THE NECESSITY OF INCLUDING EMBODIMENT & LINEAGE IN RACIAL JUSTICE WORK
The Arrow explores the relationship between contemplative practice, politics, and activism. We investigate topics in politics, economics, ecology, conflict transformation, and the social sciences. Inspired by the vision of meditation master Chögyam Trungpa for a “union of social life and spiritual wakefulness” in society, The Arrow provides a critical and much needed space for investigating the meeting point of contemplative wisdom and pressing issues of climate change, racism, inequality, and conflict.
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Chief Editor's Introduction

In her feature essay in this issue of *The Arrow*, guest editor Kelsey Blackwell observes that “racism is about bodies. It’s a reality that can be tasted, seen, and felt.” The following collection of essays, poems, and visual art speak to this truth in many ways, each lighting portions of a path toward awareness, healing, and justice.

We often speak of racism as systems, structures, institutions, policies, and cultures. Many brilliant minds have analyzed and proposed solutions to the injustice of these systems, and yet, in Ta-Nehisi Coates’ words, the violent, “visceral experience” of racism persists in landing on the body. This issue asserts that if we aspire to a more just, inclusive, equitable society, we must come into tangible, somatic consciousness of our diverse, embodied, personal experiences of the system of racist colonialism and its historical legacy. Indeed, we will not make much progress on racial justice—or any other area of social and environmental justice—if we do not involve present-moment awareness of our own and other bodies, and the knowledge of where these bodies come from. Incorporating embodied awareness and understanding of lineage is crucial for our collective liberation, as the essays in this issue articulate so well, and as the poems, photos, and illustrations so powerfully evoke.

It has been a pleasure and delight to work with Kelsey Blackwell on this issue for *The Arrow*. Over the past few years, the essays that Kelsey has written for *The Arrow* have been some of the most widely read and appreciated among our published material, stimulating fruitful dialogue among readers in contemplative communities, activist spaces, and beyond. Publishing an entire issue that arises from Kelsey’s creativity, thoughtfulness, and daring spirit, therefore, is incredibly exciting. I am also thrilled that this issue includes poetry for the first time in *The Arrow*’s history as a publication, which Kelsey proposed as a way for the issue to enact its assertions. The poems, along with the artistic photos and illustrations, arouse my present-moment feeling and enrich my experience of reading the essays. Together, the contributions featured in this collection create a dance of sensation, reflection, and insight that I hope will nourish and stimulate your body and mind.

A brief note on capitalization: Following the guidance of numerous writers and other reputable sources, when referring to people we have chosen to capitalize “Black” and “Indigenous,” as one would “Asian” or “European,” but not looser designations like “white,” “brown,” or “people of color.” When used as an adjective to describe traditions, practices, or wisdom, we do not capitalize “indigenous.”

A heartfelt thank you to Kelsey for her vision and editing of this issue, to *The Arrow*’s Creative Director Alicia Brown for her vibrant illustrations, and to the issue’s contributors for their wisdom and exertion. Enjoy reading!

Gabriel Dayley, Chief Editor, *The Arrow Journal*
Guest Editor’s Introduction

When I was invited to guest edit this special issue of The Arrow Journal, I felt a quiver of excitement through my body as we discussed the potential. I also had many questions. Could we meaningfully address topics that loom so large as embodiment, racial justice, and spiritual practice? How might they be examined in their intertwined reality, rather than simply side by side? Most importantly: Given that this issue is about the body, could we invite readers into an embodied rather than cerebral exploration of these topics through the page?

This last question, I believe we can tackle immediately. After you read these words, take a deep breath, let it out with a sigh, and place your attention on your body. What do you feel? Which areas of your body are cooler? Which are warmer? Can you sense places of opening and constriction? What natural movement is present? Before making sense of what you’re feeling, can you simply be with the sensations? This is what it means to be embodied. If you take nothing more from this issue, you’ve received the most essential. If you decide to go further and dive into the poems and essays that follow (and I highly suggest you do), you’re in for a sensorial treat.

The authors featured within share their insight and reflections with tenderness, humor, and fierce vulnerability. Reading their words is enlivening. I felt the strength of my legs in reading Mushim Ikeda’s description of the vibrant yellow apple tree that distributes fruit to hundreds of school children every autumn in the Spirit of the Valley garden. I felt the steady thump of my heart when learning about Arisika Razak’s practice of midwifery as an embodiment of the sacred in sexuality, pregnancy, and childbirth. I noticed my throat tighten and my temples heat while reading Alexandria Barnes’ frustration at her family’s erasure of her Greek heritage in exchange for the benefits of whiteness. I took a deep exhale as K.T. Tierney so eloquently reminds us that undoing the fallacy of whiteness requires that those who most benefit from this racial construct do the heaviest lifting towards its demise.

In writing my own essay, I was driven by a surge of energy—a fire that I suspect will warm some and intimidate or anger others. Not only does the work of racial justice require including the body, but also I believe the undoing of any oppressive system demands this wisdom. While these violent ideologies are forged by minds, the body is forged by feeling, connection, and the sacred—relationships that if not lost are rarely centered in our institutions and places of business. Arawana Hayashi grounds this assertion with an embodied practice that invites us to feel right now. I hope you’ll find 20 minutes to give it a try. Moving the body just how it wants is an essential practice with ripples of potential for personal and collective benefit. It’s hard to imagine this compilation without the magic of Alicia Brown’s evocative illustrations bringing it to life. The lively color and movement they evoke makes the experience of this issue a visual delight.
Since feeling deeply requires touching the ineffable, we invited The Arrow’s first poetry submissions. These contributions’ use of language effectively evades capture by cerebral thought. Indeed, simply reading the titles of these submissions, “Black Boys,” “Borders,” “I’ll Meet You There,” “How to Love a Mestiza Woman,” arouses a constellation of feelings. The issue closes with a powerful photo essay accompanied by poetry from The Embodiment Project. Artistic Director Nicole Klaymoon’s words seemingly punctuate the felt but difficult to intellectualize trauma of existing within oppressive systems that erase our cultural heritages. The power in these images and words make clear that though we may have forgotten a wisdom that could provide a way out, reconnecting with these truths requires only surrendering to the deep knowing that resides in all of us.

May this collection move you. More than words and images that yield ideas, may this creative effort be a portal to touching what is stirred in your own body. May it be a drop that ripples in our collective intelligence towards embodying in this present moment the better world we all know is possible.

I want to offer appreciation to the writers and poets featured in this issue. Reading your work has been an honor. Thank you for believing in the importance of this topic, graciously sharing your gifts, and trusting me to represent your work accurately. Thank you also to my friend and co-editor Gabe Dayley for expanding this vision from a short article to an entire issue, for your kind and deft feedback, and for your generous pursuit to lift up voices for social change. Thank you also to the readers of this issue for taking your time, for breathing, and for being with the fullness of your embodied experience as much as you are able. I believe that this alone—this revolutionary act—is enough.

With gratitude,
Kelsey Blackwell, Guest Editor
Black Boys

by VERNON KEEVE III

Black boys play outside and are told to bathe and change before sitting at the table for dinner with their families. Black boys get shaken awake by mothers to get ready for school on gray cold mornings. Black boys wait—in colorful coats, bright backpacks (black boys love purple but are taught it’s a girl’s color, so we hide it in blue)—black boys wait for autumnal shaded school buses.

Black boys trade Magic and Pokémon cards in the library before the school bell sounds. Black boys run to class, afraid of tardies—and the mamas who will find out.

Black boys play video games, because freeway-induced asthma chokes them from basketball courts and football fields. Black boys ignore tight chests up and down courts and endure.

Black boys die from broken hearts.

Black boys love their black teachers and smile and get excited when they see them outside of the school building—those “I know your Mama and Daddy” teachers, those “see them in church on Sunday” teachers.

Black boys want pets: dogs, cats, and rabbits to pet. Black boys want reptiles and amphibians and birds,

‘cuz black boys want wings.

Black boys praise God. Black boys sing in the choir.
Black boys get in trouble for bad grades. Black boys dream. Black boys run with outstretched arms still praying for the flight that was never given to Bigger Thomas.

‘cuz black boys want wings.

Black boys feel the pain of their dying mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers.

Black boys think they won’t live to become men.

Black boys will be boys, who hope to become men, who learn like everyone else what is the difference between wrong and right.

Black boys need chances.

Black boys camp. Black boys hunt. Black boys fish. Black boys cry when they watch *The Fox and the Hound*.

Black boys draw pictures in crayon worthy of your refrigerator. Black boys want to write—write raps—write rhymes—write poetry.

Black boys want to—and deserve to—tell their own stories.

Black boys fear the monsters in their closets and under their beds—and in the streets outside of their homes—fear those they should not fear.

Black boys cower. Black boys have nightmares. Black boys climb into their parents’ beds.

Black boys create. Black boys laugh. Black boys cry.

Black boys bleed.
Black boys breathe.
Black boys feel pain.
Black boys want to live.

But
Black boys die.
Black boys die.
Black boys die
more.

If you take any line from this poem to hold in your heart, please take this one: black boys, all black boys, want to live.

VERNON KEEVE III is a Virginia-born writer, and a California-crafted educator. His full-length collection of poetry, *Southern Migrant Mixtape*, is available through Nomadic Press, and received the 2019 PEN Oakland Josephine Miles Award.
by KELSEY BLACKWELL

Within this fathom-long body and mind is found all of the teachings.  
The Buddha

But all our phrasing—race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy—serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth. You must never look away from this. You must always remember that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body.”  
Ta-Nehisi Coates

YOU’VE BEEN INVITED to be part of a think tank to discuss how an organization that’s important to you can adjust its infrastructure, culture, and practices to be more equitable and racially inclusive. You arrive eager to begin the work of dismantling the structural racism that’s thwarting the organization’s potential for positive impact. At the first meeting, a woman of color you have not seen before steps up to lead the conversation. Notebooks are out and pens are in hand. You can almost hear the hum of action items to come, and you and your mostly white colleagues are ready. The stakes are high. If this team can’t get this right, it means losing more people. It means resources and a message you believe in won’t reach marginalized populations. It means your organization won’t be enriched by the voices of the diverse many. This must end. You can tackle this thing!

“You can put away your pens and notebooks,” the woman says. “We’ll begin this dialogue by being in our bodies.” You look around at
your colleagues. Some eagerly put their things away while others look
to each other with a quizzical glance. What thoughts run through your
What do you imagine happens next in the room?

