I've always identified as a Black person even though I'm half-white. I think that there can be these uncomfortable situations where people come up to me and approach me like I'm a sister, you know? And I don't really know how to be in that space. I'm trying to hang with that, but it doesn't feel real because it's not my background. Then there's also hanging out in white communities and people wanting to have these race discussions. I want to be there and hear this, but it's so uncomfortable and unfamiliar.

REV. ANGEL: Thank you for sharing that. I think it's really important that we recognize how complex our realities are, and that we don't share a monolithic Blackness, and that there's no monolithic whiteness, actually. That's part of what the racialization of our society has done, created this place in which we can't really be who we are. So it's difficult for you to just be who you are because there's a whole bunch of assumptions that are foisted on that body and that color.

That's a significant challenge, for colored people and for white people. How ridiculous. Like, you're just white. Like, you don't come from someplace. That is just kind of crazy, right? People have been divorced from their heritage and their complexity and a real connection to what it is that makes up who you are.

I think that's where liberation lies, in those pregnant moments where you have the habit, but if you can see through it, you have this truth. If you don't see it, you can't work with what you don't see. But because you are recognizing the pregnancy of the moment, that means that there's an opportunity to just pull back one little layer of that lead vest. How it will feel is something that only you will know when you actually peel that layer back and see what it's like to be a little more lightened of the burden of carrying other people's projections of you, and not simply being yourself both to the Black folks that want you to be their sister and to the white folks that want you to have all the answers about race.

LAMA ROD: Absolutely. We're born into a situation that's not of our choosing, and there's a condition that comes with that. Awareness is the tool that we're using to look at that and to interrogate. So it's not just my problem. I have work to do, but we all have work to do. My work has been to look at the ways in which I feel like I've never been good enough, to look at the ways in which I feel that I don't deserve something or [at the

ways] that it's OK for certain things to happen to me. For other people, perhaps, the work is feeling as if they do have a right to do certain things, to say certain things.

REV. ANGEL: Can you be explicit when you say "other people"?

LAMA ROD: This is across the board, so people with certain power. So you're talking about white folks being born into this kind of conditioning where [their whiteness is] so unconscious to an extent, that there are many cases where they feel like they have a right to say/do certain things, to think certain ways without ever thinking that it's particularly wrong. We see the same thing with gender, sexuality, classes. And for many of us there are boundaries constantly being crossed, and that leads to significant wounding and trauma.

That's the pain, the suffering, the rage, the despair. There's a reality of that that has to be addressed through the work of liberation and healing.

On the other end for white folks, there's still a lot of healing that has to happen. It's a different kind of healing. I think it requires different spaces for that to happen and it's not the oppressed's role to do that work on behalf of the oppressor. We can mirror certain aspects, but the work has to be done by individuals within their groups. Going back to race—there's significant racially induced trauma that we're all struggling to give voice to.

REV. ANGEL: But I mostly hear that people of color have that trauma.

LAMA ROD: I said that we *all* have that trauma. We have different kinds of trauma, but it's still trauma.

FEMALE SPEAKER: I want to say how deeply grateful I am for this conversation and your teaching. How can I focus on racial justice and still address other forms of oppression, some of which interact largely with white supremacy and several of which don't? Specifically, as a disabled person who also faces discrimination on the basis of gender expression and being queer, I really struggle with that. How do I center race fighting white supremacy while still being able to have a love practice extended to myself and to those communities who do, and who don't, experience the breadth of white supremacy and experience intense ableism?

TWO-SPIRITED SPEAKER: I would like to respond. I just finished a six-month training called Untraining White Liberal Racism held here in Berkeley. It happens in three phases, each one is six months long.

A person who looks like myself—sixty-four years old, two-spirited, European American—is generally taken at first glance to be reliable and dependable. I’ve really begun to notice very closely all the little micro-aggressions against people of color that happen through speech, through behavior, through exclusion, through the general intercourse of social life, and so I like the idea of addressing these in the moment. That’s where the change begins to happen and not in the grand scheme of wanting to do something.

When we chanted the speech by Dr. King tonight, I heard echoes of what Pope Francis advised us to do: changing human behavior and transforming on an individual level.

REV. ANGEL: I feel like white folks actually, contrary to what we’ve been saying, actually cannot be their full selves as well. And I feel like men can’t actually be their full selves when they are trying to navigate, “How do I work with the fact that there’s now this marginalized person in the room, and we haven’t had any conversation about this? I haven’t addressed my suffering about this, and I just don’t know what to do. So I need to make you invisible because to make you invisible allows me to be visible again, which is what whiteness and patriarchy essentially do for people. It allows people to be invisible.”

LAMA ROD: In person.

REV. ANGEL: I want to ask the audience how many people feel like they get an opportunity to be in spaces where they feel like the suffering that is induced and caused by white folks is actually OK to express? That’s fairly few. How many people think it’s important for that to be expressed?

FEMALE SPEAKER: Can you repeat your question?

REV. ANGEL: Yes. So whiteness does something in America, right? There are lots of dynamics that spring forth as a result of how that has been constructed in this country and how it continues to play out 450 years later on a daily basis. So what plays out induces suffering. It’s the cause of suffering, which includes the suffering of people in relationship to each other. Suffering that they themselves initiate; suffering that they are recipients of.

The human being that sits inside a racialized identity by nature of the society that we’re in—there’s a person in there that is pre-all of those

identities. And yet there's always something that's operating outside of that. That's why I say it's induced by whiteness just like I have forms of experiencing suffering that has been induced by my being seen as a woman, being seen as a person of color. So it's induced by it, rather than inherent to it.

And I mean to say something else about that, because the problem is not whiteness or Blackness. The problem is the way in which we relate to those identities. It isn't inherently a problem to be white. The problem is that we have a whole way of relating to that identity that is the suffering itself, which I think is one of the things that dharma has an awfully good lens on. It's not inherently a problem that I'm *anything*, but the way that I relate to that often as a result of a collective social identity and social way of relating to it—that's actually where the problem lies.

There's nothing wrong with any of us. And there's nothing wrong with any of *who* we are or *who* we were born as and what skin and what gender and what parts we have. That's why I want to keep pointing out that there's a construct happening. Just like ego is a construct. It's something that's out there. And then we have all of these challenges and heaps of suffering that are induced by how we relate to that ego, or that socially induced "identity"—that projection of ourselves.

MALE SPEAKER: Thank you. I'm a racist. And I mean that seriously. I was born into the racist air and water. I'm a recovering racist, and I was also married to a Black woman for twenty years. She passed two years ago, and she opened my eyes and my heart to so many things, including her pain, including my pain as a white man. I'm a member and a teacher of New York Insight [Meditation Center] in Chelsea. We have a number of initiatives bringing people of all backgrounds and all cultures into the *sangha*.

Last month we had an all-day retreat called the "Duty of White Privilege." It was very intense, very challenging, and at times, loving. Six hours together, but it was only white people so that we could provide a secure place for folks to start opening up about their pain.

Someone expressed it as walking on a land-mine field, one slip and they'll be considered racist. In six hours we couldn't even get below the surface to talk about feelings of guilt, feelings of anger toward people of

color, feelings of resentment—all the mushy, uncomfortable feelings that are there.

We're now grappling with what do we do next with this. How do we take these initiatives? We have a people of color *sangha*. Last year we had an eight-week beloved-community course where twenty people, again of all backgrounds, come together trying to understand the pain of others, and the pain of self using the tools of the dharma. It's an ongoing, messy, awkward, start-and-stop, and real process. I just want to commend everybody here for partaking in this. Thank you so much for our teachers in organizing this.

FEMALE SPEAKER: I've been a community organizer in the Latino community for a couple years. I spend every day of my life being, a lot of times, the only white person in a group of people of color who are always working for a lot of different issues.

[I'm] trying to understand my place in the organization that I've been working with for a long time. Where are these spaces for the conversations to happen? I get to a place and I'm aware of who's in the room and how I'm making myself disappear in some ways, how in photos I stand behind the sign. What do I do with that?

