

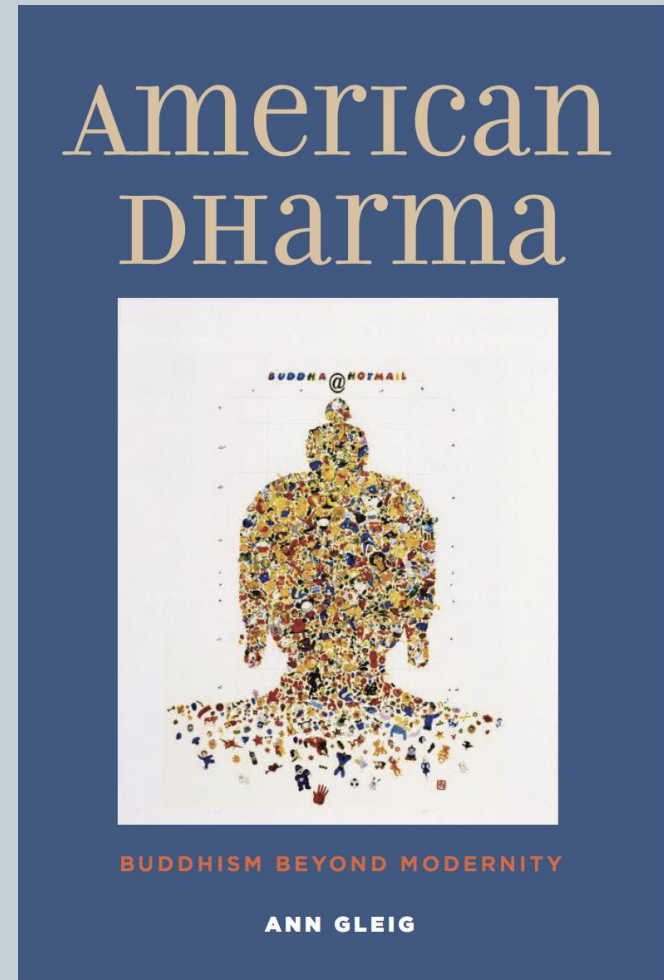
# Undoing Whiteness in American Buddhist Modernism



What makes racial justice work Buddhist?

# Wider Project

- *American Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Modernity* (Yale University Press, 2019)
- Series of ethnographic case studies of American “convert” Buddhism
- Chapter 6: “Dukkha of Racism” racial justice in the Insight community
- Current developments cannot be contained in the framework of Buddhist modernism
- George Yancy & Emily McRae (eds.) *Buddhism and Whiteness* (Lexington, forthcoming)



# Presentation Outline



- I. What is “whiteness”?
- II. Buddhism Modernism from Asia to North America
- III. Key areas of racial justice work by Buddhists of Color
- IV. *What makes racial justice work Buddhist?* Two case studies: Zenju Earthlyn Manuel and Larry Yang
- V. Conclusion: Critical, Contextual and Collective Turns in American Buddhism

# I: What is Whiteness?



**AND HOW IS IS AMPLIFIED THROUGH  
INDIVIDUALISM, UNIVERSALISM &  
LIBERALISM?**



# Critical Whiteness Studies

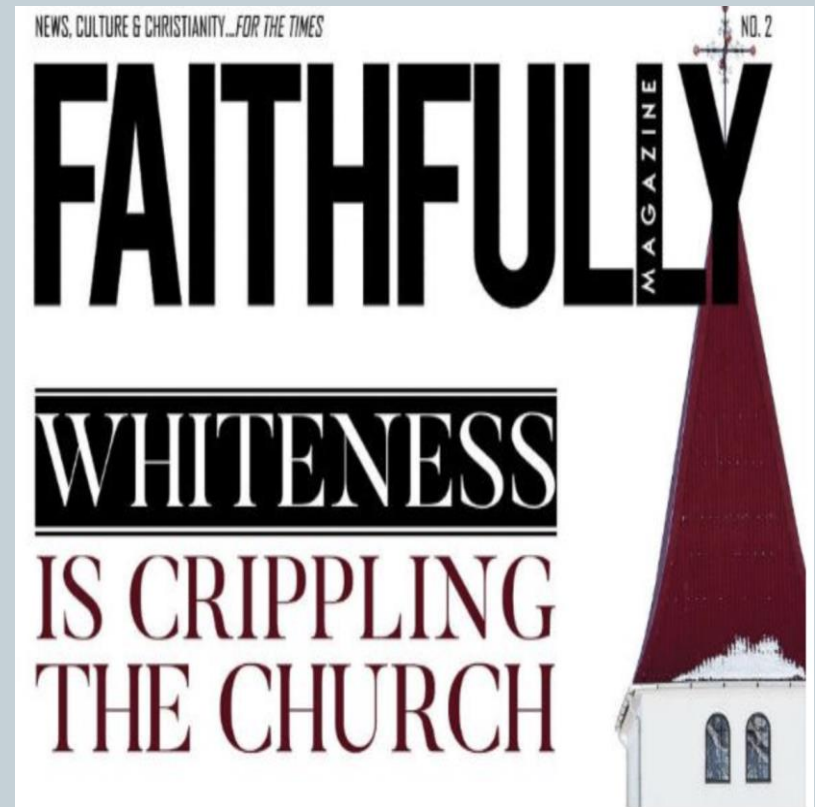


- (i) the Jim Crow era of white supremacy has been replaced by a subtler legitimation of structural dominance
- (ii) the maintenance of white Anglo-American identity and culture as universal, normative, and dominant
- (iii) the “taken-for-grantedness” of white power
- (iv) the hidden nature of white identity or what has been called “color-blindness
- (v) emphasizes the systematic marginalization, erasure & oppression of people of color rather than individual racist actions or bias

How is whiteness maintained and reproduced through modern values of individualism and universalism and how are such principles amplified by religious commitments ?