I’ve been this woman of color in front of a mostly white audience
encouraging us to come into our bodies around racial justice work, and
here’s what I’ve experienced:

1. **Revolt.** The most empowered in the group challenge a decision
   (especially from an unknown woman of color) to start a serious
   conversation about structural racism with embodiment. The
   typical sentiment is some version of “we don’t have time for
   this.”

2. **Break time.** Participants decide it’s a good time for a break.
   People go and make phone calls, head outside for fresh air,
   or find a couch to nap on. Having been in previous meetings
   where embodiment practices were the fluff sandwiched be-
   tween the “real” meeting, this work is not seen as “the work.”

3. **Reluctant participation.** There’s a sense that if we’re going to
   take time away from the meeting for body stuff, then its use-
   fulness better be made apparent—and soon. The embodiment
   practices and their worthiness are judged using the cognitive,
   linear model that deems the worthiness of any idea in our soci-
   ety. If embodiment doesn’t square itself into this frame, or if we
   don’t immediately make connections to the task at hand that
   help us get to our goal, it is deemed a waste a time.

4. **Jumping In.** Some people eagerly jump in. I’m happy to say
   that in every space I’ve invited folks to be in their body, from
   corporate offices to Buddhist sanghas, there is always at least
   one person who seems eager to do so. Thank goddess for this,
   as it’s a reminder that embodied learners (who are often starved
   for this kind of teaching) show up in the most unexpected plac-

Does any of this sound familiar?

The thing is, racism is about bodies. It’s a reality that can be tasted,
seen, and felt. The restrictions to access to nutritious food and adequate
healthcare; the over-policing of low-income neighborhoods and profil-
ing of Black and brown bodies; the insecurity of being excluded from
voting booths, good schools, good jobs, “good” hair, property owner-
ship, business loans, media portrayals of success, and more all land,
as author Ta-Nehisi Coates has named, as physical and psychological blows to the body.

When we are witness to these actions, a pain is felt in the body. When we are perpetrators of oppression, our own pain is the genesis of our actions. As Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* reminds us, people who cause pain are in pain themselves. How is it possible, then, to undo the results of this dis-ease without first addressing the root? Not only is including the body essential in our work towards racial justice, it is the primary path forward.

Writes Resmaa Menakem, author of *My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*:

> For the past three decades, we’ve earnestly tried to address white-body supremacy in America with reason, principles, and ideas—using dialogue, forums, discussions, education and mental training. But the widespread destruction of Black bodies continues…. We’ve focused our efforts in the wrong direction. We’ve tried to teach our brains to think better about race. But white-body supremacy doesn’t live in our thinking brains. It lives and breathes in our bodies.

### Dis-Connection

Racism is about bodies, but as a bi-racial Black girl who grew up in Utah, this was not readily apparent to me. In truth, I hadn’t considered the physicality of discrimination in my own life until I devoured Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *Between the World and Me*, where this physicality is so honestly and vividly conveyed. As I read, I felt a curiosity arise in my own body. What was my physical experience of racism? The violence, ineffective schools, and codes of the streets that Coates describes of the Baltimore neighborhood of his youth was not my reality. I grew up in the suburbs. I was a cheerleader. Neighbors brought over bunts and peanut brittle during the holidays.

Seemingly buffered from the harshness of the hood, my ruminations on racism were nil. White privilege? My 14-year-old self had never considered such a thing. Plugged into the larger social consciousness of my white community, I often forgot I was Black. Race relations? No problems here! Everyone gets along. Everyone is white.

Except, we weren’t.
Racism didn’t show up in my white upper-middle class neighborhood the way it did for Coates. It was subtle, sneaky, and innocently sure of itself. It was the planted false rumors that the (only) other Black kid at my school and I had a crush on each other. It was being told with full conviction that I was on the Devil’s side. It was being asked if I was in a gang. It was my best friend singing the N-Word on our routine walk home from school, because “it was such a funny sounding word.” It was a neighbor, after learning that my Black father’s family all lived nearby, asking, “How many of you are there?” It was never getting asked to a school dance. It was the endless requests to touch my curly hair and questions of how I got it “like that.”

But I didn’t see any of this as racism. It was just life. And the cost of my Blackness—years spent in silent psychological prostration to one day be good enough—was not something I realized I was paying.

While overt acts of racial oppression and physical violence certainly must end, it’s this sneaky, subtler form of discrimination—what Rev. angel Kyodo williams names “a kinder, gentler form of suffering”—that, because of its pervasiveness, I believe is truly the most dangerous. Like a noxious fume that we’re breathing in and exhaling on each other, this kind of othering not only infiltrates our everyday lives but in fact structures our own belonging. “To be othered is to be denied the fullness of one’s humanity. It’s about reminding people, either by the barriers we put up in social spaces or the barriers to opportunities to advance our well-being, about saying through words or actions, that ‘you’re not one of us,’” observes Wizdom Powell.

We know racism is bad. We know othering is bad. I can’t name a single individual in my sphere who doesn’t believe that they’re doing their part to address these social issues. And yet, petrified of “not belonging” to the group of “woke” do-gooders with whom we identify, we continue to embody and play by the rules of the very systems perpetrating the harmful patterns we detest. This is because conventional activism means “going along” with our social conditioning. It is approaching our organizing in a linear, conceptual, future-oriented way without prioritizing feeling and the here and now. It’s sitting at the table trying to use the tools of patriarchy and capitalism to “win”, when really what’s needed is standing and upending it all. The body brings us to this reality if we’re brave enough to listen.
If racism is about bodies, why are we so reluctant to bring the wisdom of the body into the conversation? I believe that it’s because the body can bring us to truths we may not be interested in receiving. It can show us that the inequities baked into a system are so entrenched within us that the only path forward requires dismantling who we think we are. It can lead us to look squarely at the fact that by supporting and abiding in a system that we know is not equitable, in some ways we benefit—and those benefits makes us feel good and safe. The body asks us to look at the places that are pained due to personal, interpersonal, and collective traumas. It says, this is true. This is happening. This is honest.

In my own life, my body has brought me to inconvenient truths over and over again. These truths challenge my sense of self and rock my version of reality.

On my 34th birthday, I held a party at an event space in an area of Oakland with a large un-housed population. It’s common in this space for people from the community to come inside, ask if they can use the bathroom, and request something to eat. Those in the space typically oblige before sending folks on their way. On my birthday, my guests were beginning to arrive. I was happy, flitting about greeting friends and dancing to songs from a well-curated playlist. A Hispanic gentleman came in whom I did not know. He had food on his clothes and was wearing well-worn sneakers. He scanned the space clearly looking for something.

My stomach clenched with embarrassment at the sight of this man. I made myself bigger to protect my friends from having to “deal” with him. I felt a flash of anger that he had barged in uninvited, and I moved to intercept him, eager to see him on his way. All of this unfolded in an instant.

As I approached, the man turned, “Are you Kelsey,” he asked. “Yes,” I responded surprised. “I have the taco platter you ordered. Where would you like it?” Defenses now down, I became overly polite and accommodating. I offered to bring in the food for him. I asked him to join us for a taco. I assured him that I’d be recommending his company to all my friends. Though I didn’t recognize it at the time, my flowery words were my attempt to mask my guilt. My own biases had taken control, and my conceptual brain was in ego-repair mode. The man, whose name I never got, brought in my order and met my guilty ap-
preciation with extra heaping bowls of salsa, chips, limes, and onion. I smiled, but inside felt terrible.

I—a person of color who actively creates spaces for other people of color, who studies othering and belonging, who is dedicated to embodiment and mindfulness practices to help us explore how we perpetuate systems of harm—had by a glance and an ensuing feeling of discomfort classified this brown man as “other”; he was someone I would be inconvenienced by, someone to be dismissed. I may hold myself as a woke, racial justice warrior, but in that moment my body communicated that something else was also true.

The body does not lie. We may do all the work in the world to conceptualize a more inclusive way of being in relationship, but until that vision is grounded in our body, our dreams will continue to reside in a fantasy world.

It’s easy to bypass what our bodies know. We’ve been conditioned to stuff down uncomfortable feelings or simply toss them away so that we might “get along” in a society that does not regard our capacity to feel as wisdom. This disconnection from the body allows us ostensibly to work towards racial justice while at the same time ignoring these isms as they show up in our relationships, lives, and world.

In a 2018 speech, author and somatic expert Richard Strozzi Heckler asked the audience, “How is it, that it is so easy for us to poison our waters and pollute our air? How is it that there’s a growing distance between those [who] have and those [who] don’t have? How is it that so much conflict so easily now precipitates into violence? One of the reasons is that we’re out of touch with our bodies. When I say body, what I’m really referring to is our capacity to feel.”

To come back to feeling means over and over again touching what is happening in the body in the present moment. Right now, I taste the memory of a strawberry on my lips. My hips and legs are rooted. My eyes strain from bouncing between the bright sunlight streaming through my window and this dimmed computer screen. My stomach dances with uncertainty. Will these words make sense? My hands run down the back of my head and neck inciting a yawn.

What is happening in your body right now?

Building a relationship with our feeling body gives a foundation for coming to feeling in our racial justice work. When we notice the fear, shame, numbness, sadness, and regret, then our burgeoning familiarity with these feelings allows us to be with what is happening rather than reacting, disassociating, or repressing, as I so easily did at
my birthday party. This is advanced level work, friends, but this is the path for learning how to “walk our talk” when we’re on the spot. When we enact a microaggression, when we’ve been aggressed upon, when we witness harmful acts, can we stop, feel, and trust what is arising and use that information to discern our next steps?

Including embodiment practices in our racial justice work is radical. People will challenge you; they’ll say they don’t get it (and likely truly won’t); you’ll be encouraged to help people “make sense” of their body as it relates to company objectives. But addressing the challenges of this world with body wisdom—with non-linear emergent wisdom—is the next frontier of learning in our being, relating, and organizing.

The Science

Racism is about bodies, and there’s science behind this. Notice the first images that come to mind after reading the following words: Homeless. Gang. Terrorist. Undocumented. What do you see? Were any of those images stereotypes? Now, after you read the following prompts, close your eyes. What emotions are here? What do you feel? What parts of your body feel closed? What feels open?