MALE SPEAKER: I wanted to speak on being an African-American man in America. I grew up here. A lot of my peers who are African American are confronted with hatred and abuse and negativity every day. And yet the goal is to walk with compassion. It's the practice to walk with mindfulness and be aware. And yet you must simultaneously hold the consistent awareness that you may be attacked today.

For the most part, I don't feel hatred toward other people based on race, and I don't discriminate based on race. I look at everyone from open eyes, but I can definitely say that sometimes I just have to disconnect because it can be so trying.

LAMA ROD: This is love, you know? I want to create this message of Black men and women talking to each other and not trying to exert power over one another, not trying to dominate. But just having a conversation and working through the ways in which we've been told to relate to each other and interrogating that resistance and making a choice to love. To love through communicating, through compassion, kindness, and patience.

We hope to work this out in our conversations with one another. I really appreciate you all being here. I encourage you not necessarily to think about being an ally but about getting to the frontlines of your struggle and not just stepping back and saying, “I can’t get in the way of marginalized people.” Go to your frontlines and be there. That’s what’s going to make me happy. Don’t get behind me.

REV. ANGEL: In this context a conversation about race is critical because the teacher cannot otherwise relate, or is not relating, to where it is we are located. Ultimately, we’re not our race and we’re not our gender, and we’re not all of our external conditions and projections. Our day-to-day experience is colored by that in just the same way that teachers recognize the fact of people’s emotions. We also have to acknowledge the fact of the things that are contributing to people’s conditioning. If race is not contributing to our conditioning, what is in this country?

If race is not contributing to our conditioning on a daily basis—out the womb, for generations, even before we ourselves got here—then nothing is contributing to our conditioning. And so it feels like such a loss that in a powerful tradition that has the capacity and language for being able to really navigate this mythic, yet real, stratification, this both made-up and felt categorization, then the conversation goes uninitiated. Race is the ultimate delusion in that it both does and does not exist in reality. Somebody went on around and decided to come up with something so that they could sell folks, that they could be “better” than other people, and yet, because of the paradigm, because of the system and structures, the impact of that creation, of that projection, this is felt and experienced as suffering—not only by the people who are on the shit end of the stick but also by the people that are, often unbeknownst to them, continuing to carry that stick.

We’re all suffering as a result of not race itself, but our unwillingness to address and be conscious about race and its impacts, how it has been constructed, how it’s functioning in our communities, in our traditions, how it is obscuring our teachings and how it is affecting the teachings [people] will interpret and what they will not. What they will share, and what they will not. What they will focus on, and what they will not. Which iconography will be acknowledged, how we interpret that iconography, and what will get left to the side.

LAMA ROD: I think you bring up something important, which is that it's not race itself that's the problem; it's the relationship to it.

Dharma helps us develop a relationship to the nature of the thing itself. So when people and communities are saying "We're all ultimately the same; there's no such thing as race," ultimately, of course, that's truth, and you want to thank them for their dharma teaching. We all need to be reminded of that, but then we have to bring our focus back to the way in which we still relate to one another as if race and skin color has this inherent meaning. We're creating the meaning, as Rev. Angel was just pointing out; we're creating this. And our conversation has to come back to the ways in which we create meaning and deconstruct that through our practices, through our tools of dialogue and critical awareness.

REV. ANGEL: There's also the meaning that was created for us, though, right? The inherited meaning that, without interrogation, we're carrying forth. One of the extraordinarily essential tools of meditation, of the dharma as it is written, is to interrogate. And what has gone awry in communities that have been developed and maintained by people who are holding white privilege is a refusal to interrogate certain areas.

There isn't an "Oh, only interrogate this." It's not taught to only interrogate emotions. You must interrogate your experience. Interrogate *all* of what you experience. Because yes, there's what's ultimate, and there's what's relative, so the only thing that should get left out of your interrogation are the things that you have no relationship to at all. Which basically is nothing.

I didn't leave anything out. I could have gone through those moments and decided, "I'm going to leave the relationship I have to my partners out. I don't want to interrogate that. How convenient!"

As you interrogate, you recognize the places in which you're not interrogating, unless privilege allows you to avoid interrogation. That's the value of this kind of conversation, to remind us all that we don't have the right to do that, even as teachers. There's no teacher that can tell you, "Don't look at that." I think that's really important for people who feel like there's been a closing down of conversations in their communities—that you actually have to be responsible for your own liberation and your own practice and not turn over your liberation to the extent that you're being asked or required to not interrogate your reality.

RADICAL DHARMA: LOVE

Love can uproot fear or anger or guilt, because it is a greater power. Love can go anywhere. Nothing can obstruct it.

—SHARON SALZBERG

HEART TO HEART

REV. ANGEL: We open[ed] these conversations because we realized that [it] is going to shift heart to heart. It's going to shift at the deepest level.

We can have new legislation. We can put cameras on cops. But it's going to be heart to heart that we expose these wounds. We've all been wounded. We've all been wounded by structural racism, but some of us got the more insidious version of it.

[Some of us] believe that we're smarter than people. We have to control the room whenever we go in. We can't make mistakes. We can't get it wrong.

We have all been wounded by this.

If you're in this conversation, and you're not in this conversation with an intention towards love—with an intention towards building and finding relationship—then it's not the place for you to have the conversation. I hate saying that.

I want to have this fierce conversation with you because I believe in connection as love, because I want to be liberated from this space in which I have to disappear because you're inhabiting that body like the pain, the guilt, the suffering, the generations of pain and suffering, the generations of shame and guilt. Like the [realization that] “Oh, my God. This has all been going on and I'm grown up and haven't even seen this.” That must just be devastating. I feel for white folks when I reach that place where I think, “Wow, I can't feel as you.” But I feel for you. So we're suffering.

LAMA ROD: Mm-hm.

REV. ANGEL: And the only reason you should be in community spaces having the conversation is because you are invested in the community; you're invested in love. You're not just trying to teach somebody or fix someplace or something. If you're not coming to this from your open heart of love and desire to connect, even if it's funky and awkward and you can't get the words right and you mess it up, then you should go someplace else where you can actually feel safe enough and invested enough to have those conversations from a place of—a place of love towards love. From love towards love.

LAMA ROD: Mm-hm. Yeah, I think both of us get the label of being angry. That's why I have to keep saying "love." Traditionally for us, that's the way that people have shut us down. [They] put that wall up and go, "Oh, you're angry. You don't make any sense." That's why we've integrated love. But we have to practice through these labels of being angry.

REV. ANGEL: This is what's going to begin to shift hearts, when people have that moment of connection to their own human heart of, "Oh, I get that." That's why marriage equality was able to suddenly catch fire. It's not because a bunch of folks said, "Hey, I love me some gay people!"

People understood love. So there were unlikely allyships that were formed because many, many, many conservative, religious folks got to a place where what they heard was not "I now embrace gay people." They heard, "That's right. I don't want anyone infringing on my right to love." Because we all know love. And we all understand and have had some experience of the imposition on our hearts.

They were moved by the truth of the power of love and the "unwringability" of love. Because even when they might not have admitted it out loud, there are areas in which we can't wrangle our own love and it doesn't fit in a neat box. Whether people say that out loud or not, that's what they checked off at the ballot; that's where the legislation was able to move from.

So I encourage people to have conversations from the place of their own vulnerable hearts. I know that's scary, and I know that puts us on a line in a way, but I don't think that trying to have these conversations at the level of theory is going to work—intellectualizing is not going to be what moves people that are most resistant.

LAMA ROD: If you are a really well-positioned member of a *sangha*, make sure you're reaching out. If you're a person of color in a *sangha*, make sure you're reaching out to other new people of color coming through the door. Be the one who extends your hand and welcomes them and just talks openly. Model that kind of inclusivity for people.

WALK OUT

FEMALE SPEAKER: I am a member of the Baha'i community and also a member of the non-profit organization We Do Racial Healing Work. My husband and I are white, but our business partner is Black, and we work specifically on Black-and-white dynamics within the dharma community and also without. We have some similar issues in the Baha'i community.