# Whiteness in Christian Evangelicalism

- Emerson & Smith (2002) show how evangelicals uncompromising adherence to *individualist, meritocratic anti-structural ideals* prevents effective responses to structural racism.
- Racism is essentially viewed as an *individual problem* to be solved with better interpersonal relationship with God and neighbor.





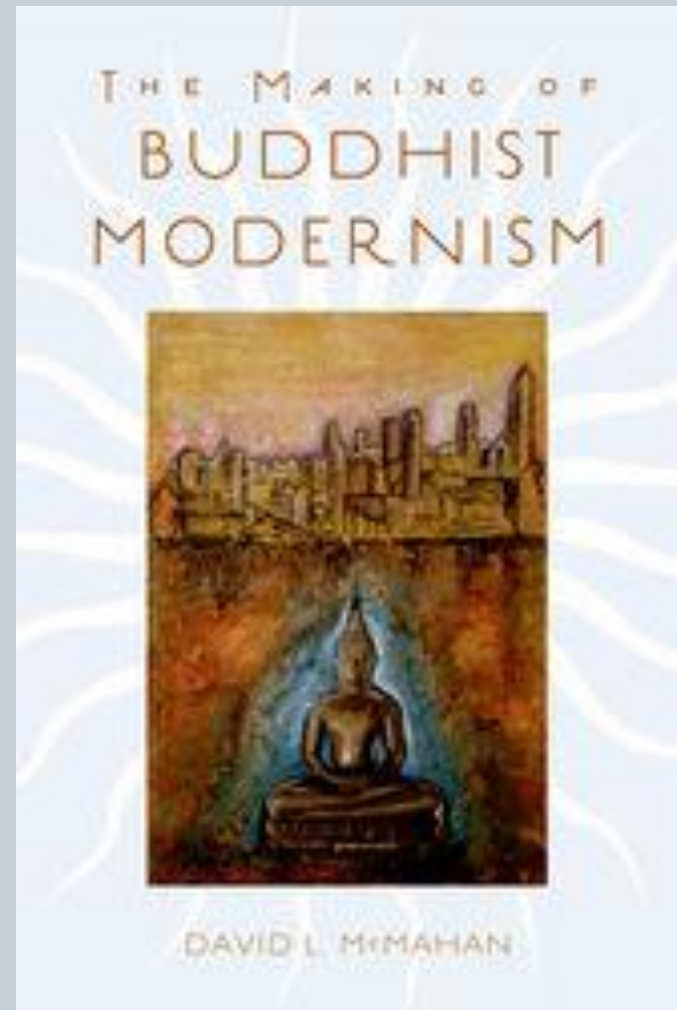
How do Buddhist modernist characteristics—particularly the focus on individual meditation practice, the distinction between “essential” and “cultural” Buddhism, and the presentation of Dharma as ‘universal’—intersect with whiteness?

# II: Buddhist Modernism from Asia to North America



# Buddhist Modernism

- “This new form of Buddhism has been fashioned by modernizing Asian Buddhists and Westerners deeply engaged in creating a Buddhist response to the dominant questions and responses to modernity.”
- (McMahan, 4-5)



# Common Characteristics of Buddhism modernism



- 1. a claim to return to the “original,” “pure” and “authentic” teachings of the Buddha
- 2. a framing of Buddhism as a rational and empirical religion aligned with science
- 3. a rejection of the traditional Theravadan separation of the mundane and supermundane levels
- 4. a revival of meditation practice and a claim that Nibbana is an attainable goal in this lifetime for not only monastics but also the laity
- 5. an interest in social reform issues such as gender equality.

# Zen and Buddhist Modernism



- Modernist reformation in Meiji (1868-1912) period
- “New School” claimed Buddhism had become corrupt due to cultural accretions
- Presented a form of Buddhism that was rational, empirical, and compatible with science and social reform.
- Zen as “pure experience”
- Focused on Zen meditation rather than its scholarly and ritualistic elements

What happens when Asian Buddhist modernist features are adopted and re-articulated in a white dominant cultural context marked by an ongoing legacy of racial discrimination (i.e. the United States)?

# Slippage between Cultural and Racial Re-Articulation



## Cultural Re-Articulation

- “a way of representing religious tradition from another's culture into ideas and practices that are familiar and meaningful to people of one's own culture.”

## Racial Re-Articulation

- “the acquisition of the beliefs and practices of another's religious tradition and infusing them with new meanings derived from one's own culture in ways that preserve the prevailing system of racial hegemony.”