Maybe you, like me, feel a churning in your stomach. Perhaps you’re feeling your heartbeat and sensing a tightness in your chest? Is your throat open or constricted? Maybe you don’t feel anything at all. Maybe there’s a jumble of thoughts and some judgment about this exercise. Wherever you fall on the feeling spectrum, there are likely also emotions present: shame, anger, frustration, curiosity…

What we’ve noticed is our mind’s implicit biases and the body’s response to them. While we don’t readily admit how prejudice lives inside of us, the truth is we all have implicit biases. These unconscious stereotypes and judgments about groups of people shape our daily interactions, communities, places of employment, and beyond. The studies on this are numerous. We know that in school, a Black student is more likely to be punished than a white student behaving in the same way. In the hospital, Black and brown patients receive less pain medication than white patients expressing the same level of pain. In the criminal justice system, those with Afrocentric features receive longer prison sentences than those who are white or more white appearing for the same crime. When we read these studies, our responses may range from cynicism to shock. We might mutter judgments of disapproval, but responding to these studies with separation and blame
exacerbates the root cause of the issue. The collective unconscious is the environment we’re all swimming in. We’re in it, and we’re of it. While we may feel that we don’t contribute to these ugly outcomes, in some respect each of us does. When the biases of our culture make themselves apparent, this is the time to explore how these fears live in us.

If, as we’ve been discussing, feeling is key to our racial justice work, what of feelings rooted in biases we’re not conscious of? Can we learn how to surface these feelings and avoid putting them in the driver’s seat? Research shows that this requires a shift in our circuitry.

All sensory data we receive undergoes rapid automatic processing before it arrives in our prefrontal cortex—where we rationalize and reason. As you read this text, your amygdala is scanning your environment. Like a sensitive car alarm, it’s driven by safety and navigates the world through a few simple commands: rest, fight, flight, or freeze. What happens when implicit bias arises? Because this conditioning is often driven by fear, our amygdala reacts before the sensory data can arrive at our prefrontal cortex to “make sense” of things. This is why I moved so quickly to turn away a “homeless man” who was really a business owner delivering food I ordered. It’s why a police officer shot a Black man in his own home after mistaking it for hers. It’s why when someone brings race into a conversation, people (emotionally and physically) vacate.

Implicit biases can trigger our fight-or-flight responses before we have a chance to “think”—even when we’re doing all the work to understand how we contribute to the racialization of society, even when we’re digging deep to explore the root of our biases and look at them squarely. Until we discover how to interrupt conditioned fear of the “other” at an embodied level, we’re likely to reenact the very oppressive behaviors we’re committed to dismantling. Understanding the language of our body when impacted by biases is therefore essential.

During the 2016 election a white man from North Carolina called in to C-SPAN to speak to Heather McGee, the former president of Demos, a diversity and equity think tank. “I’m prejudiced,” he said. “It’s not something I was taught but it’s kinda something that I learned.” “What can I do to change?” he asked. “You know, to be more American.”

“Get to know Black families,” McGee counseled, “who are not... all involved in crime and gangs as is so often portrayed.” She also told him to turn off the nightly news, which over-represents crimes committed by African Americans and under-represents crimes committed...
K. Blackwell  Race and the Body

by white people. She suggested that if he was religious to join a Black church or at least a racially integrated one. “This fear of communities that we don’t live in is tearing us apart,” she said. “We have to foster relationships. We have to get to know who one another really is.”

In essence, McGee suggested embodied experiences to train the caller’s body in how to interrupt his automatic defenses and to learn how to feel settled when in the presence of “the other.” Placing ourselves in opportunities to be in relationship with people from communities outside of our own loosens conscious and unconscious judgments that engender fear by helping us see those who are different from us as people just like ourselves.

The more experiences we have of meeting others in our shared humanity, the more likely we are to dismantle implicit biases and conditioning from third-party sources that form our opinions of the world and its inhabitants. If this process were to be broken down step by step, it might look something like this:

1. Recognize that you have implicit bias.
2. Feel what happens in your body when bias arises.
3. Put yourself in contexts that expose these biases—either by placing your body there physically or through visualizations—and begin to retrain your fight or flight responses by learning to settle your body.

In My Grandmother’s Hands, Resmaa Menakem writes:

Few skills are more essential than the ability to settle your body. If you can settle your body, you are more likely to be calm, alert and fully present, no matter what is going on around you. A settled body enables you to harmonize and connect with the other bodies around you, while encouraging those bodies to settle as well. Gather together a large group of unsettled bodies—or assemble a group of bodies and then unsettle them—and you get a mob or riot. But bring a large group of settled bodies together and you have a potential movement—and a potential force for tremendous good in the world.

While working with a somatic coach or therapist can be worthwhile, learning to settle the body can also be as simple as taking a few deep breaths, pausing, and connecting with your five senses. Menakem also suggests several exercises in his book, which I highly recommend. While this work is difficult, I believe that the fruition of it—living in
a society where all truly feel a sense of belonging, where our systems of governance are fair and just—is worth it. There’s a saying in Guinea that “knowledge is only rumor until it’s in the muscle.” It’s time we stop acting from rumor.

The Woo

Racism is about bodies, but perhaps some of our hesitance to include the wisdom of the body in this serious conversation is that it sounds a bit woo-woo. What is the wisdom of the body, and how do we relate to it? How do we get it to do what we need it to do? How can it be harnessed to guide us in moving forward in the right way?

To invite the wisdom of the body, we must know how we relate to it. It is as what women’s leadership coach and author Tara Mohr calls “the nameless next.” In response to the quote, “the future arrives first as a feeling,” from MIT Lecturer and author Otto Scharmer, she writes,

First there is a feeling—some new rising energy, or a new discontent with what is. Not a feeling in the sense of an emotion, but rather a budding, a current, a coalescing that we feel.

Now, you and I live in the land of the linear. We were raised here. In this land, we look for every energy to become some *thing*. And immediately please. Anything that is showing itself to us? We want to get to the point of it. We believe in progress that we can describe and map.

But this is merely one way. In other lands, things grow unseen. Their unfolding is not linear, but it is real. In this land, not everything is a “thing”—there are other forms—burgeonings, waves, accumulations. We’ve learned to prioritize the conceptual knowing of the mind over this nameless next. Our school system has put emphasis on our ability to think. We’ve been taught to live a short distance from our bodies. Even in many western Buddhist practices, we’ve focused on mindfulness and distanced ourselves from eastern philosophy that emphasizes the “mind” in the heart center and refers to all knowing originating in the body/mind. Because of this, we’ve lost our capacity to feel and to sense. It is this intrapersonal segregation that paves the way for the interpersonal and collective segregation rampant in our society.
Allowing ourselves to feel has become so unfamiliar that when we do it, we don’t like it. It’s overwhelming. We don’t like our bodies—how they look, how they move, the sounds they make. We try to make them into something else and shave bits and pieces of ourselves away to fit the desired mold—which, incidentally, is a photoshopped illusion.

Societally, we’re praised for this dismemberment. As women we’re told that the smaller we physically are, the more beautiful. In our places of employment, the more we distance ourselves from feeling, the more effective our arguments.

To heal these wounds we must re-member ourselves. Cultivating a culture of belonging begins with allowing all of our pieces to belong. Writes Brené Brown: “True belonging is the spiritual practice of believing in and belonging to yourself so deeply that you can share your most authentic self with the world and find sacredness in both being a part of something and standing alone in the wilderness. True belonging doesn’t require you to change who you are; it requires you to be who you are.”

The wisdom of the body gives us access to be all of who we are. It has been passed down to us through lineage, ritual, and the spiritual practices of our ancestors.

Here’s how it particularly supports the work of diversity, equity, and inclusion:

• The body is in the present moment. It brings us to what is happening right now. How are these realities showing up on the spot? From here, we can explore how and why we’re perpetuating them and what’s behind that.

• Working this somatic muscle is essential for social justice work. So often we want to fix things in the future and talk about the trauma of the past. While I agree that discussing these things is important, the essential work is knowing how to be with what’s happening right now. Microaggressions happen as a thousand little cuts in the present moment.

• The body brings us to our vulnerability. This is where healing can happen. We both long for and are afraid of this kind of being seen. However, it’s necessary to be witnessed in our vulnerability by a collective. This is how we feel that we belong.

• In racially integrated settings, including embodiment practices can be a relief for people of color who can become fatigued from all the talking. Talking often means explaining, defend-
ing, or praising. Being and feeling is essential for helping us to have the sustainability to stay in the conversation—and to know when it’s time to leave to take care of ourselves.

Feeling is the Work

For people of color, there is no option not to feel how racial inequities impact our lives. They land squarely in our lap every day. It’s time to
be joined by our white allies in the feeling of this—not in a self-flagellating kind of way, but in an “I’m willing to be vulnerable and not (physically or psychologically) bounce when the conversation gets real” kind of way. How can I trust you until I know that you can “feel me?”

Bringing the body into the conversation is essential because it teaches us how to be with the so-muchness of living in our world. Writes adrienne maree brown in *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*:

> It is still a rare thing for most of us to sit with what we feel, how we feel, the reality that we carry memories and feelings from what our ancestors experienced, and that we carry our current continuous collective trauma together. The pain can open to other feelings, more nuanced and clear. It can begin to make authentic connection and collectivity more possible.

Every mass movement, every collective effort, is made up of relationships that exist between members of the larger group. Around friends old and new, somatics helped me begin to gauge what I truly wanted and needed from connections, from political space. I got clearer on what I could offer. I got in touch with a feeling of restlessness and wandering that let me know when I didn’t want to be somewhere or with someone or with a political project. I could also feel the distinct energy of moving toward, or forward, that let me know when I did want to be around someone, did want to join in an effort from a place of authentic alignment, rather than obligation.

This awareness extended until I could begin to feel when I wanted to be in a certain place, job, political project, or even city. And when it was time to go. Yes is an embodiment. Yes is a future.”

By learning how to be with our body and the feelings that live there, we don’t have to run. We can be in tune with our yes’s and no’s in the present moment. We can bring these pieces into the conversation, which in turn allows us to go deeper with more authenticity and vulnerability in our relationships. We can do this because we’ve practiced. We can do this because our personal healing and that of our communities depends on this kind of truth telling.

Let Us Be Together
We can transform our gathering spaces into places of learning to feel together. That is what I’m hoping to bring when I stand in front of the room and invite embodiment practices. It’s about learning to re-member ourselves and to reprogram our fight or flight response connected to our implicit biases. Sometimes this means talking, but it also means rocking, humming, and making physical contact with each other—highly edgy work, and yet truly the medicine needed for our time.¹⁷

Remember though, this need not be a project. As soon as it becomes a box to be checked, we’ve missed the point. As soon as it becomes something you have to be an “expert in” to do, we’re judging it based on the wrong system. Coming back to your body is as simple as taking a deep breath. Inviting somatic practices in your work is as simple as taking a collective breath together and letting it out with a sigh. Hold the space behind that releasing breath and see what happens. Feel the uncertainty. We reshape our future by building our resilience by being with the ever-changing present.