Because we are so focused on the oneness of humanity, people think that, because I'm a Baha'i, I automatically don't have problems with racial prejudice—which is just not true. I'm very interested to see how other faith communities are dealing with this because we are trying to set an example in our community by being straightforward and talking about how white people engage in this, how Black people engage in this. I'm also just thrilled to meet other people that are doing this work in their faith communities.

LAMA ROD: What comes to mind is that taking care of ourselves is disruptive. The idea of self-care as a marginalized person or as a person of color or as a poor person—it's not the kind of nice self-care that you were talking about before but some sort of the fierce kindness of disrupting my routine, like I didn't go to work today. I needed to come here. Things like that, which there's a privilege in and is also a conscious sacrifice.

Self-care, I think, is a way of going against business as usual. It's a radical route. Learning to love ourselves is hard to do. It's a fierce kind of self-love that we need to work through—that I need to work through.

REV. ANGEL: I think that any form or any way in which you're not productive is disruption. Anything that takes you out of the system where you are producing something—I don't mean creating, I don't mean the things that nurture you and serve you and are generative for you—but when

you drop out of the system and you are not productive, it will have consequences. But those consequences are part of the imagination of this system that says that we have to be producing and we have to be making something happen in order for us to have value, in order to effectively know who we are.

We also get kind of dramatic about self-care as something that needs to be partitioned off: I'm going to go to the spa! And the self-care can just be like, "Don't go." The ordinary day-to-day interruption and disruption is not happening enough. The protests are of value, but what's really overwhelming us is the ordinary day-to-day aggression that is not confronted right there on the spot. We are not risking ourselves for what we believe and for what we love.

LAMA ROD: Absolutely, and there's nothing wrong with the spa, as Jasmine and I know! We've been practicing radical self-care lately. But I think we're addicted to being triggered. It takes a choice to actually create these boundaries that produce suffering for us, and feel like we have to be hyper-vigilant to be in the world. We have to disrupt that.

I'm saying we need to take a break. We can't be on level ten all the time because that's running our bodies down, that's running our emotional/psychological state down. So you take those breaks and you put up those boundaries. You stay off Facebook, you don't answer the phone, you don't even text, you stay home if you can, you go for a walk, you go out to the woods, you do something. But we have been told in our radical communities that that is betrayal to the movement. So we're reproducing this blame, and we're actually reproducing shame. An activist radical community is sometimes the most brutal place to be in. How do we disrupt that in those spaces too?

REV. ANGEL: Yes, how do we disrupt this penchant we have for policing each other? Something that I see a lot is a sort of one-upmanship around having all the language right and being on all the fronts, because, if you have that all together, it really shows that you're radical. Of course, we want people to learn and to educate, but we also don't create any room so people that are trying to learn, and I want to say, especially white folks that are trying to learn, to understand how do I come to have a dialogue, to have a vocabulary about this? They can't get into the conversation because they don't already know what to say. That's kind of crazy. We're wagging our

fingers because people don't already know, and then we're annoyed because they ask. Then we're upset because people didn't know, but we didn't want them to ask, and we're mad that they didn't already know. I mean, do you understand it's a circular conversation here?

That's true for folks of color too, because, frankly, we're all just swimming in the water. So folks of color don't just come with a vocabulary built in. It's an add-on purchase. And depending on where we're located and our economic situation and our skin color and our hair texture, we're getting different levels of confrontation with race. That isn't to say that any of us are escaping, because no one's escaping with race. I don't care how white you are or how Black you are; no one's escaping race in this society. It's a racialized society.

But we also have to demystify this notion that somehow people of color have all the information and know it all and white folks don't, and that it's just like Black and white.

Because it just isn't. We have to really allow ourselves to create some space for people not knowing, not understanding, just saying stupid things. I mean stupid as in ignorant. That's going to happen, and we have to figure out how to create room for that, rather than policing each other, so that people can actually get into the conversation.

If someone is asking, there's a willingness there. Treat that willingness as love, and treat it with love.

LAMA ROD: Because no one's born conscious. It's been a process for everyone. Personally, I've been a recipient of meanness. You have no idea what's going on, you don't know the language, you don't know the cause, but you want to learn, and that meanness, where you're told you're a part of the problem, that's like progressive radical elitism. We get too old for that sometimes. It's not productive. I need to be a part of spaces where I feel loved. And I don't feel loved in some of these spaces. Me leaving these spaces is self-care.

FEMALE SPEAKER: I think that in addition to self-care we need to take care of ourselves by taking care of each other. I say that as someone with a disability. It's a radical act to take care of each other, and it's a revolutionary act to ask others to take care of us. That's so much more powerful than self-care, and I think it's more in line with what we're cultivating here.

Also, as someone again who is disabled, I think there's often a conflation of discomfort with being unsafe. That's one of the things I often find myself communicating in multiracial spaces to white folks, that uncomfortable does not mean being unsafe. I once went to a normal day at Spirit Rock. It was appalling and frankly unsafe, but not in a physical way. I was not emotionally safe in that space, and I made the teacher uncomfortable. What do you do when you're the one making the teacher uncomfortable and they think that's unsafe or when you're making the dominant culture in the *sangha* uncomfortable and they're conflating it with safety and saying you're not actually promoting safety? How do you keep practice?

REV. ANGEL: Leave. Leave. What is your practice going to be made of if that's the condition?

We are a product of our conditions, and we're seeding our practice with the conditions in which we are growing our practice. So if you are putting down the seeds of your practice and having it grow in conditions that are so violent—it's not that it's just unsafe; it's violent. It's an assault on your being, and it's a restriction on the potential for your liberation, and so you must leave. You get out of spaces like that; it's a revolutionary act.

We have to stop martyring ourselves, and we actually have to disrupt spaces, and that means everyone, no matter what race you are. We have to disrupt spaces that are not seeking truth, that are not upholding our potential for liberation because they are invested in their comfort. Usually what that comfort means is that they are invested in perpetuating white supremacy. We have to disrupt them. And not disrupt them by trying to figure out how to be on their boards and trying to figure out how to do their diversity committees; we have to disrupt them by saying, "I am out." I'm not going to participate in this and letting them know why.

So it's not enough to walk out and protest in silence. Walk out and protest with some noise. Stand up in the room. This is particularly effective in dharma communities, where everyone is sitting silently and all you have to do is speak your truth in that room and say I cannot abide by this. I will not sit with this and so I will stand and leave. If we don't name it, it just keeps going.

One of the most powerful things that white folks can do is just call themselves white. Of course, it's not the whole of who you are, but neither is anyone's race the whole of who they are. But living and choosing to live

in that discomfort of what gets foisted upon you right when you wear that label is stepping into a place of your own, as Lama Rod would say, being on your own frontlines and not trying to be on folks of colors' frontlines. Being on your own frontline is where the work is juiciest, and that's where it begins.

LAMA ROD: One of the kindest things that one of my teachers told me in my very first *sangha* was that you know you can leave, and it wasn't mean. We almost feel like there is nowhere else for us to go. There is. You have a practice, your own practice. It may be more difficult but you have your own experience to start working with. I really believe that if you have this authentic wish for practice, the community and the teachers will emerge eventually.

FEMALE SPEAKER: If one is caught in an abuse cycle, often one is paralyzed. So saying you just need to get up and leave—yeah, sure, but I'm still traumatized. And I'm sitting here and I'm feeling muted. How do you suggest that we develop the means to get up and leave?

LAMA ROD: Part of it has to do with trusting me. If I'm in that place and you're coming to me and I'm saying there's this pattern there, I think at some point you have to trust me enough. And start identifying more with this space of being loved, truly loved, and truly encouraged to be free and having the experience of what that means.

REV. ANGEL: One of the ways in which you can really hone your own power is to not have these conversations at all in places that you are not invested in and where there is not love. There are so many places that you have investment in—because it's your family, because it's your community where there is love—that you don't need to waste your energy having conversations with people and in situations in which there is not love.

One of the things that we really have to do that is completely radical is utterly invest ourselves in love and to continue to practice that. Then the tone of being in a place and in a situation in which there is not love and in which you are not held in love will be something you notice. That doesn't mean that you are always comfortable ... with love also comes discomfort, but you'll be attuned enough to say, "Oh, when there's no love here, I don't even need to have this conversation."