# World Parliament of Religion (1893)



**Anagarika Dharmapala  
(1864-1933)**



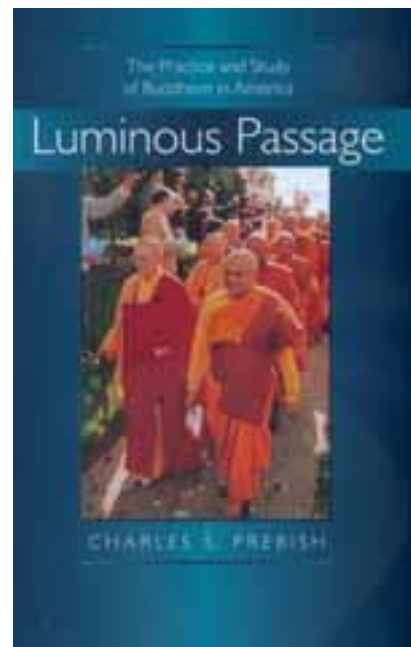
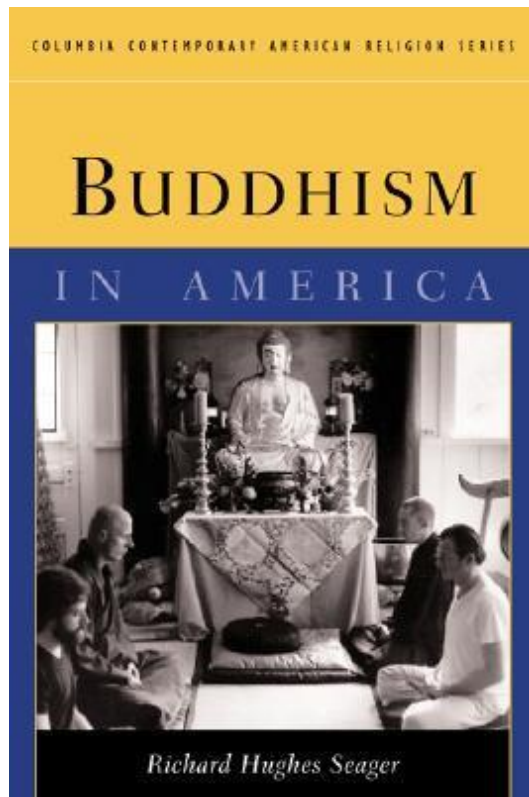
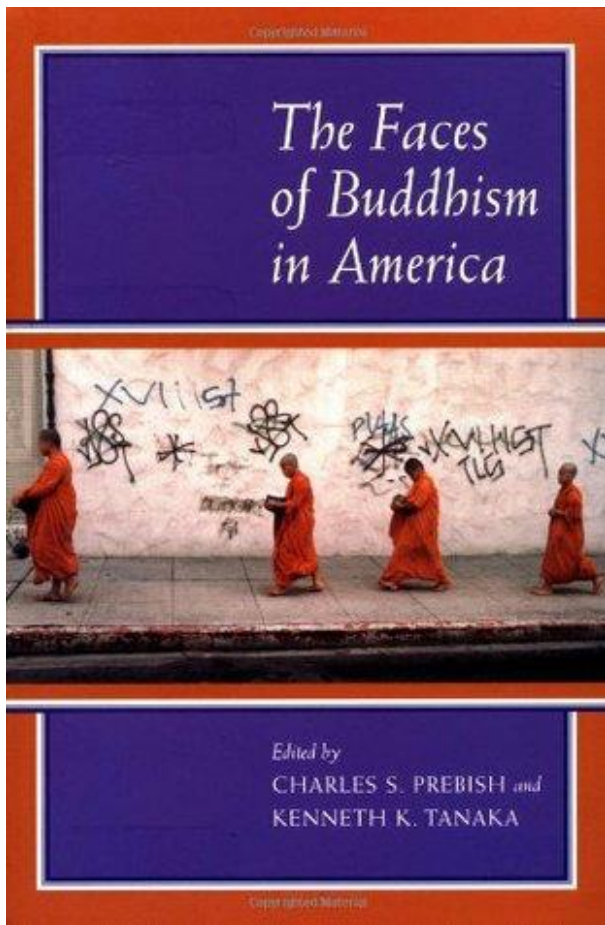
**Shaku Soen (1859-1919)**





# Boomer Buddhism





# Buddhist Modernism in North America: Common Characteristics



- Strong focus on meditation practice
- Downplaying of the cosmological and ritual elements
- Pragmatic and psychologically oriented
- Individualistic with participants showing little interest in community building.
- Overwhelming white, middle to upper-middle class, highly educated, politically liberal demographic
- Increase in female teachers but little racial or class diversity

# III: Challenges to Whiteness in American Buddhist Modernism



**KEY AREAS OF RACIAL JUSTICE WORK BY  
BUDDHISTS OF COLOR AND THEIR WHITE  
ALLIES**

## **Making the Invisible Visible—Healing Racism in Our Buddhist Communities**

### **Introduction to the first edition**

For many years there has been a movement to shine the light of awareness on the difficulties encountered by people of color as they try to participate in our Western Buddhist Sanghas. In many ways and with varying degrees of success People of Color and their European American allies have been trying to get the attention of the teachers and sangha members in order to face the underlying racism in our society at large and its manifestation within our Sanghas. This booklet, being offered to the "Buddhist Teachers in the West" conference from June 20- 24, 2000, is another step in that ongoing process.



# 1. Awareness through forums and literature



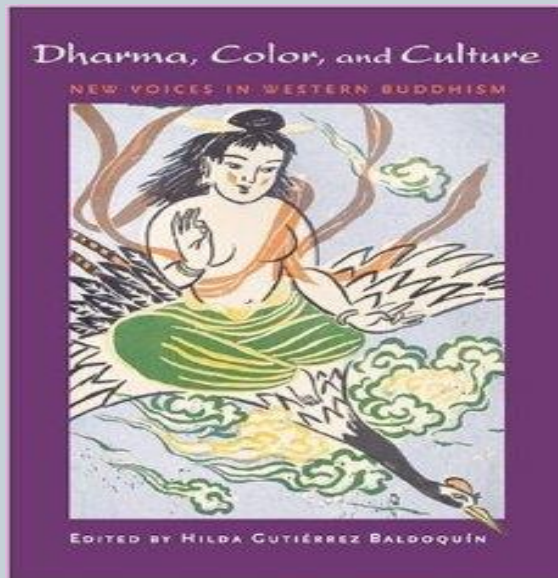
FORUM

LARRY YANG • AMANDA RIVERA • ANGEL KYODO WILLIAMS • BOB AGOLIA

## Why Is American Buddhism So White?

Our panel looks at the problem of "whiteness" in American Buddhism and what can be done—and in some cases is being done—to make it more diverse.