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3. Resmaa Menakem, My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies (Las Vegas, NV: Central Recovery Press, 2017), 4-5.
10. Menakem, My Grandmother’s Hands.
13. Menakem, My Grandmother’s Hands, 151-152.
17. I recommend the writings of Resmaa Menakem, specifically his book My Grandmother’s Hands, for examples of somatic practices to do personally and collectively for healing racial trauma.
IT IS MY great pleasure to reflect on this insightful essay by Kelsey Blackwell, “What Does the Wisdom of the Body Have to Do with Racial Justice?” Although my work does not specifically focus on racial justice, I am actively engaged in work in the realm of embodiment, awareness, and social system change. I practice a social art form called Social Presencing Theater, a name given by the co-founder of the Presencing Institute, Otto Scharmer, who is cited in Ms. Blackwell’s essay. The roots of my work are in meditation and dharma art.

Like Ms. Blackwell, I too have encountered resistance when inviting people into body-knowing practices in professional or organizational settings. However, over the past decade Social Presencing Theater (SPT) practices have become part of the culture of practitioners who are applying a Theory U framework to social system change. Theory U is an awareness-based framework and set of practices that contribute to building a movement toward a saner, healthier, and more compassionate world. It addresses our disconnectedness from the natural world, from each other in terms of social inequality, and from our authentic selves. It is now more widely accepted as a method for deepening first-person experience and for collectively sensing the deep structures in social systems. The work invites coherence between our three bodies—individual body, earth body, and social system body.

There are many excellent points made in Ms. Blackwell’s essay, but I will focus my reflection on a single topic: the capacity to feel and the ability to be with what is happening as a doorway into collective creativity. These innate capacities can be deepened and cultivated with mindfulness and awareness practices—both sitting and movement
practices. By letting go of thoughts, we develop loyalty to our bodies and to our moment-by-moment experience. The body is a sensing-feeling organ. Feeling is the language of the body. Embodiment practices invite us to be present, to listen to the body, to feel, and to be in our experience with a nonjudgmental, friendly attitude of mind.

Ms. Blackwell quotes from Resmaa Menakem, “A settled body enables you to harmonize and connect with the bodies around you, while encouraging those bodies to settle as well.” Settling the body into this good earth body is a daily practice—one that we call the 20 Minute Dance. It is an invitation to feel the connection, naturally present, between our body and the earth body. It is not enough to think about how we should be more in the body or to relate to the body and breathing only when triggered. It is good to engage in yoga or some other form of practice that synchronizes body and mind. However, many of us have benefited from having a daily body-mind check-in in which there is no agenda, no right way of doing things, nothing to accomplish, and nothing to fix or change. This experience of the body right now, comfortable or uncomfortable, is perfect as it is. That attitude toward our body in itself has a settling effect.

Take 20 minutes (fewer if you have less time). Lie down on the floor, place your attention (mindfulness) on the body, alternate moving and stillness, and work your way to standing and moving about the space. That’s it. Attend to the body. As we let go of the thought world of memory, fantasy, projection, and opinion, the body settles onto the earth’s body. We feel grounded. We feel our place on the planet. We belong in this body, in this spot right now. We can walk on this earth, grounded with each footstep, acknowledging in every step this planet that supports our life.

From this experience of a grounded body-mind, awareness can naturally expand out to an experience of the social body. We all live in multiple social bodies—families, teams, organizations, communities, ethnicities, networks, and social movements. When we are with others in groups, we have a felt sense of the environment and the texture of those social bodies. The social body can feel open and inviting, or hostile and confusing. We notice how our habitual thinking, evaluating, judging, and projecting can diminish our ability to sense the underlying wholeness of the social fabric.

Through group movement and space awareness practices, we can let our awareness antennae expand out. We explore how to create sane, inclusive social bodies. We see how our choices—made from habits,
concepts, bias, and fear—lead to the shutting down of possibility and to a sense of disconnection from ourselves and from others. We learn to notice these habits without judgment and to let them be gateways to opening, to curiosity, to care. We are able to experience the natural, spacious quality of our mind and heart—the basic goodness present in relationships—and let those guide our choices.

The SPT practice that might be the most useful in the work of racial justice is one we call *Stuck*. This is an exploration of a personal or systemic “stuck” place in our work or life. In the oft repeated words of my mentors, Peter Senge and Otto Scharmer: “What is most deeply personal is most deeply systemic,” and “The issues outside are a mirror of the issues inside.”

The body holds both the painful, stuck areas of our life and also the freedom from what is stuck. The body holds both confusion and wisdom. In the *Stuck* practice, we embody a shape or sculpture of a particular feeling in our life where what we are trying to create is blocked, either by internal emotional patterns or by external circumstances. We invite that feeling into a body shape. We feel into it and invite whatever the experience is. Then we wait. We stay with that feeling until the stuck shape begins to move. We do not think about it, plan, or manipulate. We go with what the body wants to do. Stuck is not a permanent, static situation. Life is movement, and the still shape will move and then stop in a new shape. We then reflect on this process and gain insight from the body-knowing.

We notice that embedded in the stuck feeling itself are direction, energy, and insights. We suspend the urge to name and solidify the idea of our stuck place—the “who did what to whom” stories. These may be important in some contexts, but here we simply attend to the felt quality of the body shape, and then the body-knowing will move. We are emphasizing the reality that systems, including our own body-mind system, do not want to remain stuck. They yearn to move toward health, sanity, and openness. This practice is not about finding a solution to a problem. It is a way to bring body-knowing into the reflection process.

What arises from this practice is a sense of shared humanness, of openness and possibility. We each play diverse roles in many social bodies. Those bodies are often disconnected, or, at worst, at war with one another. However, these parts with their stories and histories arise in a vast space. That space allows the freedom to be fully sane, creative, compassionate, and brave human beings. The body can be the door-
way to compassion, creativity, and courage. Given our situation on the planet today, we need our whole selves, including our body-knowing, to engage for the benefit of all.

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Notes

1. Resmaa Menakem, My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies (Las Vegas, NV: Central Recovery Press, 2017), 151-152.
Borders
by JESSICA STERN

Somewhere in your body lies
the memory of your grandmother
the glimmer of you in her belly
impossible oceans,
herself twice
blood-lined border
the land that,
she called Liberty.

carrying
across
crossing
before crossing
to meet
in letters to her sisters,

Liberation lies
in defying
in deconstructing
lies your father told you,
washed history
black and brown between
in destroying
of the mind,

lines,
fragile white
that white-
that bleeds
the lines,
the border walls

remembering
you, too, came
against tides,
to that shore most longed for:
and raises
from within.

from crossed borders,
against orders,
a liberation that rises
its hands

JESSICA STERN, PhD, is a developmental psychologist at University of Virginia, a lover of Rumi and Mary Oliver, and an Associate Editor at The Arrow. She is grateful for the wisdom of writing mentors Deb Norton and Claudia Rankine.
'May I Also Be the Source of Life': Embodied Resistance, Existence, and Liberation in Bodymind as It Is

by MUSHIM PATRICIA IKEDA

And until they pass away from pain
May I also be the source of life
For all the realms of varied beings
That reach unto the ends of space.

Shantideva

IN MAHĀYĀNA BUDDHISM, I have been taught that body and mind are not two separate entities. They are one: bodymind. There are seeming limitations of the specific and located human bodymind I call “myself,” this named entity that comes into being at a certain point; lives a certain span of years, days, and minutes; then goes through the death process of dissolution of form and cessation of bodymind activities. To be embodied in the ordinary, day-to-day sense means that I am subject to sickness, to aging, and to death, which are all forms of anicca/anitya, impermanence. True enough. How is it, then, in accordance with the Bodhisattva vows I took in 1983, that I can become, as Shantideva says, “the source of life / for all the realms of varied beings”? And can I and others who have taken the great vows also become part of the liberation of all beings through working for social justice?

As a practitioner, not a Buddhist scholar, I’d like to share two stories with you that don’t, as far as I know, have equivalents in the sūtras and sūttras that have come to us through the patriarchal Dharma lineages. Thus, in their existence and telling, they are also expressive forms of resistance and renewal. They might point toward additional ways to think about the fulfillment of the impossible Bodhisattva vow as the expansion of the understanding of embodiment, including in and
through the female human body, rather than through some theoretical transcendence of the breathing flesh that we are.

Story #1: The Garden and the Tree

Hidden off of a coastal road near the ocean in Northern California there is a large garden, and in that garden there is a thirty-year-old apple tree. It has been a heavy bearer over the years, its abundant bright yellow fruit distributed to hundreds of schoolchildren and made into apple butter each autumn. Called Spirit of the Valley, from verse 4 of the *Dao De Jing*, the garden and its sprawling, ranch-style secluded house were originally renovated and redesigned by artist Mayumi Oda, a practicing Zen Buddhist whose vision included the high-ceilinged, light-filled artist’s studio she constructed on one end. Like the *Dao De Jing* text—which refers in one of its verse 4 translations to “the mysterious female,” a source which is impossible to diminish or deplete—this fertile flood plain surrounded by wild forest is generative and ever-changing.

My own and my son’s DNA, originating in Japan and Korea, are infused into that garden’s soil and that Golden Delicious apple tree, through the part of my body placed below the roots of the tree when it was planted on a spring day in 1989. The placenta through which an unborn human child receives nourishment is a large organ, expelled from the uterus at the end of childbirth, if all goes well. It is, like vaginal mammalian birth itself, large and bloody, messy and meaty. I am reminded of this when I eat my polite slice of toasted sourdough bread, spread with placental apple butter from that tree, in the morning with my tea, after meditation and prayer.

The soil of the garden, the tree, its fruit, my body and blood, my child, the meal which now nourishes me—“all beings, one body,” as we used to chant daily in the Zen temple.
Story #2: The Drum

The human body is a Dharma drum, resonating deeply with exterior and interior sounds and rhythms, responding to voices even before birth. When I was five months pregnant, in 1988, I sat the Rohatsu sesshin (seven-day intensive meditation retreat) with the Rinzai-ji Zen sangha at Mount Baldy monastery in the San Gabriel Mountains outside of Los Angeles. During the daily chanting sessions in the sutra recitation hall, the vigorous chanting was accompanied by swift and loud drumming and bells, an immersive and percussive environment that was profoundly beautiful. I had participated in a Rohatsu (celebrating the Buddha's Enlightenment) retreat with the same group in 1985 in New Mexico. But this time, three years later, I experienced the unexpected addition of another “practitioner,” my unborn son, who at that age was perhaps ten inches long. In perfect unison with the large drum of the sutra hall, he kicked from inside my body with swift precision.

