

Community of “Neighbors”: A Baptist-Buddhist Reflects on the Common Ground of Love



Today we are all aware that the concept of “race” is a mere construction. There is only one “race”: the human race; to think otherwise is like still believing that the earth is flat. But “racism” is a different matter. It exists as a system of beliefs and prejudices that people differ along biological and genetic lines and that one’s own group is superior to another group. When these beliefs and prejudices are coupled with power — especially the power to negatively affect the lives of those perceived to be inferior — we have a serious problem. And no one should downplay or underestimate the harm that such an ideology inflicts on everyone who participates in it. According to one African American professor of social work, “America’s history is inextricably bound to this racist ideology. From the codifying of slavery, to the belief in ‘Manifest Destiny,’ to the treatment of ‘illegal immigrants,’ many of America’s actions continue to conflict with its creed that ‘All men are created equal.’”³⁸⁴

Over the past decade or so, I have written a number of pieces that focus on racism in America and racism in so-called American Buddhism.³⁸⁵ Being African American myself, my reasons for this focus may perhaps be clear though not necessarily inevitable. I have written on a number of other topics: Buddhist philosophical discourses and life stories of Buddhist “saints,” for example. In my writings on racism, I have tried to communicate something of the emotional and psychic toll it takes to live in this country as a person of color. In a number of these writings, I have called myself a “Baptist Buddhist,” and thus this is also one of my “dual belongings,” one of my “multiple identities.”

When I speak of racism, I am not concerned with garnering pity, or playing the “race card” of guilt, or telling you, from some assumed position of superiority on the matter, that there is simply no way for you to understand this toll. I certainly cannot speak for all African Americans, or even for most of them. Early on in the process of writing this paper, I emailed the organizers of this conference, Jung and Paul, to say that I found the title of the panel both much too broad and much too narrow. Too broad because one person cannot possibly channel and/or verbalize the countless instances of suffering endured by African Americans (and more broadly, by persons of color) throughout space and over centuries in this country owing to slavery and its aftermath. And too narrow because, ultimately, we want to do more than just rehash our many sufferings. We don’t want to wallow in victimhood. We want to move on — from the recognition of that immense suffering, seen and unseen — and to go out into the world and act to bring about racial, social, economic, and ecological justice. That’s what we are called on to do: to form a new community wherein there is compassion and caring for one another, where there is love and peace, nonviolence, reconciliation, and justice.

So even though I am quite frankly tired — as are so many people of color — of being the token African American who can add visible diversity to a group in order to show that it is now more inclusive than before, nevertheless, in this so-called postracial society where we have a black president and the demographic of “persons of color” now comprises an actual majority of the United States’ population, I must still rise to say that, sadly, racism is not dead in this country! Its painful vestiges exist, and those vestiges are far from being either innocent or unharmful.

I truly believe that — for African Americans, in particular — it is the trauma and the legacy of slavery that haunts us in the deepest recesses of our souls. It is hard to imagine what having been bartered and sold as though mere property does to a human being, what being dehumanized, infantilized, and divested of all rights and liberties does to one’s sense of self-worth and well-being. As I once wrote, the trauma of slavery “is the chief issue for us. It needs to be dealt with, head-on — not denied, not forgotten, not suppressed. Indeed, its suppression and denial only hurts us more deeply, causing us to accept a limited, disparaging, and even

repugnant view of ourselves. We cannot move forward until we have grappled in a serious way with all the negative effects of this trauma.”³⁸⁶

Some of the wounds of slavery are buried very deep within. I grew up in the Jim Crow South where traces of the system of human chattel were everywhere apparent, where Black Codes and the rules of segregation defined and dictated for us our “places,” where the water fountains were designated “white” and “colored” and our parents warned us against ever drinking from the wrong one! And yet I was fortunate enough to be a fifteen-year-old teenager when the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. decided to bring the civil rights movement to Birmingham and to let us children lead the marches there. So I got that invaluable opportunity to march with King, and I wouldn’t trade that for anything.