INTRODUCTION BY CHARLES JOHNSON



THE DALAI LAMA ON THE ESSENCE OF DZOGCHEN • BUDDHIST APPS • THE LAST WORD OF ZEN

# Buddhadharma

THE PRACTITIONER'S QUARTERLY

SUMMER 2016

## FREE THE DHARMA

### RACE, POWER, AND WHITE PRIVILEGE IN AMERICAN BUDDHISM

angel kyodo williams | Ruth King  
Tara Brach | Chenxing Han | Greg Snyder

## 2. People Of Color (POC) specific events

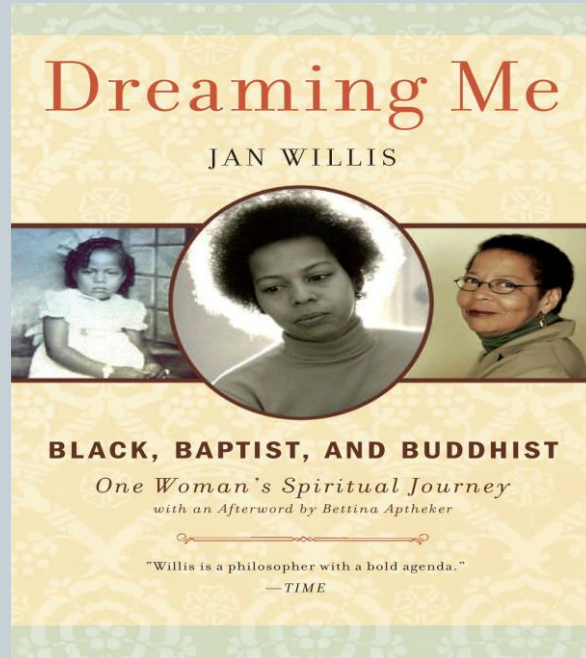


. . . just to talk about “them” and “us” and “white people” and “people of color” is painful . . . But in this retreat full of people of color, I felt an incredible joy and glory in myself being a person of color; it was profound and healing.

### **POC SANGHA Meets EVERY THURSDAY**

We come together as a community of people of color for meditation, practice and resilience, to support the struggle and provide a balm to sooth our continued work forward. Bell Hooks says, *“Beloved community is formed not by the eradication of difference but by its affirmation, by each of us claiming the identities and cultural legacies that shape who we are and how we live in the world.”*

# 3. Impact of POC teachers





## 4. Impact Of Inclusive Communities



East Bay  
Meditation Center

Program Book



**BELIEFS**

*Finding Path to Inclusion  
Through Exclusion at an  
Oakland Meditation Center*



## 5. Impact of non-sectarian Buddhist organizations



## 6. Institutional diversity and inclusion and anti-racist initiatives



### Major initiatives

- :: IMS's diversity and inclusion work is Board-led, guided by the Diversity Committee. An initial step was to increase the number of people of color serving on our Board. Today, one third of Board members self-identify as people of color, and three as LGBTIQ.
- :: We continue to invest significant financial resources in diversity and inclusion workshops for Board and staff, to increase individual and collective understanding of racism, white privilege, microaggressions, internalized racial oppression, homophobia and transphobia, gender identity and bias, as well as other prejudices, and how these manifest in ourselves, our organization and our communities.
- :: To raise awareness among our predominantly white visiting faculty, IMS's Guiding Teachers provide a variety of resources and information on racism and gender issues.
- :: To bring greater diversity and equity into IMS's teacher body, a four-year teacher training program is underway, with 75% of the trainees being people of color. On graduation in 2021, this new cohort of teachers will carry their collective wisdom of varied life experiences and perspectives into insight meditation communities throughout the world.
- :: An article on diversity and inclusion is part of each issue of our internal e-bulletin and our e-publication *Sangha News*, sent to our wider community.
- :: IMS offers several annual retreats for marginalized groups – people of color, our LGBTIQ community, and women (cis, trans and genderqueer).
- :: To reduce the financial burden, we provide financial assistance for people of color retreatants to undertake short and longer-term practice, essential for ensuring more diverse leadership into the future.
- :: IMS reserves a number of spaces in all retreats for people of color, providing greater accessibility.
- :: IMS regularly engages in personal conversations with our POC and LGBTIQ retreatants, teachers and Board, so the organization can learn from and deepen the capacity to respond to feedback. A diversity survey is offered to every retreatant.



# 7. Teacher training initiatives



<https://www.lionsroar.com/training-the-buddhist-leaders-of-tomorrow/>

## 7. Buddhist teachings & practices to combat racism



# Race and Dharma:

## Waking Up in the Racialized World Around You

This new 8-week online course explores how the liberating teachings of the Buddha relate to the contemporary social issue of race. The facilitating teacher team of JoAnna Hardy, Sebene Selassie, Erin Treat, and Brian Lesage examines how the dharma can be applied to cultural separation and oppression.

How can we wake up from the delusion of not seeing racism, internalized oppression and unconscious bias? How do these patterns relate to the five aggregates of experience, and what are the connections between social realities and emptiness?

The curriculum is comprised of carefully chosen content that is evenly balanced between issues of race and identity, and the dharma.

# 7. White Awake Buddhist groups



## Brooklyn Zen Center

## New York Insight

### undoing whiteness and oppression



#### Undoing Whiteness and Oppression

Meets on the 1st or 2nd Saturday of every month, from 1:30–3:30pm, at BZC. Please see the BZC UWO program meeting dates below and check the [BZC Calendar](#) for the latest information on meeting dates. **Please note that the group will NOT be meeting in August.**

Upcoming meeting dates: September 8, October 13, November 10 and December 1.

This is a monthly group of Zen practitioners who identify or are identified as white to explore the racial construct of whiteness, how we grasp the identity and the privilege integral to it, and how we might divest from these entanglements so we are freed to skillfully address the pain and suffering caused by them.

- Would you like to become part of a supportive learning community of white practitioners exploring racism in the context of Buddha Dharma?
- Do you want to deepen your understanding of Buddhist teachings on suffering, oppression and liberation?
- Do you want to gain insight into the suffering that arises from our racial conditioning as white people in this society?
- Would you be interested in exploring how to act on insights arising from this investigation, exploring together ways of transforming our own white racial conditioning?