What are you trying to prove to people where there is no love? Get out of that conversation. Just don't be there. Too many of us are doing that, and

that's a result of our being habituated to suffering. We're habituated to being the victims of suffering, and we are habituated to being the perpetrators of suffering, so we go around and beat other people up that we have no investment in. I've watched so many people of color just banging their heads against that wall, trying to make those spaces change. That is deep, deep internalized oppression.

We are desperately trying to make our abusers love and accept us when they do not love and accept us without them doing their work, and you can't do their work for them. I don't care how much you want to love them into being. They have to do their own work, and so you have to really insist upon only living within the vibration of love. Love that changes, love that confronts, love that holds you, love that allows you to make mistakes but only within love.

LAMA ROD: But what if we've never been loved? Or what if we don't know what real love is? That's real for people. At least that was real for me in my practice early on. Because the way I was taught to love is by reproducing oppression and violence. I can't love you unless I'm getting something in return, or I'm going to cut you off unless you're doing something that I need. And that's the kind of love we're practicing consciously and unconsciously.

So how do you actually tune into authentic love, real love? The kind of love within Dr. King's speech? The love that isn't passive, but really direct and truthful and real? We suffer because we don't know how to do that, because we've been disenfranchised from love, which is part of why I think for marginalized people that's the way in which we still remain subjugated because we've been taught we have no right to love. Or be loved. For me interrogating that and starting to love myself is about developing an authentic understanding of love. When I knew what love was I knew people around me were actually trying to love me in a real way and I just couldn't get it before. Real teachers are trying to love you, but sometimes we sabotage that, and we go back to the people and the places that continually hurt us.

So how do we liberate ourselves from these cycles? It's really about believing in that real love and trusting it. Until you make that choice, you are bound in this cycle, and I can't pull you out physically because that becomes violence. I can't barricade the door of the *sangha* and keep you

from going in, but I can continue to be a presence of authentic love. I look at it like it's a hamster cage. You have the wheel on the hamster cage and the hamster gets on and runs and even when the hamster jumps off, the wheel keeps spinning. I think that's what change is like: You may jump off that wheel that is reproducing this violence and it's going to keep spinning for a while, but it's going to slow down and stop eventually. We need to have the patience to wait. It takes time for love to sink in.

TRYING TO LOVE

FEMALE SPEAKER: I'm a disruptor. First, I just want to thank you, angel, Lama Rod, and everyone involved. I first want to express just the general impression upon me of the group of people that have gathered here tonight. Looking at us and our faces and our many shades, I think this is really beautiful and precious.

What's coming up for me is that we tend to use the language of separation when we're talking about skin privilege. There are different types of privilege across the board, so there's different types of oppression. Even if you are a straight, white male, this society is oppressing you in some way by dictating how and what you should be, and I acknowledge white supremacy is certainly alive and well in the Western world. There's also skin privilege in my home country of Argentina; there's skin privilege in my family system.

I'm brown, but I'm not the darkest person in my family. I'm mixed race. I'm Native American. I have a long line of Scots in my family. I've noticed it kind of feels good to be privileged. We go around the world; we go to other countries. I'm just going to call this out—we don't like to let go of our privilege, and when we feel more educated, more wealthy, more powerful, more privileged, there is a conscious awareness around not harming people, but we like our privilege.

Until we as brown people stop this type of dynamic, I feel like we're empowering the situation. We're sort of saying, "You have power over us. We have less value as people." So, when do we claim our power or when do we decide we have value? People will continue to see us as less valuable if we continue to say, "You are the privileged and powerful." When do we

decide we are people of all colors with varied experiences going in all directions? How do we acknowledge what's happening?

REV. ANGEL: For me, naming the social reality of the privilege of white skin is not giving it power. I'm naming a social reality. I think it's important to do that because too many of us are not aware of it and don't acknowledge the impact that it has on people. That's very distinct from saying that it defines who I am. But I have to navigate against that because I operate in society, after all.

I think my depth of practice and my own just enormous personal power lets me get by a lot of things. So I have the experience of that particular paradox. When you are steeped and rooted in your own power, a lot of the perceived dynamics of what's coming at you actually changes because you don't let it. I don't make space for a whole bunch of bullshit, and so it doesn't come for me. There's no room here for this, but I can still catch a bullet if I open my mouth in the way I tend to open my mouth to a white cop. That's not giving them power. That cat has a gun and he's been socialized to view my Black female queer body as beneath him. As a result, he devalues the life that exists in this body, and therefore is willing to take that life wantonly.

One of the challenges we have is that to name it *is* to give it power. I think the way that we name it invites those people that are swimming in it, without knowing they are swimming in it, because many people that are within white-skinned privilege are upholding privilege even though they don't have white skin. The real problem is that they're not recognizing the suffering that they're experiencing as a result. They're not recognizing how they're cut off from love and loving and how that cut-offness from love is not limited to how they are relating to dark brown and Black-skinned people.

It's actually representing itself in their family lives, and that's why there's such a high degree, I believe, of mental illness that runs through white America, such a high level of psychopathic behavior, because there's so much repressed.

I was saying this at a gathering I was at the other day. I don't think we're better people in this era if, as human beings, we have the same hearts fundamentally as human beings that existed in other times. What happened to people? What did they have to do to be born, live, and die watching

Black bodies sold on the corner like popcorn or cotton candy or a cell phone cover? What kind of cut-offness had to happen for generations in order for people to abide by that?

These are bodies. It's not like you can kind of *pretend* that they're *not* bodies. They have arms and legs. All the parts look the same. They're just darker; their hair is kinkier, but they are human bodies. White folks need to inquire into what is running through their generational line as a result of whiteness, what had to happen for people to see that and to live with that for generations. Not just focus on what has happened to us, but what has happened to *you*. So I'm not talking about giving people power. I'm actually encouraging people to take back their own power by taking back the wholeness of who they are by examining and interrogating what this system has done, not to just whoever is marginalized but to the people that are participating and perpetuating that marginalization ... often unbeknownst to them.

FEMALE SPEAKER: I totally hear what you're saying, and I'm sorry. With all due respect, I'm all for one people and all of that, but we need to get down to really have the conversations that are necessary because the inclination to bypass is so strong. Not to bypass, but to acknowledge. For instance, there's Jewish folks who are lighter skinned. There's Armenian folks who are lighter skinned, who've all gone through persecution and genocide, and so what I'm saying is that there's sort of a universal experience. We're kind of narrowing our conversation to what's happening. I think it's really necessary to think about how to stop thinking that we're separate, that there are different people.

JASMINE: One of the things you're walking into is a weekend-long retreat dedicated to radical dharma race, love, and liberation. One of the things that happens in both dharma communities and academic communities is this attempt to view the problem of suffering and of racial violence in a "we all experience it" kind of way. I think that's true, and systems impact different people differently.

I'm impacted differently because of my gender and my race and my class and education. All of those factors matter, so when we talk about Black Lives Matter, it's the materiality of our embodiment that actually matters, on the level of domination and empowerment. Those are the things that we

have to attend to. I don't know that we have the tools necessary to acknowledge that in our own families.

My sister is impacted by race more than I am. Our families are constructed in ways that completely black out the ways in which violence impacts us differently. Part of what I'm interested in talking about is how we can love each other through that imbalance. I don't know how to make up for it. I don't know how to change it, but I do know I can stare at my sister and say, "I see that you are impacted differently than me, and I'm going to stand with you in whatever way you need me to stand with you and create communities in spaces that would honestly rather us be completely alienated and alone and isolated from each other."

I'm all for the end game, the utopia, but I also know that the way we are going to get there requires that we deal with the fact that we are very different and have different experiences. In my classes, I ask the students to tell each other our stories, and then we talk about the ways in which our personal stories are politicized and constructed by different systems of power in different ways, that those stories are interconnected. I'm trying to see the ways we can build connection without obliterating difference.

FEMALE SPEAKER: In that video of your interview [the original *Buddhadharma* interview with Lama Rod and Rev. angel described at the beginning of this section], I think you were talking after Michael Brown was shot and expressing your feelings. You had white congregational members come up and say, "But we love you." You said, "That's not sufficient." That just grabbed me, and I wanted to hear you speak to that. When we do this work, we find it's really the white men who don't show up.