In spiritual lineages that have traditionally been stained through and through with patriarchy, I want this true story of being a pregnant human body in a monastic-style Buddhist meditation retreat to be known. In solidarity and in sound with my unborn child, I was literally the drum and he the drummer.

If you haven’t experienced this, I invite you, perhaps after a period of meditation or quiet contemplation, to imagine how this might feel in your own bodymind.

• • •

There is a both/and here. While contemplative practices in all spiritual traditions promise what might be described as the expansion of the limited and suffering self in the direction of the infinite and universal Self, and in Buddhism the specific liberatory insight revealing “no fixed or permanent self,” we are also social and meaning-making creatures. When I teach Buddhism, I remind students who are enamored of their idea of “no self” that the Internal Revenue Service does not care about how enlightened they may be—they’ll most likely still have to file taxes when mid-April rolls around. The teachings of nonduality apply to nonduality itself.

Buddhist mindfulness, sati, literally means “to remember” or “to remind oneself.” I am mindful that, like all illusory dualities, although
it can be said that “we” (all life forms) are “One,” there is also a complex and clearly manifest relationship between and among individually defined animal and plant and insect and microbial bodies, the eaters and the eaten. And there are dynamic relationships among all constructed and mentally defined bodies—governmental and decision-making bodies, bodies of truth, bodies of water, bodies of evidence. While in ultimate Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy, form is emptiness (śūnyatā) and emptiness is form, we also create karma through our actions, and we are impacted moment by moment by the karma that is generated within systems. In my Dharma practice and teaching and in my Sangha (Buddhist community), we fully acknowledge the interwoven histories of gendered and racialized politics and policies. Buddhists can easily understand the intersectionality of multiple systems of oppression as illustrations of dependent origination (Pali: paticcasaṁuppāda; Sanskrit: pratītyasamutpāda). The impact of these systems is not theoretical. It is physical and medical, emotional, social, spiritual, and multi-generational. The toll and karma of misogyny and racism are huge; it is a toll enacted on bodies and a karma that has included the sale and exploitative disposal of human bodies.

Embodiment and issues of embodiment not only affect every part of our lives, they are every part of our lives. Recently, for those of us in the United States, the Black Lives Matter movement and the broader Movement for Black Lives in the past decade have highlighted the traumatic oppressions experienced daily by Black bodies. None of us can simply shed our bodies. Differences in appearance—judged to signify “same as ‘us’ and therefore safe,” or “different than ‘us’ and therefore threatening”—when combined with social differences in power and unexamined privilege, create the toxic conditions of racial “Othering.” And these realities have pointed fiercely to structural changes that are needed in how U.S. Buddhist communities are able (or not) to address politicized forms of suffering in multiculturally sensitive ways; this includes the honest and vulnerable self-examination of demographics on our boards of directors, staff, and within our wider Sanghas.

Much has been written about how underrepresented communities in the U.S. need “safe spaces” that are identity-based, in order to create the conditions of inclusion and self-acceptance. Most people in meditation-based communities need to feel at a minimum “that I belong here when I look around the room,” in order to soften their body armor and let down their psychic shields enough to focus inwardly through one or more meditative techniques.
And while “I” am not a disembodied entity or “soul,” it is also true that fully and consciously inhabiting the interrelated systems that are called “my body” is a developing process and a practice of both spiritual liberation and social justice. I speak as a Buddhist practitioner, both monastic and lay, for over thirty-five years, as a mother who breastfed for three years, and as a person of color who has witnessed and been part of political, identity-based liberation movements in the United States since my birth in 1954. These movements have included the civil rights movement, the women’s movement, the Black Power movement, the Gay Pride movement, the Asian American movement and more. Among other identities, I speak as a third generation Japanese American (sansei), and as a core teacher at the East Bay Meditation Center in downtown Oakland, California, which is an urban Buddhist- and mindfulness-based meditation center with a mission that centers on diversity and social justice.

The very concept that there can be a Cartesian split between body and mind—a perceived gap between physicality as we experience it and the idea of a “pure” consciousness that transcends and negates the specifics of bodies—is odd to me. I’ve always appreciated that my entry into Buddhism was through Korean Zen practice in North America and in South Korea, beginning in 1982, and that the word in English used by my original Zen teacher and his senior practice leaders was always “bodymind”—one word, not two. This went beyond abstract talk. Our everyday practices were rigorously and sometimes painlessly embodied: long hours of sitting meditation; manual work such as cooking, cleaning, and gardening; prostrations (standing in place in front of the altar, bending the knees and lowering oneself to a kneeling position, bending forward and placing the entire body on the floor, gently turning the hands palms upward, and returning to an upright position, then repeating hundreds of times); and chanting, producing what might be called sacred sound through the instrument of the body vessel.

My Buddhist training in North America and in Asia emphasized the elimination of a lot of discursive thinking, not through an act of will and repression (which most meditators find to be pretty much impossible anyway), but through physical activities that are repetitive in nature (thus eliminating the need to think about various choices) and that require enough awareness and concentration to prevent the practitioner from going on autopilot. Because of these experiences, my guess is that Buddhist meditation was never meant to be a cerebral, plea-
surable, floating-feeling, disembodied experience, as it has sometimes been taught and practiced in the West. Yet it is quite true that what might be called deeper levels of meditative concentration (samadhi) dramatically alter the practitioner’s perception of bodily sensations, including what is usually called pain. Quite a bit has been written about samadhi and jhāna states, and except for the addition of information from recent neuroscientific research, this is nothing new, at least not in my experience and study.

In these times of climate emergency and political chaos, what will help all of us regularly “unplug” and simply be in our bodies, aware of our own physicality? What will help us to show up in person in community with others? Significantly, I’ve been reading that smart phones, screens, and the often harried, multi-stressor pace of life has contributed to what’s being called a “loneliness epidemic.” Meeting face to face, and looking at one another eye to eye, eating together, working together, telling our stories, engaging in silent or vocal spiritual disciplines and study together—these are what we yearn for in order to become not lonely, to fulfill the need to belong.

How, amidst mass extinctions of species, can we become “the source of life” for ourselves and for one another? Is it possible to collectively heal the wounds of historical harms? I am not daunted by these huge questions; my initial Zen Buddhist training was learning to respond to big and burning questions with a wholehearted “I don’t know.” This is not the “I don’t know” of resignation, of inner collapse. It is the “I don’t know and I want to find out” through which vulnerability and humility and a sort of outrageous determination to discover what is possible collide within us and propel us along the spiritual journey.

I don’t have “final” answers. I do have some notes on process:

Transformative racial justice is experienced through the body and through embodied processes.

Because the trauma of racism is embedded in our bodies, people of color need to see bodies, cultures, and positive images like us in our Buddhist communities, in media in general, and in leadership in all our spheres of activity.

Speaking as a person of color resident of the United States, the nation of my birth, and as a staff member and core teacher at the East Bay Meditation Center in downtown Oakland, California, we have found over the thirteen years that EBMC has had its doors open to underserved communities one powerful and continuously validated truth:
People from non-dominant cultures want to see people who they feel physically resemble them and their family members, and who have had similar cultural experiences, in positions of both peer relationships and leadership positions within any spiritual organization. This extends beyond racial identity and ethnicity. We call it valuing “radical inclusivity.” People with disabilities want to see people with disabilities. Younger people want to see younger teachers and Sangha members. Fat-positive people want to see large-bodied, fat-positive people. Parents and guardians of young children want to be with one another in a spiritual center where the children can play and sing and squirm and move. Our embodied lives, what we do with our bodies in living, loving, working, and playing, in grieving, rage, pleasure, birthing, and dying, is more important than intellectual discourse, no matter how politically astute in analysis or how visionary in scope. When oppression tries to shame, diminish, negate our bodies, it is an act of political and spiritual resistance to embrace what transformative thought leader Sonya Renee Taylor has said: “The body is not an apology.”

Transformative racial justice in Buddhist groups means our teachers need to renounce “hanging out in the Emptiness Zone” and to model how they hold their own power and unearned privilege. They need to be aware, constantly, of their own positionality and be honest about it. Because, as far as I can see, there is no such thing as an individual human being who exists outside of historical circumstances. There is no individual human being who exists apart from ongoing conditioning resulting from slavery, internment, genocide, exclusion, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and other institutionalized systems of inequitable treatment that affect every aspect of human life from birth to death. Spiritual practices such as meditation do not erase social realities and systems that privilege and normalize some bodies and identities over others.

And we can do better than this social ranking of bodies according to ethnicity and age and gender-assigned-at-birth and abilities and other constructed categories. Just as exclusion and discrimination are passed on through social conditioning, inclusivity and openness to people showing up as they are can be practiced. With such practice, over time, communities build up new cultural forms in which the conditions for physical and emotional relaxation, enjoyment, trust, and consent are present. In these communities, including my own here in Oakland, California, we try to fully acknowledge that “the body”—exactly as it is in this moment, with “its” desires and sexuality and aches
and pains and petty murmurs and itches and rhythmic extensions and contractions—is not an apology. It is the ground of being and doing, the rich and fertile mud and water that are environmental requisites for awakening, represented in Buddhist iconography by the blooming of the lotus.

And because community arises from communing with one another, the opportunity for tender and extraordinary and lasting spiritual connections and friendships arises from a strong collective commitment to *ahimsa*, non-harm. What this means, speaking plainly, is that we need to commit to ethical and consensual forms of interacting with one another on a daily basis. We need to create conditions of transparency and equity in which abuse resulting from “power-over-other” relationships is lessened and eventually eradicated. Just as the Dharma teaches that the idea of an individual “self” can be dismantled and deconstructed, we can dismantle hierarchies and traditional structures of teacher–student relationships and other forms of relating within our spiritual communities; we may need to do so in order to create new forms and to prefigure what an awakened multicultural society might look and feel like, perhaps for the first time.

“May I Also Be the Source of Life”: Embodied Resistance, Existence, and Liberation in Bodymind as It Is

In *A Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life*, Shantideva says: “May I also be the source of life / For all the realms of varied beings / That reach unto the ends of space.”

If you are willing to play, for just a few moments, I invite you to use your amazing human consciousness to imagine yourself as the source of life for all living beings. If this were the case, what might you do differently on a day-to-day basis? How might you think, feel, and act?