White Awake-NY1 is a 6-session course, meeting from September through November, that will explore these questions. The course will focus on deepening personal awareness and understanding of race and the role it plays in our lives and in society. Through gathering to practice, study, examine, and learn within community, we will gain insight into how systems of racism and privilege operate, and ways we can skillfully support change.

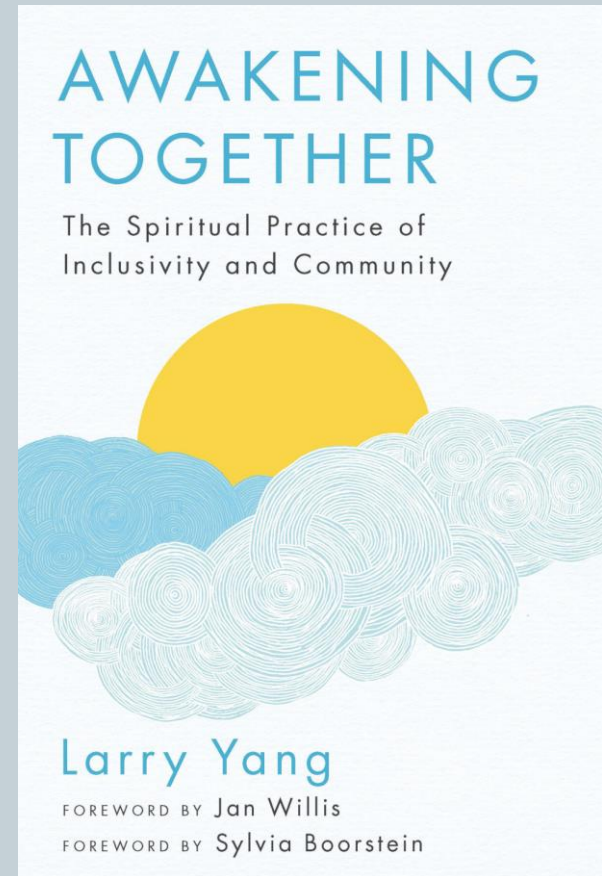
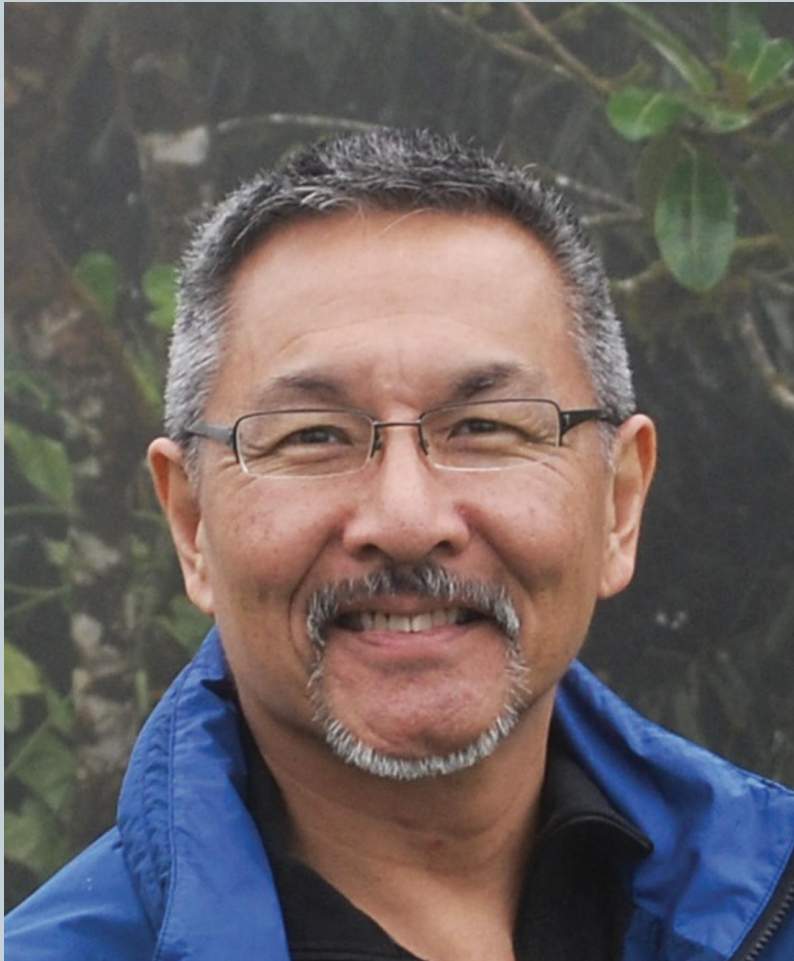
# What Makes Racial Justice Work Buddhist?



**TWO CASE STUDIES: LARRY YANG & ZENJU  
EARTHLYN MANUEL**



# Larry Yang: Dharma as Culture and Community





## “Multicultural hermeneutics of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha”



- 1. Buddhism has *always been* shaped by and taught through specific cultural contexts.
  - 2. Euro-American sanghas did not reproduce Asian American sanghas but created their own culturally congruent communities
  - 3. Culture is not transcended through practice; it must be acknowledged
- “Monastics, the word of the Buddha is not to be rendered into classical metre. Whoever does so commits an offence of wrongdoing. I allow the words of the Buddha to be learnt in one's own language.”

# “Cultural Unconsciousness”

- Overwhelming demographic whiteness of meditation-based convert communities
  - 300 Insight teachers only 11 self-identify as POC
  - Marked by slippage between “white experience” and “universal experience”
  - Critique groups that explicitly embrace cultural difference
  - Not recognizing cultural particularity is a misunderstanding of the Two Truths doctrine
- “All I could focus on was that I was the only person of color out of about 100 people— and how awkward, lonely, and even unsafe I felt. Of course, my experience was partially due to my own psychological conditioning at the time (itself socially influenced), but it was also due to the external conditions of how the teachings, teachers, community, and organization had manifested.”