Some say those days of overt racism and segregation are over.³⁸⁷ But they are not. Racism in America still shows its face each and every day — for those of us who experience it directly — in ways great and small. We may have heard about James Byrd Jr., the black man in Texas whose body was chained to a truck and dragged for several miles before being finally decapitated.³⁸⁸ We probably know the sad history of Emmett Till, the fourteen-year-old boy visiting from Chicago who was savagely beaten and then shot outside his relative’s home in Money, Mississippi.³⁸⁹ We may lament the countless lynchings of blacks that occurred throughout the southern states in the 1920s and 1930s. We may suspect that if today there are more young African American males imprisoned in this country than are in its institutions of higher education, then something is wrong. But, even apart from these bigger examples, people of color continue to suffer countless small indignities each day in this country as well. In my memoir, *Dreaming Me: Black, Baptist, and Buddhist*, I titled a chapter “Little Things” to point to these experiences — to the unseen and perhaps unconscious behaviors of others that inflict real wounds. Let me quote here just a couple of passages from that chapter by way of example:

A woman in Jasper, Texas — a baby-boomer, modern, “with-it” liberal — said on *Racism in America*, a TV documentary in the 1990s, that she hadn’t known how badly divided her community had become or that the division between whites

and blacks had widened rather than narrowed. She hadn't known that day in and day out, blacks in her own community still suffered so from racism's soul-crushing hatefulness. She told the documentary's interviewer, "It's the little things, like not putting their change actually back into their hands, just laying it on the counter." She recounted, as if in amazement, the simple question raised by a local black man, "Why can't you put the change back in my hands? Am I so low, so disgusting to you, that you can't touch me?" The liberal-minded baby-boomer hadn't known it was so bad, went so deep, and was reflected in such little things.

Not long after I arrived in Middletown, Connecticut, and assumed my new position as a tenured professor of religion at Wesleyan in the late 1970s, I ventured down the three blocks from campus to Main Street. It was almost Christmas. I had a smoking friend, and I had decided to get her a nice cigarette lighter. Off I went, happily. There were already several lines of shoppers in the first jewelry store I entered. It was Christmas, I thought to myself. I waited patiently, with all the rest of the shoppers. When finally my turn came at the counter, I said to the slim, gray-haired, bespectacled saleswoman facing me, "Hello, I'd like to see some lighters, please."

"We only have *expensive* lighters here!" she said, dismissing me abruptly. For a moment, I was completely stunned. I wasn't sure I had heard her right. I stood there in silence.

Before her remark could register and draw forth an outburst from my innermost core, a young white man in the line next to me said aloud, "Ah, lady! Show the woman the lighters!" He had recognized the woman's dart as being intended to wound me. He had seen what I had just suffered, and it embarrassed and angered him. But I was too angry and too hurt to speak. My inability to respond to her made me

even angrier. I turned away from the counter and thanked the man as I exited the store.³⁹⁰

These are the “little things,” the small indignities that aren’t easily seen.

Now, to be fair, whites, too, experience the effects and legacies of slavery. For the most part, however, these are little noticed. Why would one notice? They are, after all, what we consider “normative.” They are what are now being termed by some “white privilege.” When whites look in the mirror each morning, it may well be to notice new wrinkles or unaligned teeth, but rarely, I suspect, does the image reflected there engender a worry about what small indignities might have to be suffered this day. If we like, we might read the famed 1961 account by the journalist John Howard Griffin, *Black Like Me*,³⁹¹ to get some idea of what it may have felt like to be black in the southern states in the late 1950s. But the real story today is what is not felt by whites, owing to their possession of white privilege. This fairly new focus of research suggests that rather than focus exclusively on the human cost of racism, we might explore instead the ways in which some people or groups actually benefit, deliberately or inadvertently, from racial bias. There are some good resources available.³⁹²

In the end, I don’t like the term “racism.” I feel that it sensationalizes things. The term immediately makes everything more loaded and heavy. I’d rather readers of my work first read what I’m trying to say than be turned off before attempting to understand me. “Racism” is a big, heavy thing. Its mention has the power to shut down conversations before they can even begin. I don’t like the term “racism” because it is ugly; it is about violence — whether to body, soul, or spirit. It is about hate. I much prefer to think about and to meditate on love.

LOVE

As most of us know, love is a cardinal principle of all of the world’s religious traditions. It stands at the center of what we, as religious and spiritual beings, are called on to practice. But its practice is not easy!