I received the Bodhisattva vows and precepts in 1983, in Toronto, Canada, and along with them I received the Heart Sūtra name Mushim (literally, “no heartmind”). When I heard “my” Dharma name first called out in the Buddha Hall I remember, distinctly, thinking, “Well, this is going to be a lot of work.” The Heart Sūtra is both famous and famously perplexing among practitioners of the Mahāyāna, declaring that “form is emptiness (boundlessness) and emptiness is form.” This pithy challenge to binary thinking, sometimes called the Nondual Gate, is our entry into considering that body and mind are not two but one: bodymind, and that heart and mind are not two but one: heartmind. And that as soon as we form those concepts—bodymind, heartmind—
they, too, begin to resist hard-edged ways of knowing, and to instead reveal themselves as organic process, more verb than noun.

I, Mushim, retake the Bodhisattva vows each morning when I am fortunate enough to wake after sleeping. I renew my commitment to justice and life for communities of color. In addition to being a literal conveyor of life to my biological child, in this lifetime I have also embraced Shantideva’s expansive, liberatory, and thoroughly terrifying vow: “May I also be the source of life.” On a moment-to-moment basis, what this means to me is this: In whatever ways you and I are interacting in this moment, may I be a source of life and liberation for you, and may you be a source of life and liberation for me. In some cases, this might literally mean life and death; in most daily interactions, the meaning of this is less dramatic and yet subtly pervasive—like walking in a mist and eventually realizing that our clothing is soaking wet, to use an old Zen Buddhist story about how we absorb the Buddhadharma.

The ability to show up fully, exactly as we are—“heartmind” one word, “bodymind” one word—and to create spaces for others to do the same in awareness of our interdependence with all life forms—these are intrinsically acts of political resistance. We show up in resistance, in complete embodiment, to every slow or fast death-dealing regime that aims to erase us, our cultural heritages, and our fluid, multiply-conditioned ways of being.

In my world, it can be as quiet as drinking my morning tea, eating my morning toast, in gratitude and in awe, knowing that what I call “my body” is unknowably vast and uncompromisingly present.

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NOTES


How to Love a Mestiza Woman

by LAURA SOTO

I wish I could tell you what it is like to love a woman who knows and creates, nurtures and feeds love, a Mexica woman, a Mestiza woman, a Warrior woman.

I wish I could tell you what it is like to go deep into the pain of a many-centuries-old nation, to feel the sacrifice of many generations, to see the resilience of a conquered indigenous people with reverence, to see the steadfast battle for present survival, and yet feel in your core the living ancient spiritual wonders.

I wish I could show you that to be this woman it takes great strength, endurance, resilience, great humility to learn through unsolved grievances; it takes connecting to the cycle of life and its mysteries; it takes listening to Mother Earth and her whisperings.

To love such a woman you would have to understand: she has many stories intertwined in the curls of her voluminous hair, she carries many lives in the balance of her heavy dancing hips, she has many legends woven into the fabric of her olive-colored skin, she holds ancient wisdom in the depth of her dark, profound eyes, she carries the shattered pieces of many broken hearts in her fragmented smile; she has been tested, she has been trialed.

Mi color de piel es olivo porque soy trigueña, una mezcla hermosa de claros y oscuros que han sacado un verde amarillo con un brillar dorado; El mestizaje que emana de mi piel, su fusión celebrando.
El mestizaje se vierte de mi corazón,
se funde en todo mi ser,
y se refleja brillante en mi piel.

Gracias a este color que me decora
y gracias a mis ojos negros que hablan sin palabras,
en mi tú ves a una foránea.

Que no importa de donde sea realmente,
tan solo se reconoce que no se le puede dar un lugar de origen;
porque ¡yo soy gitana, yo soy hija de la tierra!
Soy una amazona que no tiene medida,
la cual rige con gentileza,
porque conoce la humildad de ser buena,
¡yo soy trigueña!

To love such a woman, you would have to understand,
she learned from her elders that to be woman,
is to be provider, protector, healer, mender, filter, weaver,
caretaker, warrior, survivor, life-giver, storyteller, dreamer, rituals-keeper;
you would have to understand that for all of this she is container.

LAURA SOTO is a bilingual and bicultural poet, artist, and activist from Chihuahua, Chihuahua, Mexico, living in Longmont, CO. She serves as Operations Manager at Philanthropiece Foundation, where she supports local initiatives on immigrant rights, indigenous rights, climate justice, economic justice, and youth engagement. She is an active member of the SVVSD Parents Involved in Education (PIE) Taskforce, the Colorado Immigrants Rights Coalition (CIRC), and Community Language Cooperative (CLC). Laura is also an artist who shares her activism via performance, spoken-word, and written poetry. She has performed for Motus Theater, Latino Community Foundation of Colorado, City of Longmont, City of Lafayette, Migrant Youth Leadership Institute, Noche de Peña, and Tones Latinos.
Examining Whiteness with Meditation

by KALEN TENDERNESS TIERNEY

Our search for understanding in matters of race automatically inclines us toward blackness, although that is not where these answers lie. It has become a common observation that blackness, and race more generally, is a social construct. But examining whiteness as a social construct offers more answers. The essential problem is the inadequacy of white identity.

We don’t know the history of whiteness, and therefore are ignorant of the many ways it has changed over the years. If you investigate that history, you’ll see that white identity has been no more stable than black identity. While we recognize the evolution of “negro” to “colored” to “Negro” to “Afro-American” to “African-American,” we draw a blank when it comes to whiteness. To the contrary, whiteness has a history of multiplicity.

Nell Irvin Painter¹

FOR MANY MEDITATORS and people on a spiritual path in contemporary western society, an ideal is to live in a just and equitable society, where meditation and ethics are central to the way of life. We often fall short of this mark in our society, particularly when it comes to matters of race. So often race is seen as a problem experienced only by people of color, and, in the United States, most often by Black people. In fact, we need to investigate whiteness to understand the issues of racial inequality and oppression completely. Doing so allows us as

¹ The author of this essay is a person of European descent living with the legacy of settler colonialism in the United States. The essay is addressed to people who are white; however, all people are invited to read it.
white people the opportunity to overcome the obstruction of our conditioning in the cultural context of the United States specifically, and in the world more broadly. We must examine whiteness in particular in order to address the ways that we benefit from systemic racism and how we replicate systems of oppression in our spiritual communities. This endeavor need not be a burdensome punishment for being born white, but rather can be a clear opportunity to awaken to the ignorance of our conditioned mind as a part of our spiritual practice. Opening to the challenge of looking at whiteness is precisely the type of practical application that meditators and contemplative practitioners seek—a chance to put the Buddhist teachings into practice more thoroughly. The work of awakening to the suffering created by whiteness can pave a pathway for healing to take place. Inside a container of unconditional positive regard, this work can be profound, allowing us to join history and analysis with meditation, embodiment, and contemplation.

Over the course of the last 500 years, European colonizers and their descendants created a global system of exploitation, violence, and economic dependency that continues to dominate geopolitics and the world’s economies. Known as white supremacy, this global system functions at multiple levels of society to structurally advantage people who are of European descent (“white” people) over all “non-white” people in order to maintain wealth and power. This system of domination is particularly insidious because it creates conditions in which poverty and other results of oppression appear to be the causes of disadvantage rather than the results of systemic injustice. For example, years of Black families being denied loans by the government have resulted in less Black homeownership and wealth. “If only these families worked harder or were smarter,” the argument of meritocracy goes, “their situation would improve.” These often unspoken but pervasive sentiments, of which white people themselves are often unconscious, support systems of power that continue to privilege them while ignoring the systemic roots of the apparent inequality. This system is mostly invisible to the majority of white people of all class backgrounds who benefit from it but plainly visible to the Black, Indigenous, and other people of color who daily experience its oppression. The effects are infuriating and confusing, causing disconnection and the inability to engage in dialogue about the harms the system creates.
What Is Whiteness?

Whiteness is a socially constructed collection of cultural identity, values, beliefs, practices, and assumptions that people of European descent hold, generally without realizing that these views are particular to themselves and in contrast to the views and practices of other peoples. Over time, the construct of whiteness has evolved to serve the interests of a historically wealthy, Christian, white, property-owning elite. The first instances of the term “white” date to the 17th century, appearing in legal documents created to define who could and could not own property, such as land, animals, guns, and people. It established a permanent slave class marked by skin color. It was also used intentionally to keep poor people with white skin from uniting with enslaved people from the African continent to overthrow the wealthy elite. Through the creation of a white identity, wealthy landowners made having white skin a structural advantage. Being white was seen as “better,” because even a poor white person could potentially own property and have the chance of one day amassing wealth, but the same would never be true for someone with Black skin. In other words, the poor whites may have been poor but at least they weren’t Black; they had an “other” to look down on and oppress. Over time, notions of who qualifies as white have shifted according to the needs of powerholders and as other cultures subsume the values of whiteness to advance their positions in society. For example, the Irish were not originally considered white; nor were Italians. From a historical compendium of U.S. case law on who is considered white:

“White Person” has been held to include an Armenian born in Asiatic Turkey, a person of but one-sixteenth Indian blood, and a Syrian, but not to include Afghans, American Indians, Chinese, Filipinos, Hawaiians, Hindus, Japanese, Koreans, negroes; nor does white person include a person having one fourth of African blood, a person in whom Malay blood predominates, a person whose father was a German and whose mother was a Japanese, a person whose father was a white Canadian and whose mother was an Indian woman, or a person whose mother was a Chinese and whose father was the son of a Portuguese father and a Chinese mother.

Such absurd legal language for defining who is and who is not held to be white clearly shows that whiteness is both a created category, shifting over time, and a powerful one that affords many rights denied to
other socially constructed racial categories.

Whiteness does not reside in the color of our skin, but in our thoughts and actions. It is a mindset rather than an innate quality. However, those of us socialized as white people often cannot see whiteness for what it is because we are so thoroughly immersed in it. Our enculturation happens as we learn history, imbibe media, and live almost every facet of our lives in a society dominated by whiteness; many of us cannot not see the whiteness of anything specifically because it is everywhere—in the protagonists of most stories, in most consumer product advertisements, in the qualities and attitudes children are taught to cultivate. White people dominate mainstream media both as producers of content and as those who are represented. “White” is taken as the norm for personhood—think product ads, “John Doe,” or the protagonists of most entertainment media. In the twenty-first century this has changed somewhat as the legacy of civil rights struggles has permeated the mainstream; however, no process of acknowledgment and reconciliation has addressed these harms on a scale appropriate to the atrocities.