LAMA ROD: I attract a lot of white men. It's really interesting.

REV. ANGEL: So do I ... I'll have to trade notes with you. [Laughter]

LAMA ROD: Middle-aged white men really seek me out for teaching. Not queer-identified either—straight, middle-class white men. There's a study there that I have to do at some point. [Laughter] Getting back to that question: angel was present, we were actually together the day we found out about Robin Williams, which affected how I was operating. [There was] also everything happening in Ferguson, the military attacks in Palestine. With Robin Williams actually reintroducing depression and mental illness, I

was triggered really strongly and a lot of trauma stuff was coming up for me.

When I would share that, I felt like people would shut down. As a response people would simply say, “Oh, but I love you,” as if what I was experiencing was wrong or unrelatable to them. I think what I was looking for was simply the space to be held. Not to be told, “You’ll be OK.” I just wanted to experience what I was experiencing in community. I know people love me, but we get into these situations where we feel like we have to say something, instead of being vulnerable and allowing ourselves not to know what to do. Plenty of times people come up to me and I have no idea what to say. I just sit with them. It’s all I can do.

So it can be hurtful. Especially if you’re not really deeply embodied in that expression of love—when you’re using that expression simply to mask discomfort, to deflect. That was the hurtful part for me. These were friends, *sangha* members, who were saying that, and that’s why I was so uncomfortable. I know they love me, but I knew that’s not what I needed. You didn’t have to say that.

SPEAKER: Thank you.

REV. ANGEL: Thank you all so much.

RADICAL DHARMA: LIBERATION

One of the extraordinary things about liberation is that you do not feel the need to control things when you're free, because the illusory nature of control becomes clear to you.

—REV. ANGEL KYODO WILLIAMS, SENSEI

WHAT DOES LIBERATION LOOK LIKE, AND WHERE DOES IT LIVE?

Black women are the canary in the coal-mine of the social structure of America, and as the canaries, they seek the air that is most clear, because they know what it's like to suffocate. They know what it's like to suffocate as women, people in female-gendered bodies; they know what it's like to suffocate as people in Black-skinned bodies, and so, as people that have touched the liberatory teachings—when they seek liberation, when they seek a clear space to breathe—they create that space around everyone because they know what it's like to suffer, to suffocate.

In the teachings of the Dharma, the first teaching is that life is suffering. It's not a thought, it's not an idea, it's not something that you should take as you go off onto the second Noble Truth—it's teaching. It's something that you actually have to come to know. And if you don't truly know, know intimately that "life is suffering," then you cannot know what it means to seek liberation. So Black female bodies know suffering; that is the nature of their existence in this society—they know suffering. Therefore, they know liberation when they see it and they are not capable of not seeking that liberation on behalf of others. Because that's what liberation is; that's what liberation actually

gives rise to. You can't possibly come to know the depths of suffering and then have any wish other than to not only be free of your own suffering, but to have others be free of their suffering. Because of who they are in society, they have to do that.

—REV. ANGEL KYODO WILLIAMS, SENSEI FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH
PROFESSOR FELICIA SY

“THE PEOPLE OF COLOR PROBLEM”

REV. ANGEL: What I get to hear is largely about white folks who are trying to figure out how to fix the people of color problem. That's what people ask me all the time: How do we invite more people of color? What I don't hear in that is: “I'm suffering. I'm experiencing trauma. What is it that I can do to help myself?”

LAMA ROD: I think it says a lot about *sanghas* when the line is, “Well, we need to be more diverse. How do we get brown bodies into these seats?” I don't care about brown people populating the *sangha* because that's a distraction for me. I am interested in the healing piece. I'm interested in looking at how we're suffering, how we're creating these relationships that actually exclude people. I don't use the word “diversity.” I really rarely use the word “racism.” I think we have this programmed response to these words, and we have to disrupt that by transforming the language a little bit or by using more precise language. The suffering of whiteness. The trauma of whiteness. Let's look at our suffering. How do we practice in such a way that we're restoring our humanity? How can we instigate that kind of transformation? Because healing is also transformation.

REV. ANGEL: How do we practice in such a way that we restore humanity? That suggests that our humanity has been compromised. That the humanity of white folks, in particular, has been compromised.

LAMA ROD: Well, the humanity of this country *is* compromised. One of the sisters over here spoke about embracing our history—which is an act of reconciliation. How do we say that our country is really a very violent place? We have a very violent history. We can wave the flag around and talk about democracy. How can we use the reconciliation models that we've

been seeing in other countries, like South Africa, for instance? That's healing, you know? That's saying, "Oh, there's trauma."

We have historical trauma as a country, as communities, as different-bodied people, as different racially identified people. There's trauma we have to start bringing to the surface and articulating the hurt, the guilt, the pain—holding the space for that. I don't see that happening in communities.

REV. ANGEL: For too long these conversations have circulated around the healing that has to be done for people of color. Even reconciliation. Even South Africa. The lens that is conventionally held is that there's healing to be done, but largely that healing is to be done on *behalf* of people of color. I may have to say I'm sorry as a white person. I may have to deal with some guilt and shame. But who's really being impacted has heavily focused on people of color, "different" people. "Oh, women are suffering. Oh, queer people are suffering. Oh, Black people are suffering."

But for me, too, there's been too little conversation allowing space for the unearthed suffering of white folks. Almost because of the power dynamics involved and almost because we have been so racialized into saying, "If I'm white, I'm supposed to feel bad for folks of color." But there's zero space for white folks to really claim suffering around living in a racialized society. There's no space, it seems to me, for white people to actually get down to the conversation. Even folks sitting there are feeling it and they're, like, "Hm, I better not say anything." It can't even be acknowledged that there is any suffering. I just don't see how we can ever expect that this dynamic is going to change if we can't allow people to fully claim their own suffering.

That's what the dharma is actually about. It's about allowing people the space and the opportunity for discomfort so that they can touch their own suffering. And this focus on other people's suffering, for me, frankly, feels like a distraction. It feels like we have spent decades now tiptoeing around other people's discomfort. I think there's some degree of relief that people feel. I think some relationships may grow in those conditions. But in my own experience, when the shit hits the fan and people are in contraction, when the economy turns upside down, when the spaces that people live in start to change, when more people of color—more marginalized people—enter the room, when people contract, they go back to those places of unaddressed suffering and the behaviors that we experience as racialized behavior, like micro-aggressions, and so on, continue.

So we can all be on good behavior, and I feel that that's what we've had in the dharma for the last forty years. Good behavior dharma. It's largely progressive—not 100 percent—and we have this progressive liberal way of talking about race, either I'm color-blind or “I'm OK with colored folks” in theory. But the reality is that people of color are not feeling welcome. They're not feeling welcome, and they're not feeling welcome because there aren't enough POC scholarships! [Laughter]

DEFINING LIBERATION

LAMA ROD: I'm listening to where people are coming from, and I notice a lot of frustration, anger, and helplessness. This is actually a deepening orientation towards healing.

In our conversation we're defining and identifying it as “liberation.” You can ask, “What is liberation? What are we liberating ourselves from?” We're actually going through frustration, anger, helplessness to be liberated. We're developing the capacity to experience all of this in a direct way. Often when we run into the difficult stuff, we actually just set it to the side and then somehow define that as healing.

This is a lot of what we find with the practice of color-blindness. We're just going to put it to the side where we don't see it: “There's no color! There's no system there! There's nothing. We just don't see it anymore.” We have to really challenge that because we're not opening to difference and how we're affected by difference. How we're benefiting from difference. How we're not benefiting from difference.

In Theravadan Buddhism there are two kinds of *sukha*, or happiness: our outer happiness and our inner happiness. Outer happiness is related to the external world, to our stuff, to situations, to things that give us joy, like Netflix and Hulu. This is Brooklyn, I guess, so maybe composting and dogs and babies.

REV. ANGEL: Walking dogs.