As Christians, we are taught that the “good news” (the Gospel, from the Old English *godspell*) is that God loves us. He is no longer solely a

vengeful God — as so much of the Old Testament tells us — but he now shows us a new, softer face and gives us a new chance for salvation (through the loving sacrifice of His Son, Jesus Christ, as a ransom for our sins). Over and over again, we are reminded that the hallmark of true Christian behavior is love. For example, there is the oft-quoted New Testament passage found in 1 Corinthians, “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am become but as a sounding brass or tinkling cymbal. . . . And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. . . . And now abideth faith, hope, and love, but the greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13, vv. 1–2 and 13).

In his First Epistle General, the apostle John (who tells us the meaning of Jesus’s life and resurrection) tells us: “Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not, knoweth not God; for God is love” (1 John 4:7–8). Having defined “God” as “love,” the apostle John then goes on to tell us how God has used, has employed the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, as a means for our individual salvation: “In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:9–10).

The apostle John then announces how we, in recognition of the fact that Jesus has died for us, should or ought to behave. Interestingly, and importantly, it is not how we should behave toward God or toward Jesus, but toward each other — toward our fellow human beings. John writes: “Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another” (1 John 4:11).

As I mentioned earlier, I call myself a “Baptist Buddhist.” This is not a theological stance for me, but rather an empirical description of who I feel I am. I was once on a plane that came very close to crashing. And in those tense moments, I found that I called on both my Baptist and Buddhist spiritual backgrounds. These are very deep responses. As Kierkegaard once wrote, “One doesn’t truly know what one believes until one is forced to

act.”³⁹³ Moreover, because I grew up in Alabama just outside of Birmingham, and as a teenager marched with King during the Birmingham campaign, I learned about nonviolent social activism at that time. Many of the ideas that I later encountered in Buddhist teachings I had already heard from King and other civil rights activists. So finding once again the themes of nonviolence, interdependence, and love in Buddhism was, for me, like coming home.

In Buddhism also, love is a cardinal principle, a central tenet. For example, in the famed early Buddhist classic the *Dhammapada*,³⁹⁴ at verse 5 one finds this concise description of Buddhist belief and practice: “Hatred is never appeased by hatred. Hatred is only appeased by love. This is an eternal law.” The term translated here as “eternal law” is *Dhamma* (in the Pali), or *Dharma* (in Sanskrit). In short, this message is at the very heart of all Buddhist teachings: We must practice love. (The Dalai Lama often says, “My religion is kindness.”) If this is so, how are we to practice it? Another *Dhammapada* verse, number 183, encapsulates the entirety of the Buddhist path as follows: “Do no harm. Practice virtue. Purify the mind. This is the teaching [i.e., the Dhamma] of all the buddhas.”

Again, the Dalai Lama — paraphrasing the great eighth-century Buddhist poet Shantideva — often says, “We all desire to be happy and to avoid suffering. In this respect, we are all exactly alike. Therefore, as much as possible, let us seek to do good to one another; and if we cannot do good, let us at least try not to harm!”

The Buddha founded a community, a sangha, to foster and encourage these principles. It consisted of four parts: monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen, in that order, in deference to his time and cultural milieu. One should note that the Buddha’s sangha was diverse; it consisted of young and old members, of men and women, and, importantly, of beings drawn from all the four *varnas* or castes of India at that time.³⁹⁵ The Buddha said, “The members of a sangha look after one another,” and again, “When you look after each other, you are looking after the Tathāgata (or, me).” (There seem to be some echoes here of later New Testament passages.)

Now, I would like for a moment to focus on a well-known Christian story known as the parable of the Good Samaritan. This story is found in two separate places in the Gospels, in the accounts of Matthew and in those

of Luke. At Matthew 22, we find the following, when a lawyer among Jesus's listeners asks him:

“Master, which is the greatest commandment in the law?”

And Jesus said unto him, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.”

I believe that this is as compact a declaration of Christian doctrine and practice as one will find. For here, one finds both the letter and the spirit of the law. What does a Christian accept fully in mind? And how ought a Christian to behave, ethically? That is, what kind of heart should she seek to develop? (In Buddhist thought, it should be noted, these two — mind and heart — are so integrally connected that the same term, *citta*, is often used to denote them.)