Over the course of the past decade my entire frame of reference has shifted as I have read histories outside of the high school classroom style mythology of the United States. Such books as Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz’s award-winning An Indigenous People’s History of the United States, Howard Zinn’s classic A People’s History of the United States, and James W. Loewen’s Lies My Teacher Told Me are excellent places to start to understand alternatives to the mainstream historical narrative. Ta-Nehisi Coates’s Between the World and Me is a contemporary account of being a Black man in America, written by a father to his son. Marcus Reddiker’s Amistad, Michelle Alexander’s The New Jim Crow, Resmaa Menakem’s My Grand Mother’s Hands, and Angela Davis’s Women, Race, and Class each offer scholarly accounts of the legacy of chattel
slavery and its impacts on our present day. Sylvia Federici’s *Caliban and the Witch*, C.L.R. James’s *The Black Jacobins*, and Juan Gonzalez’s *Harvest of Empire* are standouts that I consistently return to. These books remind us that history is not singular. It is a multiplicity of narratives that converge to give us a fuller picture of how our particular existence as people within a larger society came to be. Not to engage with these histories is to choose ignorance.

A lack of engagement with history and the consequent failure to acknowledge how our painful past contributes to the social ills of today allows for white ignorance to persist. This ignorance amounts to a collective amnesia on the part of the majority of white people whenever people of color—especially Black or Indigenous people in the United States—claim rights. This ignorance interferes with our ability to seek truth and accountability. The true histories are hidden, distorted, and discounted. We cannot have dialogue on equal footing if all parties are not grounded in the truth. The trick of whiteness in denying this history is that it makes the results of hundreds of years of racism and violence—poverty, illness, mass incarceration—look like they are “natural” parts of being Black or Indigenous rather than the effects of systematic oppression.

Meditation As Tool

*To lean into this aspiration, you must confront the fact that “whiteness” is a social ego as void of inherent identity as the personal ego, and you have identified with it as much as your very own name, but without being willing to name it.*

*Just as the ego-mind is a construct that constantly reinforces itself—building structures and systems of control and developing attitudes and views that maintain its primacy and sense of solidity so that it can substantiate its validity—so, too, does this construct of whiteness. One could call it the Mind of Whiteness.*

Rev. angel Kyodo williams

In all of this pain, heartache, and confusion over the cost of whiteness, there is a great opportunity for expanding awareness, healing, and collective liberation. Over the past decade I have walked a path of uncovering, challenging, and undermining my own mind of whiteness. I have participated in reading groups, workshops, and conversations.
about race and whiteness. I have read articles about and analysis of whiteness by Black, Indigenous, and other people of color, as well as by white people. I have looked into my ancestors and read histories. I have facilitated workshops and reading groups, leading others on the journey of examining their whiteness. Most importantly, I have engaged in embodied learning activities and cultivated meaningful relationships with people of color. Through all of this I have begun to settle into a place beyond guilt, where through reflection and engagement I no longer feel at fault for all of systemic racism but rather responsible for changing what I can change and being in the struggle for racial justice on a daily basis. I have begun to feel a shift in my heart; I no longer feel that I am to blame for racism, but rather that I have agency to forge a new white identity that belies the legacy of whiteness. Beyond that, I can begin to acknowledge, take responsibility for, and transform the ways that I benefit from white supremacy. I can investigate how to directly shift my relationship to whiteness.

Some years ago I began a serious daily meditation practice, and began studying the dharma. As my mind slowly settled, I began to notice a subtle texture of racist thoughts just below the surface of my conscious mind. I was both horrified and intrigued. These were abhorrent thoughts that I did not believe—and yet, there they were. I found myself unintentionally making disparaging assumptions about the background, abilities, and potentials of people of color—most often Black people—despite knowing that they possess brilliance, are resilient and capable, and come from all class backgrounds. Almost daily I noticed subtly racist thoughts about the type of car a person of color was driving, the things a Black person in line at the Whole Foods was buying, or the dreams that a young Black man might dare to have about his future. On one hand, I took comfort in the knowledge, gleaned from my dharma practice, that these thoughts, having no origin, did not define who I was. On the other, I was disturbed that deep inside of me, despite all my anti-racist training, lived such toxic, racist thoughts. The discovery led me to several conclusions: Social conditioning goes very deep and is difficult to uproot despite consciously held beliefs or training; undoing white conditioning needs to involve embodied practices; and unlearning whiteness is a fully engaged, long-term process.

In time, I became excited about the opportunity that this noticing was presenting to me as a Buddhist and a meditator. As the teaching on selflessness reminds us that the ego is made up of accumulations of patterns that convince us that there is a self, so too does the “Mind of
Whiteness” convince us that whiteness exists and needs to be defended. Both operate to make their existence seem unremarkable, de facto givens. They appear to us as the backdrop against which life happens, rather than as constructs upon which so much falsity is based.

Given the parallel between the individual ego and the socially constructed ego of whiteness, we see that meditation practice is a most precise tool for dismantling our confused and toxic conditioned mind. It encourages us through curiosity to combat our ignorance about the effects of whiteness on people of color and ourselves. Among other evidence, a recent study of anti-racist white groups in the San Francisco Bay Area has shown that mindfulness and embodiment are among the best tools for cultivating resilience in the face of what Robin DiAngelo calls “white fragility.” Characterized by an inability on the part of white people to stay in difficult conversations or situations around race, white fragility is commonly thought of as a fight-flight-freeze response, occurring when situations leave one feeling threatened or unsafe.

Through workshops that join analysis with embodied exercises, where learning happens in the body, I have noticed profound shifts in myself and others in our ability to stay with the difficulty of talking about and attending to the impacts of racism. One example of an embodied learning activity is called intervention forum theater, in which a group role-plays interrupting racism in conversation. It helps us to notice what is alive in our bodies when we practice confronting these things in a safe space, so that we can be more comfortable in conversations about race in our daily lives. The cultivation of resilience in situations of racial discomfort has allowed me to expand my capacity to be present with the Black youth I work with who experience extremes of systemic violence and poverty. At the same time, being more able to stay with the discomfort of whiteness and racism has allowed me to see more fully the toll that whiteness exacts on myself and other white people, so different from but connected to the toll it takes on Black, Indigenous, and other people of color.

The Cost of Whiteness for White People

As a white person living with the legacy of violent settler colonialism in the present-day United States, I am disconnected from my ancestral homes and practices. I am descended from European ancestors who variously came from Ireland, England, Bavaria (in what would later become Germany), and scattered Eastern European lands. Europe was a
violent place for centuries before some of my ancestors fled for “better” lives in the American colonies or, later, the United States. Ireland began to be conquered and colonized by Britain nearly a thousand years ago, and the people suffered brutally. This was the proving ground of British colonialism and subsequent empire. Almost universally, regardless of their individual circumstances, these ancestors lost touch with their own indigenous practices and sense of belonging to a specific place, were disconnected from the land and their earth-based practices, and were subsequently assimilated into whiteness to become colonizers themselves. As Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz notes in An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States:

The institutions of colonialism and methods for relocation, deportation, and expropriation of land had already been practiced, if not perfected, by the end of the fifteenth century. The rise of the modern state in western Europe was based on the accumulation of wealth by means of exploiting human labor and displacing millions of subsistence producers from their lands. The armies that did this work benefited from technological innovations that allowed the development of more effective weapons of death and destruction. When these states expanded overseas to obtain even more resources, land, and labor, they were not starting anew. The peoples of West Africa, the Caribbean, Mesoamerica, and the Andes were the first overseas victims. South Africa, North America, and the rest of South America followed. Then came all of Africa, the Pacific, and Asia.\textsuperscript{11}

The cost of this alienation has been enormous and traumatizing for all of humanity and the earth.

As I pursue my spiritual path and practices, I find myself conflicted and confused by the cost of whiteness—my ancestors lost their connection to their own land-based indigenous wisdom. In the process they both benefited from assimilating into whiteness and perpetrated tremendous harm. Growing up, I did have religion and some aspects of culture rooted in a context before whiteness, but those things lacked the spirituality, mysticism, and magic that I have longed for and found in other traditions. I have been transformed through the practice of meditation and the teachings held in the Shambhala lineage, yet as a white person I feel confused about which practices I should be adopting, located as I am in what bell hooks calls the “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.”\textsuperscript{12}
I have most connected with practices embodying the indigenous wisdom of Tibet, practices that would not have such a prominent presence in the West were it not for the invasion and subsequent occupation of Tibet. While it is true that these practices and teachings have been shared genuinely, I question whether it is appropriate for me to engage in them with so little experience of the cultural context—the society, cosmology, and ideology—from which they come. I wonder which elements are part of a common wisdom heritage shared with all humanity and which are culturally specific and not for me. Staying with these questions is the practice for me at the moment. It gives me an opportunity for contemplation that doesn’t simply allow me to bypass the complexity of being a white western practitioner with thoroughly modern sensibilities.

In addition to those layers of confusion, for those of us whose ancestors assimilated into whiteness there is the added complexity of defensiveness when confronted with terms like “white privilege” and “white fragility.” We may be a woman, trans or queer, working class, Jewish, disabled, old, femme-identified, descended from recent immigrants, or any other combination of traits yielding less advantage in our society, but that does not change the fact that we are afforded heaps of advantages over non-white people, in the United States and throughout most of the world. Advantages such as wealth accumulation in the form of home or land ownership afforded to whites but denied to Black people and others remain mostly at the periphery of our conscious inquiry. Blatant disadvantages suffered by non-whites, such as the disproportionate incarceration of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color, as well as the pattern of police murders of innocent, unarmed Black people, may also go unnoticed by those of us with privilege.

The cost of whiteness, while different depending on what kind of body one inhabits, is enormous. The cost for those of us who benefit from this system of oppression is nothing less than our full humanity. Recent research into the effects of racism, intergenerational trauma, and historical trauma passed on from one generation to the next reveals that the work that we have to do is not just on the wounds of the moment. We all also carry the pain and the crimes of our ancestors in our bodies and, through socialization, into our families and the broader culture. So when someone asks, “What does slavery have to do with anything, that was so long ago?” I reply, “Everything.”
Conclusion

As I proceed on this journey of being in the world authentically, I find that I have more questions than answers. In my continuing study of the dharma, I am constantly amazed at how little I know. I am also finding myself able to notice and confront my social conditioning more skillfully through the practice of meditation and inquiry. I find constant opportunities to let go of some of my perfectionism, defensiveness, and need to be right all of the time—my socially conditioned whiteness.

Through conscious effort, meditation, and analysis, comprehending the problem of whiteness and racism becomes an opportunity. It offers a chance to take responsibility for learning about, unlearning, and challenging the systems of oppression that create so much suffering in our society. We can become agents for collective liberation by doing our part in dismantling the social ego of whiteness that has taken up residence in our minds, but which is not innate to our being. And we can work to dismantle white supremacy in our daily life and in the systems around us. I am white. And I want to abolish whiteness. That means starting with acknowledging the harms whiteness has created. I see that this work will not be completed simply by doing a weekend training or reading a book. It is the work of my lifetime.