# Two Truths



- (1) Must affirm the reality of *both* universal oneness *and* relative difference
  - (2) Can't use absolute truth to bypass relative truth
  - (3) American Buddhist have tended to use ontological interdependence as a way to avoid tackling the pain of relative difference
- “Sometimes people put a stress on oneness, but this is not our understanding. We do not emphasize any point in particular, even oneness. Oneness is valuable, but variety is also wonderful. Ignoring variety, people emphasize the one absolute existence, but this is a one-sided understanding”
  - Shunryu Suzuki quoted in Yang (2017:65).

# Cultural Upaya

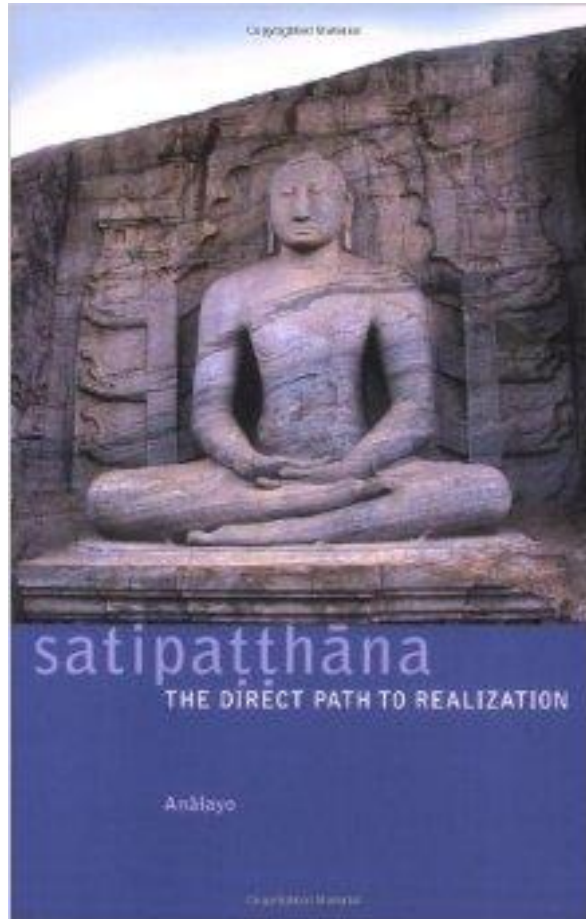


- “An example of skillful cultural means within the context of mainstream Western Buddhist practice is the experience of silence. The container of meditative silence has become a highly-respected format, treasured and revered. It is called “noble silence.” Unquestionably, the nobility of silence is not only beautiful but allows us to explore our lives beyond the chatter both external and internal. However, if we honor the sense of a larger sangha, the practice of silence should not occur without a broader awareness that for some communities, and in some cultural contexts, silence can become repressive, especially when one is new to this form of spiritual practice. It does not take much for people who have been continually discriminated against or who have been injured repeatedly to feel that the silence itself is oppressive.”

# Dharma as Sangha



- (1) Insight community has placed too much emphasis on individual meditation practice
  - (2) Sangha reflects dependent origination—interdependence
  - (3) Sangha reframed as “beloved community”
  - (4) Shift from individual to collective liberation
- “The Buddha was always precise in his guidance and he elevated community as one of the three most important aspects of our spiritual life in the teachings of the Three Refuges. He did not do this just to pay obligatory lip service to the collective aspect of our spiritual journey. He was inviting us to explore, as deeply as meditation itself, what it means to awaken together in community. He was inviting us to explore community as a practice of meditation or cultivation”

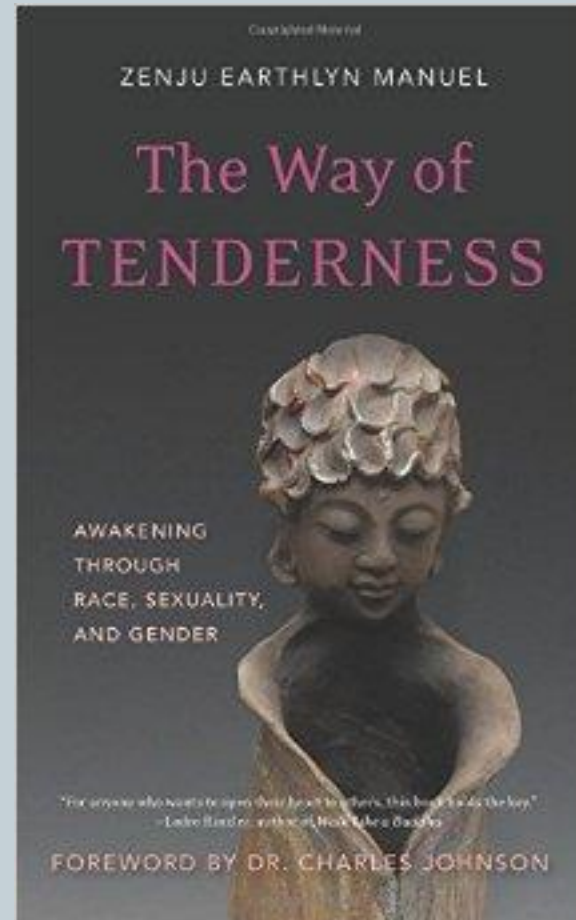


“According to the *Abidhamma* and the commentarial interpretation, “internal” and “external” satipaṭṭhāna encompasses phenomena arising in oneself and in others. In this way, proper practice of satipaṭṭhāna would also include awareness of the subjective experience of others.”