Now, at Luke 10:25–27, we get the fuller context as well as the aforementioned complete parable. Here we find the following:

And, behold, a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted him, saying, “Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus said unto him, “What is written in the law? How readest thou?”

And he, answering, said, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself.”

And Jesus said unto him, “Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live.”

But he, willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

And Jesus, answering, said, “A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, who stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead. And by chance a certain priest came

down that way; and when he saw the wounded man, he passed by on the other side. And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where the wounded man lay: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him, and went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, 'Take care of him; and whatsoever more thou spendest, when I come again, I will repay thee.' Now which of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbor unto him that fell among the thieves?"

And he said, "He that showed mercy on him."

Then said Jesus unto him, "Go, and do thou likewise."

This is certainly a quite rich narrative, with many intricate and subtle twists. But the heart of the story is this: We are human beings, we are children of God, and, as such, we must love one another. For it is only in the acting out of this love that we truly perform our sacred duty and act in accordance with God's laws and God's wishes. How do we show that we love God? We show it by loving our neighbors! This is our job; this is how we show, how we demonstrate, who we truly are.

When Jesus asks, "Now which of the three was [truly] neighbor unto the man?" he is really asking which of the three was truly the religious man. Perhaps the first two "religious" men, the priest and the Levite, were afraid that they might themselves be harmed if they stopped to help the wounded man; the robbers might still be around. Or perhaps they thought that by stopping to help the wounded man, they might somehow be defiled or polluted by him since he was not of their tribe or clan. But — either way — it was the priest's and the Levite's fears that prevented them from acting religiously. In Jesus's time, Jews regarded all Samaritans with scorn. Samaritans were considered to be polluting, and so no Jew wanted any physical contact with them. What a good thing that this particular Samaritan did not see the world this way! Rather than ask, "If I help this man, what

might happen to me?” the Good Samaritan asked, “If I don’t help this man, what will happen to him? In King’s words, “the Good Samaritan engaged in a dangerous altruism.”³⁹⁶ He was willing to practice putting another’s well-being above his own. (In Buddhism, this is called being a compassionate bodhisattva.)

In his book *No Future without Forgiveness*, Desmond Tutu beautifully explains this care and compassion for one another as the idea of *ubuntu*.³⁹⁷ Tutu notes that we are human beings by virtue of acting humanely in a community of beings who all belong, and who therefore care for one another.

But practicing in this way is not always easy. In fact, it is most times very difficult. We are all accustomed to putting our own selves first. So it does not come naturally to us to love our neighbors, much less so to love those we consider our “enemies.” Yet love must become for us a sustained habit, an attitude, not simply a one-time knee-jerk response; and to generate this transformed view requires serious practice. Buddhism offers many meditative tools to help bring about this transformed view. The methods employed are both calming and analytical in nature. A key notion is that of our interconnectedness. It is a positive take on the universal Buddhist idea of *shunyata* (Skt.; Pali *sunna*). Usually the term is misleadingly translated as “emptiness” or “voidness,” but the concept more appropriately connotes the idea that we are “empty” or “void” of independence and so are dependent beings, unable to truly live or to be ultimately satisfied on our own, completely without others. We are interconnected by our very nature.

Dr. King knew about this interconnectedness also. Indeed, he spoke about it often and often tied it into social justice issues. For example, he wrote:

In a real sense, all life is interrelated. All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality.³⁹⁸

We do not exist independently. We need only breathe to know this. This is the real — not virtual — Internet. We are inextricably bound together. And therefore, unless we find a way to live together, we shall — all of us — perish together. And since this is the case, since this is our reality, we must have compassion for one another. Another way of saying this is, “If you suffer, I suffer, and if you are happy, I am happy.” And this is just exactly what the bodhisattva — and the true Christian — knows and feels.