LAMA ROD: Local handcrafted beers and stuff. That gives us joy. That outer stuff. Our cars. Our houses. Our status. And that's where we're stuck. That's just superficial happiness. We're cycling through that. I call that

samsara. That's ignorance until we begin to see what it really is. Then we can start moving into that inner happiness, which is the recognition of the natural state of being, the natural state of mind.

We have to see this first-level happiness isn't ultimate happiness. That comes with a lot of discomfort. I go back to this analogy of the lotus in the mud. The lotus actually emerges from the mud. So we're talking about wisdom emerging from the chaos, the ignorance, the suffering because we're learning to transform this relationship to what is around us. We're not so clingy and attached to the outer part of this first level of happiness. We begin to interrogate that. In doing so, we're allowing space for discomfort to be there, and we're developing real awareness of what happiness is. But we have to see through that discomfort. As we begin to see through it, we begin to transform that relationship.

“A KINDER, GENTLER SUFFERING”

LAMA ROD: The question I have is when is enough enough? When do we finally start making the choices to confront, to interrogate, and to strategize around the forces of hate and materialism and devaluing? How do we create antidotes to the otherness that many of us feel in our communities? How do we practice self-agency and reimagining our lives, not within the context of someone else's imagination but within our own? Not within an imagination that is about control and domination, about silence and hate, especially self-hate. How do you take that power away from people?

These are the questions I started with when I began my dharma practice those dozen or so years ago. I wanted to seek refuge; I wanted peace from the overwhelming trauma of being all these identities. I was seeking liberation from this deep, deep hunger, this deep, deep sense of loneliness, this deep, deep sense of feeling like I didn't matter, that I wasn't important, that no one cared. What I was able to see was that liberation was up to me, and that's what my early dharma teachings were really about. Liberation was a choice, and at some point I had to choose liberation on my own.

REV. ANGEL: I want to chime [in] because what I hear a lot is people asking questions about navigating their dharma centers and their spiritual

homes, and about what *those* people are doing rather than [people] taking responsibility for themselves.

What we're missing in dharma communities is that people seem to have forgotten that this is about liberation. And that is a significant challenge I see all over the place. I think that we're settling for this as a result of white-skin privilege and white supremacy and the complacency it engenders. We've ended up settling for a kinder, gentler suffering rather than actually seeking and seeing our practice in our communities and our *sanghas* as places for liberation.

It's—as this young brother said when I was at Buddhafest [a conference held in DC]—like a white finishing school, and people are just figuring out how to be nicer to each other. But it's all within those confines of Puritan values of whiteness foisted upon the country at large, which are to not interrupt, to not confront, to not challenge, to not say things when you see things. Because I guarantee you that most of the racism that is occurring, and most of the really pervasive presence of white supremacy that gives rise to the discomfort that we're feeling and the misalignment that we're feeling in our communities, is happening in the presence of perfectly good people who know better, that know this is not what they want to see in themselves. But we've all acquiesced to minding our business. And that's not liberation.

LAMA ROD: Part of me wants to articulate this experience of feeling colonized within American Buddhism. Rev. angel and myself, we have to have a practice to sit here and talk about white supremacy and racism and valuing others, but even if we do this in a loving way, there are still people who will resist it and still call it aggressive. When we start talking about how these kinds of systems and structures are reproduced in *sanghas*, then we are met with this wall: “Why are you being aggressive, why are you being angry, why are you yelling?” Meanwhile, you haven't even raised your voice yet.

“THE REAL THING”

FEMALE SPEAKER: Thank you so much for having this conversation today. The discomfort—I really identify with that. And I think feeling discomfort and being in it is healing. I truly believe that with all my heart.

I think the biggest disease in America—because this is where I live; I haven't really lived anywhere else—is consumption. It's such a distraction. I identify with some of what other people said, not being able to process feelings. There's young men who come from families where men are still being told not to be in touch with their feelings. Being in discomfort is very healing.

FEMALE SPEAKER: With regard to how diversity's taken in the dharma, what I find is that there is not a recognition or an understanding that one's background and one's nationality, one's whiteness forms a lens through which we read the teachings. The communities may want to include people of color and more diversity; what I come up against is them not realizing what that's going to do in terms of exposing how they're actually holding the dharma. Once you bring in more diverse cultures—peoples that are holding wisdom from other spiritual traditions, from their other own lineages, from their own cultures—their wisdom is coming from their experiences of being Black, as being Asian, as being queer.

Whatever the aspects are that are the most uncomfortable are the aspects that probably should be that person's practice. But, like you said, there's this generation of teachers of color and students that are starting to leave because the way oppression exists is making people not feel safe enough to go through the teacher trainings, and they're bouncing.

FEMALE SPEAKER: Thanks for being here. Wonderful to have this event. I'm a believer and I've been a participator in white ally groups and *sanghas* and allied and POC groups. I've been impressed with the importance of relationship and connecting through dialogue. I wonder, aside from doing specific identity work, what can we do about coming together during what can often be a quiet non-relational time together? Do we need more spaces to talk within *sanghas* and not just be quiet and listen to one person? I'm just curious about where the potential is for relationships to be built?

LAMA ROD: I absolutely believe that we can use the quiet or the sitting practice to avoid having the dialogue. I am trying to resist going into quiet sitting practice to avoid feeling uncomfortable. I've tried to have more dialogue in my *sanghas*, or anywhere I teach, actually, because I think that's what we're really craving. People can sit at home in quiet, but in community we need to know where we are and how we are. And I think

that when we really engage dialogue around difference, we can really deepen our relationships. I think there's particular work that different people need to do in that engagement of difference.

REV. ANGEL: Meditation is not the primary practice for most Buddhists in the world. The thick number of people who practice meditation would be here in the States and in the UK. I think it's not an accident that white convert *sanghas* are putting such a strong emphasis on non-relational ways of developing their *sanghas*. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with meditation, but I think that's our mistake.

We can use anything, even a practice of liberation, to further our neuroses. What walking the Buddha's path calls us to do is to shine the light on the path of neuroses and to do exactly the opposite. We don't have to know what the outcome is; we just have to know we have a neurosis around hyper-individualism in this society and disconnection and distraction and that we are increasingly out of relationship with each other, no matter how many Facebook friends we have.

It's also not an accident that by contrast Black and brown folks mostly hail from oral traditions, and so there is a discomfort that arises just out of that cultural difference. It has occurred to me that one of the challenges of white privilege is how few white folks realize that other folks have different cultural practices and ways of being—that their way isn't The Way and that everyone else is somehow different and off ... which suggests that difference is "off" from the real thing.

I was going to say earlier on that white folks got the privilege of bringing the dharma into America, and they got to shape it, got to interpret it, and got to choose which aspects of the text would be highlighted, which aspects of the teachings, and which orientation of spaces would be brought to the forefront. Ultimately, I don't think people are doing that because they need to oppress. I think they do it because they are engaged in their neurosis, to repress feeling their own experiences of disconnection, their own sense of being lonely. Rather than using the practice to go into it and connect, we're furthering that neurosis.

We can't save everyone that's going to bounce because of what they're experiencing. Dedicated practitioners, the dharma's in your heart. The truth is in your heart. The love of that is in your heart. It's going to be a small group of us. Some of us come with the resilience, and that will help make

room for some people that have a little less resilience. Some people will build the resilience, and we will increasingly make room for people that have different expressions and interpretations. It's going to be a process. We have to, as Rod was saying, form community to create supportive and expressive and creative spaces for people that are marginalized in all sorts of ways. We will crack the ceiling.

MALE SPEAKER: I was just thinking about the [dharma] tradition over the past one hundred years and the reaction that African Americans or Blacks and the diaspora have had to being closed out or feeling uncomfortable in institutions. I think there's one where you fight for a space within institutions, but also there's another where we form our own. I would love to hear your thoughts of what that would look like. I don't know if a lot of whites in this room know, but when we're together, there's so many African and traditional spiritual Caribbean practices and experiences that we bring to the Buddhist practice. I'm curious in the next twenty, thirty years how the practice is going to look and feel with all of our traditions included into it.

LAMA ROD: The practice I bring from the diaspora is always being late to everything. [Laughter] I'm five minutes late to my *sangha*. And there's a search party going down. But this is how I was raised.