p.95



# Zenju Earthlyn Manuel: Dharma as Embodied Difference



# Two Truths



- “When I was taught Buddha’s Two Truths, I heard the choir sing hallelujah. There are two basic truths in regards to the nature of life—the relative and the absolute. These teachings are vast, but briefly, the relative is that which you can sense about life—what you see, taste, smell, etc. While the absolute nature of life goes beyond those senses, seeing into the true nature that we cannot touch or see. So, the tension between the two is inherent in our existence. We can find ourselves holding to the relative and not the absolute or vice versa. When I can be African or descended from Africans and be awakened to life, be Buddha within my darkness, the tension dissolves. With Buddha’s teachings of the Two Truths, I returned to that expansive way of seeing myself before I was told that I could not go to a particular place because I was black. I returned to that original moment when I was born free from the hatred placed on darkness and on dark things and dark people”



# Misuse of Buddhist teachings



- 1. No-Self and Non-Duality used to dismiss discussions around identity
  - 2. Identity is a lived experience not just a label that can be conveniently dropped
  - 3. Dismissal of identity is traumatic for marginalized people and maintains social power structures
  - 4. Conflation of universal with whiteness
- “Some suggested that if I “just dropped the labels” I would “be liberated.” Some said, “We are delusional; there is no self.” Others said, “We are attached to some idea of ourselves.” If I could “just let go of being this and that, my life would be freed from pain.” I thought for a time that perhaps I was holding on to my identity too tightly. Perhaps, I thought, if I “empty” my mind the pain in my heart will dissolve. What I found is that flat, simplified, and diluted ideas could not shake me from my pain. I needed to bring the validity of my unique, individual, and collective background to the practice of Dharma. “I am not invisible!” I wanted to shout.”

# From a Transcendent to an Embodied Awakening



- “It is a misinterpretation to suppose that attending to the fires of our existence cannot lead us to experience the waters of peace. Profundity in fact resides in what we see in the world. Spiritual awakening arrives from our ordinary lives, our everyday struggles with each other. It may even erupt from the fear and rage that we tiptoe around. The challenges of race, sexuality, and gender are the very things that the spiritual path to awakening requires us to tend to”

# Collective Dukkha



- “After about two years of chanting with this pain, I realized that the suffering I felt was part of a much broader suffering in the world. It was not mine but a suffering that existed before my birth. I recognized that I felt separate from the rest of the world, that I did not belong, and that I was not an acceptable part of the dominant culture because I was so different from the majority in terms of my appearance. The world had structured itself around appearance. The way in which I was perceived and treated depended on a structure of race, sexuality, gender, and class. The perverse power of these structures made my embodiment unacceptable to others and myself. As a result, I was paralyzed by feelings of isolation in my younger days.”

# “Cultural Sanctuaries”



- “I feel it is crucial to support other kinds of Buddhist communities that will be created by folks from different cultures. Instead of re-shaping what has already been done, allow for something new to be constructed and not worry about whether it is too far from the root or not. We have already gone a long way from Buddha’s days. If new relations look and sound different, existing western Buddhist communities must be willing to open to that difference rather than saying, “This is how we do it.” If not, what is different will disappear and what is left is the same.
- “Difference and Harmony.”



## Buddhism as an Earth Practice



[http://blogs.sfzc.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/zenju\\_shusoartwork5-300x210.jpg](http://blogs.sfzc.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/zenju_shusoartwork5-300x210.jpg)

# Core Principles of Buddhist Racial Hermeneutics



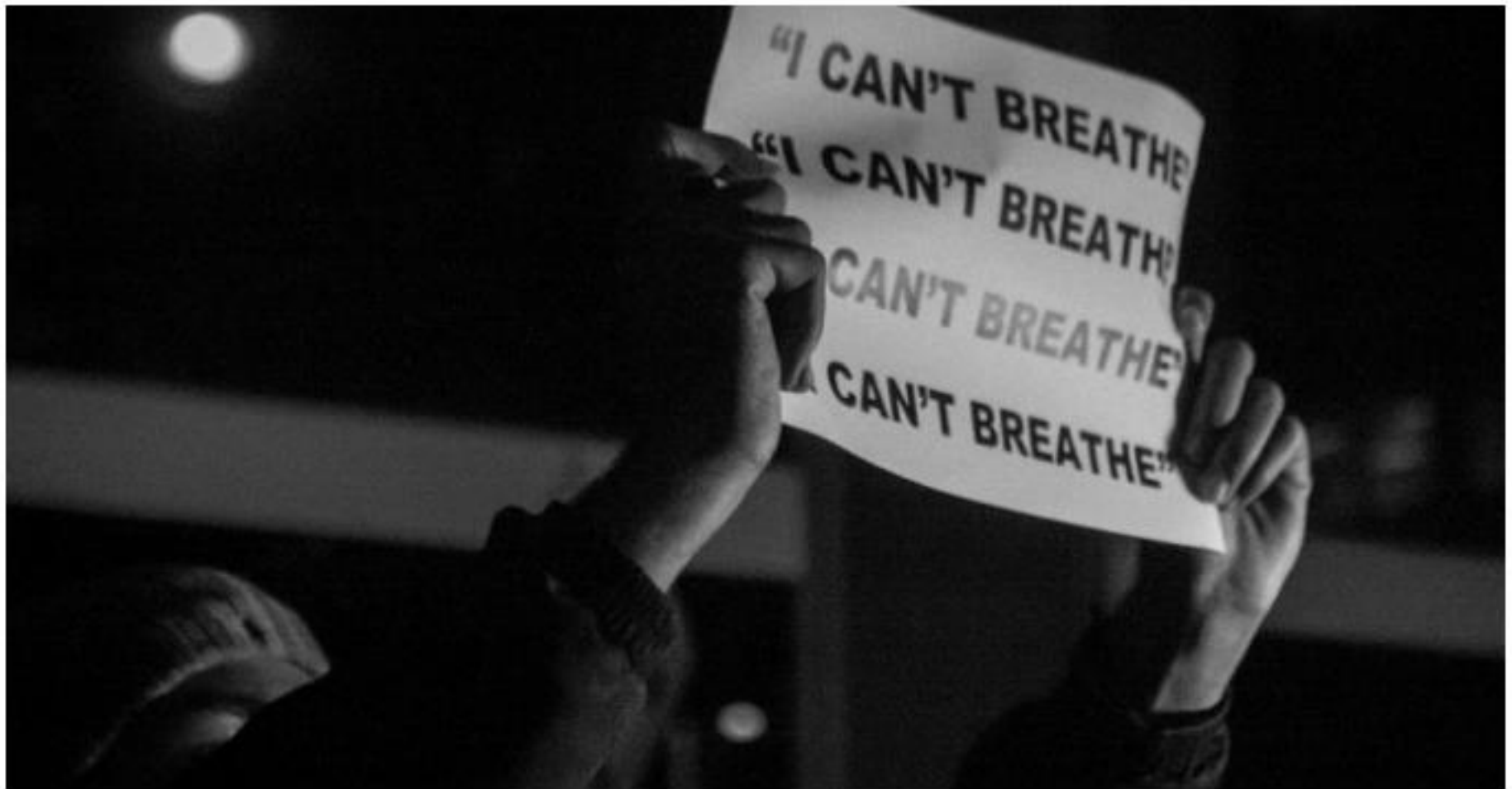
- Racism is a form of *dukkha*
- Two Truths doctrine: can't bypass the relative
- Three poisons are structural as well as individual
- Affirmation of sangha
- Collective karma
- Collective liberation
- Anger as a wisdom energy
- Utilization of meditation practices to pierce socio-cultural conditioning
- Bodhisattva vow to save *all* sentient beings
- Buddha-nature—basic goodness of *all* sentient being
- Embodied rather than transcendent awakening