In King’s sermon “On Being a Good Neighbor,” he notes that “the ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy. The true neighbor will risk his position, his prestige, and even his life for the welfare of others.”³⁹⁹ King concluded with the following: “No longer can we afford the luxury of passing by on the other side. Such folly was once called moral failure; today it will lead to universal suicide. We cannot long survive spiritually in a world that is geographically together. In the final analysis, I must not ignore the wounded man on life’s Jericho Road, because he is a part of me and I am a part of him. His agony diminishes me, and his salvation enlarges me.”⁴⁰⁰

The great Buddhist poet Shantideva wrote:

All the joy the world contains
has come from wishing happiness for others,
while all the misery the world contains
has come from wishing happiness for myself alone.⁴⁰¹

Though it is not an easy practice, this practice of love, it is the practice that gives our lives true meaning. In this interconnected world, there is no one who is not, and no thing that is not, our neighbor. With this deep recognition of our very being, we need to go forth and act in the world.

KING’S “BELOVED COMMUNITY”

Dr. King had a vision of a “Beloved Community.”⁴⁰² That vision calls for us to join together in a society wherein, recognizing our interdependence, we belong and share compassionately with one another. Recognizing that

“God is Love” (a New Testament Christian notion), that “we exist in dependence on one another” (a Buddhist notion), and that nonviolence and nonharm (*ahimsa*) and love (*agape*) must be our sole methods of dealing with one another, King envisioned a society in which we could be our best selves by seeking the benefit of others, knowing that when we seek to lift others up, we ourselves are raised up.

This is how the King Center in Atlanta website describes King’s vision:

For Dr. King, The Beloved Community was not a lofty utopian goal to be confused with the rapturous image of the Peaceable Kingdom, in which lions and lambs coexist in idyllic harmony. Rather, The Beloved Community was for him a realistic, achievable goal that could be attained by a critical mass of people committed to and trained in the philosophy and methods of nonviolence.

Dr. King’s Beloved Community is a global vision, in which all people can share in the wealth of the earth. In the Beloved Community, poverty, hunger and homelessness will not be tolerated because international standards of human decency will not allow it. Racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood. In the Beloved Community, international disputes will be resolved by peaceful conflict-resolution and reconciliation of adversaries, instead of military power. Love and trust will triumph over fear and hatred. Peace with justice will prevail over war and military conflict.⁴⁰³

The concept of “the Beloved Community” may seem to us today to be too grandiose, too idealistic and, in the end, impossible. I disagree. It is certainly not a new proposition. If we look at the grand sweep of history, we see that no nation or people seem to have yet actually achieved it. Why? Because, where there are wars with “winners” and “losers,” bitterness lingers. Because, as King said over and over, hatred only gives rise to more hatred, and therefore only love can bring an end to hate. Only

reconciliation, rather than selfish one-sided victory, can bring lasting peace and justice.

Again, the King Center records:

In his 1963 sermon, *Loving Your Enemies*, published in his book, *Strength to Love*, Dr. King addressed the role of unconditional love in struggling for the beloved Community. “With every ounce of our energy we must continue to rid this nation of the incubus of segregation. But we shall not in the process relinquish our privilege and our obligation to love. While abhorring segregation, we shall love the segregationist. This is the only way to create the beloved community.”

One expression of agape love in King’s Beloved Community is justice, not for any one oppressed group, but for all people. As Dr. King said, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”⁴⁰⁴ He felt that justice could not be parceled out to individuals or groups, but was the birthright of every human being in the Beloved Community. “I have fought too long and hard against segregated public accommodations to end up segregating my moral concerns,” he said. “Justice is indivisible.”⁴⁰⁵

The Buddha exhorted his first sixty ordained sangha members — while they were still practicing their own meditations — saying, “Go forth, O Bhikkhus, for the welfare of the many, for the happiness of the many, for the good, well-being, and happiness of gods and men. Preach the sublime Dhamma, excellent in the beginning, excellent in the middle, excellent in the end. Proclaim the Holy Life, altogether perfect and pure.”⁴⁰⁶

So, how do we demonstrate that we have understood the Buddha’s — or Christ’s — teachings? By being compassionate, by loving our neighbors, by loving our enemies, indeed by working for the weal of humankind, for the welfare of the many, for the happiness of the many, for the good, well-being, and happiness of gods and men.

As 1 Corinthians reminds us, “Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.” The important thing is our doing.

Compassion is our wisdom in action. Therefore, with courage, and together, may we begin to act.