I do a lot to bring traditions from the diaspora into the way that I teach, into the way that I am within *sanghas*. And there's resistance to that, but I feel like there's beginning to be more reception because there's a lot of healing in what we're bringing from our tradition. I think in the future we will see communities that are much more embracing.

I grew up in the Black church, and I still have that in my heart. I love a little fellowship dinner after *sangha*. "Fellowship" is a really important word for me. We're in community. We're relating to one another. We're trying to support each other in healing and in having this space to support one another in life transitions. I want to bring pieces of the congregational model into traditional *sanghas*.

REV. ANGEL: I think what that looks like is going to change as more of us become teachers. This engages the power position question. By nature of the limited number of loosely sanctioned teachers of color, there's a limit to peer-led *sanghas*. Communities get to natural limits, so in terms of the people that want to go deeper in the practice, not fellowship, people can be

peer-led forever. As they want to deepen their practice, they're going to run into the ceiling of wanting and needing guidance that comes from having studied teachers. So for now, there's going to be a little bit of a ceiling because we have to wait for a new rising of teachers of color. And then I think there's going to be an interesting churn. Because one of the challenges that comes through the fact of white folks having carried many of these traditions over is an obsession with authenticity.

That obsession with authenticity has very much more to do with trying to locate oneself when whiteness is all we've been left with, because this country needed to cut people off from heritage and needed to cut people off from lineage in order to organize them, explicitly against brown, Black, and red peoples. So the obsession with authenticity says that's not real this and that's not real that. Any one of us that does any study of the history of Buddhism knows that what it is best at is picking up other traditions as it goes along. As we simultaneously slough off the cultural baggage of whatever mother countries these practices have come from, we're going to have to start letting other things in, including, in this country, the teachings which happen all over Africa. As it is, I've seen it in South Africa—Buddhist *sanghas* with predominantly Black-bodied people in them. They have diasporic practices. It raises questions about what the invisibility of whiteness has robbed from white people that would have allowed them to more naturally express their own manifestation of the dharma.

LAMA ROD: Going back to this practice of Black prophetic tradition, I think teachers of color, especially Black teachers, really have to return to that kind of way of being in spiritual community which isn't aggression, but is something about how we're embodying and speaking to that embodiment. That's important. I don't see a lot of teachers of color in general, but I think from the few Black teachers I've seen, I feel we could be doing more to embody that Black prophetic fire.

We've lost that radicalism, and we've kind of succumbed a little bit to some of these really harsh realities of being marginalized in *sanghas*, though we have some teaching authority. My question is always, how do we regain that prophetic vision, that fire, to use the words of Professor Cornel West, that prophetic, Black tradition? How do we return it to that in a way that's not materialistic or self-serving?

I think the directors of centers can do what they will, but teachers have a responsibility to speak truth in the best way that they can in the service of people's happiness, to giving people an opportunity to see and experience what they need to see and experience in order to transcend their suffering. First, to be honest about their suffering, then to actually develop a relationship to that suffering, and then to work with the suffering and work through the suffering. You can't actually go to the other end automatically. Too often we're selling the idea that we can just skip over the suffering part. And if you put your money in the *dana* basket or fill out your membership form and pay your dues, it's all taken care of, and we can sit here and we can be nice with each other. We avoid causing one another any discomfort because if we did, we'd remind ourselves of the suffering that we're actually experiencing.

If we're asked to check our suffering at the door, then what are we here for? And I think that this is probably, for me, one of the strongest inhibitions to being able to get to truth, to get to the Radical Dharma. Folks are worried about their own sixty-five-million-dollar jets. If I'm more worried about having people and their money over being as honest as I can, then we're in trouble.

We're not talking about just roughing people up for the sake of it, but that's what we're doing. We're bean-counting. And part of that comes out of the fact of Buddhism's arriving in a cultural context in which there is not an automatic understanding in the larger cultural context about the relationship between the teachers and the community. Historically, teachers have been supported by the community, and so lacking that, we have unfortunately deferred to a capitalization of our teaching. We've commercialized and moved our dharma teaching into a capitalist model of competition, marketing, who sells the best, and then ego just runs rampant.

Our integrity is compromised when we're dependent upon our communities for support. Now obviously relationship is important. At the same time, we have to be careful about how we compromise our vision for liberation. When we compromise, we're actually compromising liberation for both ourselves and for the people we're in service to. That's something I've had to really reflect on. Do I say what I need to say? Or do I censor what I feel like I need to say in order to keep people coming to see me?

I think I've been very fortunate on my path not to be so supported by *sangha*. So I've never had that thing where I was like, "Oh, I'm getting all the support. I better not say anything." I wasn't getting supported fully, so I just felt like I could say what I wanted to. But over time, what I began to witness is that people were actually hungry for that kind of authenticity. That's exactly why I entered into relationship with my own teachers. Because finally there were people in my own life who loved me enough to tell me the truth, who didn't beat around the bush. My root teacher does not beat around the bush. He just points it out: This is where you need the work. He doesn't care about people not supporting him; he cares about you being liberated. I think any authentic spiritual teacher is concerned with your liberation.

REV. ANGEL: Period.

LAMA ROD: I feel like that's why we're willing to do it. You should do this only because you want to see people liberated and happy. I think this is important because being liberated means to be happy, and to be happy means we are liberated or at least in process.

REV. ANGEL: Not "happy" in the ordinary sense. I think even when we say "happiness is important," it's important for people to know what we mean by "happiness" because it's not an ordinary happiness.

LAMA ROD: The happiness that I'm talking about is that deep sense of well-being, comfort—not materialistic comfort but that deep sense of being at home with who and what you are. Occupying that space in a way that's not dependent on the external environment, that's not dependent on your Honda or your 65-million-dollar jet or where you live. It's dependent on being fundamentally OK with who you are—no matter if you are experiencing tragedy, illness, death—you're always at home with that. And when I'm at home, there's a sense of spaciousness. So I can be happy at the same time I can be going through rage and anger and despair.

I'm not saying you can't have a secondary level of happiness that we get from our Hondas and our jets and our favorite TV shows and our ice cream. The joy we get from our puppies and cats when we go home. Because sometimes those are the only friends we have; those are the only creatures that will put up with us. But really they're just dependent on us, so they know enough to act right because they need to get fed. So we have this secondary happiness that comes from relationships, that comes from other

things but that can't be primary because that doesn't last. Whatever's created will be destroyed, so nothing will last. That's why we ground ourselves in a sense of being at home in our own experience, in who and what we are. That's the happiness I'm talking about. Relationships with spiritual teachers and so forth helps us to develop a relationship to that inner happiness.

“WHAT ARE YOU WILLING TO GIVE UP?”

LAMA ROD: We're not here to reproduce comfort. You can go to a country club for that. Or you can go to the club; you can go out to the bar, which we all do. Sometimes our *sanghas* are country clubs. This is not a social club. This is not a country club. I mean, there's snacks and drinks and everything; that's fine. But this is a place for us to be uncomfortable, and for it to be safe to be uncomfortable, because discomfort is where liberation really emerges from, just like the Buddhist symbol of the lotus that emerges from the mud. We need to emerge from our confusion through strategies of awareness. You can't emerge from something you haven't owned and recognized. What we are seeing now, instead of folks owning that confusion, is that we try to bypass the chaos of the mud or the confusion because we see *sanghas* as being this really nice place we can relax, but it doesn't serve us actually. Like I said, you can relax anywhere. We waste *sangha* and community when we choose not to engage in discomfort associated with liberatory practice.

REV. ANGEL: The misunderstanding is that refuge means somehow being protected from our discomfort. Refuge is actually about being protected from all of the things that are hindering our ability to see our discomfort and to be able to actually come in contact with it. The refuge is: Here is a space. Here is an opportunity for you to meet your discomfort instead of continuing to bypass it, to drug it, to distract from it, to Hulu it or to Facebook it or—you know all of the ways.