# Do Bodhisattvas get Angry? A Response to the Killing of Eric Garner.



Via Rev. M. Jamil Scott  
on Dec 5, 2014



# Conclusion



**CRITICAL, CONTEXTUAL & COLLECTIVE  
TURNS**



# Critical Turn



- Refers to a growing acknowledgement amongst participants of certain limitations within their communities such as a lack of racial and socio-economic diversity and the problematic ways in which Western ethnocentrism has discarded certain aspects of traditional Asian Buddhist practices such as devotional and communal elements.

# Contextual Turn



- Refers to the fact that practitioners are increasingly aware of how the specific social and cultural contexts in which Buddhist practice occurs shapes and limits it, particularly in regards to issues of power and privilege.

# Collective Turn



- Refers to multiple challenges to the individualism of meditation-based convert Buddhism ranging from efforts to build more inclusive sanghas to the application of Buddhist principles and practices to the collective *dukkha* caused by systems of oppression such as racism and capitalism

# beyond Buddhist Modernism



## Modernist Characteristics

- Universalism
- “Essential” / “Cultural” Buddhism
- Liberal
- Individualistic

## Post-modern/Post-colonial characteristics

- Cultural Particularity
- *All* forms of Buddhism are cultural
- Progressive
- Collective

“America’s unique stamp on and responsibility to Buddhism lies in the culture’s capacity to formulate a practice of dharma that transcends boundaries of race, class, gender, and sexuality. One of the things that all human beings fiercely cling to is sameness. Our individual identities are falsely wrapped up in and reinforced by relations to people that are the same as us. We’ve been taught to resist difference, to resist change. Buddhism teaches us that resistance to positive change comes from our habits and patterns. **But never has Buddhism been practiced in such a widely divergent culture. We have the rare opportunity to actualize the Buddhadharma in a way that truly incorporates diversity and recognizes our basic equality.**”

-Rev. Angel Kyodo *Being Black: Zen and the Art of Living with Fearlessness*

# Collective Karma & Liberation



## Canonical Buddhism

- In Mahayana, there is no philosophical notion of collective karma only similar individual karmas
- In Mahayana, the 30 Verses and 20 Verses from the Yogacara tradition address this.
- Vasubandhu, commentary *Abhidharma-kośa-bhāṣya* trans Pruden (p. 551; 649)
- Luk's translation of the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra* (p. 49-52)
- Justin Ritzinger work on collective liberation in the thought of Taixu (1890-1947) & modern Chinese Pure Land
- Sri Lankan reactions to the tsunami discusses *Jataka* sources for Theravada.
- Jonathan Waters “Communal Karma and Karmic Community in Theravada Buddhist History,” in *Constituting Communities* ed. Holt, Kinnard & Walters

## Lived Asian Buddhism

- “Chinese Buddhists use the concept of “shared karma” (yuanfen 緣分) to explain things such as love at first sight... Not “collective” but seems to assert that two or more persons' karma can actually become intertwined in some way.”
- “I’ve heard the phrase (in English) “collective karma” used amongst Tibetan diaspora in South Asia as well as Tibetan Buddhists from elsewhere (SE Asia, America, Europe, etc.) to explain the plight of the Tibetan people,
- “My experience in Taiwan, in contrast, would have me suggest that Buddhists there tend to think in terms of “conditions” (yuan 緣), specifically being “bound together” (jie yuan 結緣), but this is used to generally explain positive experiences, or to express the hope that the conditions we establish today result in collective well-being. Hence, aspiring bodhisattvas create the karmic conditions together for everyone to have the optimal circumstances for liberation (or to build the Pure Land on Earth).”
-

# Discussion Question



- The affective dimensions of these topics: identifying discomfort, fragility, defensiveness.
- Does American Zen practice and culture help or hinder racial justice work?
- Tackling concerns that this work is a progressive “take-over” of Buddhism.
- What does it mean to have a "welcoming" center? Considering location, demographic make-up ect.
- What is the difference between diversity (as assimilation) and equity?
- What are the pragmatic steps to building equitable sanghas?