We're always talking about other forms of anesthetizing ourselves. We create this separation between people who are drug users and alcoholics, so they're the bad ones that aren't taking care of themselves and are really distracted. In fact, we are all heavily anesthetized by the various ways we're

distracted from our own suffering. Mine is maybe online shopping, but we all have some version of it and just because we're not actually using hard drugs or hard alcohol doesn't mean that we're not distracting ourselves from this pain.

Not the least of which is to recognize our distraction from how deeply misaligned most of our communities are—that we're waving the flag of wisdom and compassion, and we can't stop pulling ourselves in when someone "other" comes in, whether that "other" is a brown or Black body or a transgender body. That's a significant challenge because we don't confront it. It's a challenge because folks are so desperate to fit in and to find a place of relative ease that we begin to acquiesce our own power and what we know is right, and our own wisdom and our own truth just so that we can belong. And it's really, really time for us to break with that and question, what are you belonging to?

LAMA ROD: What are you belonging to and also what are you willing to give up? I think that disruption comes at a price, and for many of us to really call out injustice means that we risk belonging in certain communities, belonging within our families, belonging within our friend groups, belonging within our *sanghas*, belonging within our workplaces. You know wherever a community is for you, and that's a really hard choice.

REV. ANGEL: We're way too invested in nation-building around Buddhism and nation-building around these institutions, in general. We're more invested in some sense of continuity because we have a fear of death. Because we're invested in extending continuity beyond this current moment, we can't just have our dharma practice in our living rooms and forget about high rents, and forget landlords and all of the things that we have to pay for. We need to figure out how we just create real true *sangha* wherever it is that we are.

LAMA ROD: The struggle with that is that we're not seeing examples of this. Because some of us don't even know how to do that. How do we actually project a sense of authenticity into the world? We have no idea who we are because no one's showing us. We're distracted by these things because we prioritize and value trying to fit in, trying to belong, instead of actually privileging our deepest desires for equality, equanimity, community. And I think that for those of us who struggle there's a lot to

learn from others who have made these choices before, to privilege who and what they are at whatever cost that comes.

REV. ANGEL: Do you have some examples?

LAMA ROD: Anyone who we see as a hero. I think we are drawn to their choice that they made to be themselves. There are all kinds of examples. Personally, of course, my teachers, and before even coming in the dharma, just the great change-makers like, for instance, Ericka Huggins, who some of you know. I just met her today but have known her through correspondence for a while. She is someone who I've followed for a while and just sitting with her today and asking her what was that choice for her? When did she choose to privilege her deepest desires to create change?

If you know her, and know of her story, as one of the leaders of the Black Panthers in the '60s right here in your community, it cost her a lot. Regardless of what she lost, she was always coming back to help people. And ultimately, I think for me that's truly the bottom line. What am I doing to benefit myself and others?

There's a sense of integrity too, as Rev. angel was pointing out. I think the choice that I had to make was that I had to value and choose integrity. Doing what I needed to do to support the benefit of my students and those around me over whatever financial benefit there was. And I think that when we choose other things over integrity, that's when the violence starts in our communities and our relationships. I don't want to say that it's so widespread, but I think that's the root of so much violence in our relationships with our spiritual teachers. When that integrity gets devalued and you become a source of something that the teacher needs. I don't need anything from you. I need you to practice. If you want to give me a few dollars fine, but I'm not in it for that.

REV. ANGEL: Too many of us as dharma teachers have also given up our authenticity because our livelihood is tied to people's feeling of being comfortable. Too many of us are more and more willing to allow a kinder, gentler suffering. Just give people a little bit of a salve, a little bit of a balm on their suffering, and not really touch the place of challenge and woundedness that needs to be touched to release the energy so that people can actually find their liberation.

So if you're going to dharma communities, if you're going to walk in the path of the Buddha, if you're going to any place of spiritual enrichment in

which you are not meaningfully experiencing discomfort, not all the time, but meaningfully uncomfortable frequently, you are not doing your work, and you are not walking the path of liberation. I just want to let you know that. If it's all warm and fuzzy all the time, then someone is really not dropping wisdom. Otherwise, it just means that we're all sitting in here awake already. Right? Because that's about the only time that it should stay warm and fuzzy, is if we're already awake.

If that's not what's happening, if you're not being challenged, if you're not feeling uncomfortable, and particularly made uncomfortable by the teacher, someone's dropping the ball. I'm not saying you're wasting your time. Maybe you want kinder, gentler suffering. Maybe that's what you're in it for. But if it's liberation you're after, and you're not experiencing discomfort, liberation is not where you're headed. You just need to know that.

LAMA ROD: Even two days ago [before the Charleston massacre,] you all needed a space to grieve; we always need spaces to grieve because we don't have public spaces to grieve anymore. We do not like to do public mourning in our country, in our world. We are really uncomfortable around grieving people and sickness and death, so we send it off somewhere. That's trauma. We're told, "Oh, you can't be sad. You can't be upset. You can't be sensitive to the suffering of the world because that makes people uncomfortable. You're not going to be productive if you're sitting around weeping all the time."

Rev. angel and I can hold the space for this pain because we hold the space for our own suffering, because that's been the stuff, the material, of our practice.

REV. ANGEL: Many of us don't feel permission.

You have to disrupt business as usual in your own life, and you have to disrupt business as usual in all of the spaces that you're in. If you don't do anything tonight, leave here anointed as a disruptor, and really allow the rest of our time together to embolden you, to strengthen that resolve in you to disrupt on the spot and to make people uncomfortable. Give yourself permission to be uncomfortable and to make others uncomfortable in your truth.

LAMA ROD: I'm an activist, so I can say this: sometimes we go to do the easy stuff. Let's go to a march, let's go plan something, but meanwhile we

can't even talk to our friends and families. We can't even be ourselves and have that courage in our meetings to stand up and say, "I don't agree with this. Let's do something different. I believe in love, not this aggression." That's the kind of disruption we're talking about. You can do everything else, but let's start with the basics.

To be a bodhisattva in the world—which doesn't mean necessarily that I have to be like Jesus, that I have to sacrifice myself—we have to ask, "How do I witness the violence in the world? How do I do what I can do to disrupt that violence, and how do I work in a very skillful way in whatever way possible? How do we hold space for our own rage and despair?"

In my practice I ask, "Why am I always so interested in fixing and channeling my rage into something else?" Why am I always so fixated on this? Why am I giving it all this narrative and airtime? Why am I making it the heart of my presence in the world? Why can't it just be this experience? Why does it always have to be there in everything and all of my interactions? Where does love come in? Can't love and rage exist together? How do I take care of my rage? These are just questions that I go through in my own practice, but at the end of the day, whatever it is, I just have to know, I just have to be there. There will always be violence because there will always be a *samsara*. There will always be ignorance.

For many of us who are on the streets, on the frontlines—we're getting burned out. We are getting run-down. We are being killed. We are being confiscated by states and empire. And when I'm at actions and protests, people are like, "Oh, what are you doing here? Shouldn't you be in the *zendo*?" I say, "No, I study Buddhism in *zendos*, but my practice compels me to be in the world because I don't have a choice. I'm Black too. It doesn't matter if I'm walking outside with this shawl on. I'm still a Black man with a shawl on. My body could still take a blow just like any other person if people assume things about me that aren't true, so I have to be real about that.

I see too many people who will not think twice about going out to the march, and to the die-in and to all these great fun things we do as activists, but aren't willing to talk about these issues with the people that live with them. And I think our activism has to be about equipping ourselves with the tools to have the conversations with the people that are closest to us,

because these people will listen to us much more than they would someone else that's further from them.

In the classroom, one strategy that has really been helpful for me is to actually articulate my experience with my professors. I had a particular incident on the day that the grand jury decided not to indict the officer [who shot Michael Brown], and people were really quite upset. I just had this experience with a professor who maybe wasn't sensitive to how some of us were feeling. Choices were made during the class that did not honor our emotional struggle. I talked with several students after the class and I sent her an email saying, "This is the experience that some of us had and are having on this day." She heard that and apologized to the class. We dialogued about it and I ended up developing more confidence in this professor. So those are some of the strategies that we can use. How do you go back to places like rural Georgia and have these conversations? You start with the people closest to you, which is hard. That's the hardest work I think.