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Notes


7. A few instances of such acknowledgment exist, such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada on the cultural genocide committed in the residential school system for Indigenous children. See http://www.trc.ca.


I SPENT A LOT of time during my youth pondering my family story and where I came from. While kicking rocks around my suburban street, I would wonder, “Why do we call ourselves Greek but don’t speak the language or cook the food? Why doesn’t my family feel like other Greek families I know?” My family name comes from someone who signed the Declaration of Independence; my mother’s family holds the Greek ancestry. I’ve always felt that I’ve straddled different worlds. When I say I’m Greek, it feels as if I’m holding onto some name from a previous life.

My maternal grandfather (Papou) was a man of noble actions. He taught me that giving someone my word was worth more than gold, and that I should treat everyone I met with honor and respect. When it came to instructing his grandchildren on Greek heritage though, he skipped the richness of story and mythology, instead passing down safer tokens: counting to ten in Greek and a smattering of his mother’s recipes. These minor cultural artifacts would never risk our family being seen as offbeat to the burgeoning cookie-cutter paradise of 1950s America. He transmitted simple reference points of being a Greek American in things that White Anglo Saxon Protestants wouldn’t feel threatened by and could even purchase at the market, like feta cheese and ouzo. But I don’t feel in my bones the dynamic vitality of Greek culture, nor did I ever see it in my family. My Papou passed down superficial ornaments but not the traditions, magic, or lore.

My childhood perusing of cultural phenomena such as Harry Potter and Backstreet Boys wasn’t actually all that interesting to me. I dipped into those things simply to fit in with the awkwardness of
youth. What I was really interested in was a little too painful for my divorcing family to process: I wanted to know why there weren’t rituals that held us together and why holidays felt devoid of meaning and connection. Now that we didn’t have each other, what else could I fall back on or learn from?

I’ve come to understand that those contemplations in my childhood were access points to a deeper pain and grief associated with my ancestry. I felt cut off from society because I didn’t have ancestral teachings to light the way, something I especially yearned for in my newly fragmented world.

I still find myself angry with my Papou sometimes, asking why don’t I speak Greek? Why don’t I know the stories of our people? Why did he give me capitalism and puritanical values in place of the culture I see in other Greek Americans? Was he scared that his Greek identity would be an obstacle to the success of his children and grandchildren? Can I forgive him for putting to rest the traditions of his culture and accepting those of America in perhaps his deep desire to belong?

Because I lacked a developed identity connected to my Greek heritage, I found myself unknowingly looking for any reference point as a substitute bloodline. Throughout my adolescence, I slowly built an identity grounded in more generic features of the dominant white American culture—shopping, pop music and literature. I found my place as a white woman in systems of racism, patriarchy, and capitalism. Sometimes a beneficiary of these systems, sometimes bearing their costs, they shaped my sense of who I was. In them, I found my own way to belong.

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In the third grade we had to present a small teaching on our ancestry. I proudly stated to my classmates, “I’m from Greece!”, with no second thought that I was born in Indiana. As I grew and my network of interactions expanded in complexity, it became trickier to say that. Upon telling someone from Greece that I was Greek, they replied, “Oh, you mean your family is from Greece.” I remember awkwardly blushing and folding my hands, unsure if this person was telling me that I wasn’t who I thought I was or that I didn’t know who I was in the first place. Either option felt appallingly sad. In my late teens, I began asking my mother’s family about the Koulourakia and pastitsio they baked, about
the music boxes and floral plates they kept in their homes. My aunts would respond that we just made certain foods at certain times of year and that they bought the plates on a trip to Greece. No stories were told. No connections to deeper history or context were shared. These were simply items, static artifacts.

Eventually, I could see that the label of Greek that I carried with me actually meant very little. I couldn’t participate in most of the practices that constitute Greek culture or weave myself into the fabric of those who came before me. So if I wasn’t Greek, then who was I?

When I started practicing Buddhism, the colorful vibrancy of the lineage stories I heard quickly enticed me. Tales of the Tibetan hero Gesar, fickle serpent lords called Nāgas, and the female deity of compassion White Tara rekindled my desire for stories of origin and supported my embodied understanding of meditation practice. When talking about lineage, Chögyam Trungpa told his western students, “You should realize that there is tremendous love and affection for practitioners coming from the lineage.”1 The felt experience of that statement—the balm-like ease and compassion from White Tara—drew me deeper and deeper into practice.

It is easy for ancestry and lineage to become ensnared. We should understand lineage as an umbrella category, of which ancestry is one form. We inherit ancestral lineage through our family; but there are other forms of lineage—spiritual, cultural, intellectual, philosophical. I have found it important to understand that each form of lineage nourishes a different aspect of my existence and facilitates another way I express myself in this world. Ancestry requires me to reckon with the reality that I come from a Greek family that adopted the culture of North American whiteness. This ancestry is distinct from the spiritual lineage gifts that I have received, and from the love of which Trungpa Rinpoche speaks that many practitioners experience. For those of us
whose ancestral and cultural lineages have been lost to whiteness, however, our longing to connect with lineage can turn us away from our European ancestry, which is laced with both oppressor and oppressed identities. Today, white people often make the mistake of believing distinct forms of lineage to be interchangeable. The richness of one’s connection to spiritual lineage does not equate having done the work to understand the cultural and ancestral lineages that condition one’s identity.

Through deepening my studies on ego, a door to the intangible realm of cultural identity began to open. I started to notice that if we don’t have a sense of our cultural identity, we can become entangled in the questions, “Who am I?” and “Where do I come from?” According to historian Nell Irvin Painter, “An essential problem here is the inadequacy of white identity... bring up whiteness and fewer people want to talk about it. Whiteness is on a toggle switch between ‘bland nothingness’ and ‘racist hatred’.” With this limited cultural understanding of identity, it is not especially enticing for white people to investigate their social and historical conditioning.

This simplistic, dichotomous view of white identity has led me to wonder, does whiteness allow room for ancestry? Is whiteness so big that it chokes out the embers of ancestry that stayed alive through generations of assimilation? Is it really a dichotomy between nothingness and hatred, or is it an entirely different paradigm?

During a particularly bleak January breakfast, my friend Kate confronted me with a question I hadn’t considered: As white people living in the United States, can there really be a way to embody our cultural lineages seemingly lost to whiteness? What is it to unearth the hidden identities and lineages that my body holds, to come to know how I interact with them and how they interact with society at large? What I hold is my Papou’s heritage of Greek customs coupled with whiteness. My heritage is both, not one or the other. I cannot seek to embody just one part of my ancestry because being a third-generation Greek American is why this body moves through the world in the way it does. This doesn’t mean I cannot learn more about Greece and Greek culture, but neither can I skate around a deep well of instructions I received on how to be white.

Historically, the evolution of whiteness gained strength as it adopted previously marginalized and oppressed groups such as the Irish, Greeks, Italians, and Jews over the late 19th and early 20th centuries. For those who had been previously excluded from the benefits of white
America, the assimilation into a socially privileged class gave more security than before, but it came at the cost of giving up the cornerstones of each culture’s native ways.\(^3\) That loss can be difficult to confront.

The exploration of ego is a brilliant starting point for understanding where we come from—where the construct of “I” originates. While the Buddhist examination of ego traditionally focuses on individual psychology alone, in today’s world, examining culture is imperative to this work. Some of us haven’t thought of our cultural background or don’t have much information about our bloodline. Nevertheless, investigating our ancestral and cultural lineages is an important way to understand where our choices stem from—how we learned what is “good” and “bad”. I believe many of our bodies’ systems are flooded with grief from not knowing where our sense of the world comes from. Instead of using the Dharma to work with such grief, Buddhist teachings have often been usurped as merely a way to find a family story.

Over time, the practice of investigating where I come from as a Buddhist and as a white American has strengthened a certain sense of home within myself. This home is tender and often leads me to question my assumptions and to listen with my heart. This home has separated me to an extent from the desired validation of systems such as patriarchy and capitalism. This process has also challenged me to better understand where the social conditioning of whiteness guides my actions and how I employ my Greek ancestry or my Buddhist lineage to evade doing the work to confront the conditioning of whiteness. My experience allows me to recognize that we can have both ancestry and lineage. We can investigate many family stories, even if they’re painful. But to clarify the history we’ve been born into and the spiritual practices we’ve chosen not only allows us to know ourselves better, but also transforms us into more beautiful and multifaceted practitioners.

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Notes


I'll Meet You There
by JAHAN KHALIGHI

We should dance
as if dancing were a symbol of peace
as if gyrating arms and fluctuating feet
were the protest signs
of the anti-war movement

We should dance
to shake and wake ourselves
from complacent stupor
for indigenous water protectors
on the frontlines of our future

We should dance
as if dancing were
finding our way home
as if our ancestors’ stories
were stored
in the calcified minerals
that built our bones

We should dance
to make sanctuaries of our bodies
enough to welcome the stranger
forced to flee
dance at the gates of detention centers
demanding migrant children
be released

We should dance

moved by the momentum of
the hummingbird fluttering
her wild wings
inside our chests
as if inscribed inside
the folds of our flesh
were scriptures of ancient text
and only through dancing
could this hidden wisdom
be expressed

We should dance

in the streets
like a thousand bursting roses
rising from an Arab Spring
as if the answers were less important
than the burning songs we sing

We should dance

as if Mandela just got released
from metal bars
as if the earth below
were actually the night sky
of another world
and our scurrying feet
were its
shining stars
We should dance
the earth pulsing like a drum
palms outstretched to celebrate
each rising of the sun
contract, expand,
hold, release,
reach out to be spun
circle our sacred hips
in honor of the waters we come from

We should dance
as if the ground were a dream
and movement made us lucid
as if our thoughts had been unplugged
and our hearts had gone acoustic
as if our bodies were shaped
and made for making music

We should dance
We should dance
We should dance

JAHAN KHALIGHI is a spoken word poet, artist, and educator, born and raised in the Bay Area. He is an alumni of June Jordan’s Poetry for the People and a former member of the Eugene Slam Poetry Team. As the community engagement manager for Chapter 510 and The Dept. of Make Believe, he curates and leads programs for Oakland youth to write with confidence and joy. Through California Poets in the Schools, he leads creative writing workshops at public schools and juvenile halls across the state. His original poetry has been featured at TEDxSonomaCounty and on Whoa Nelly Press.
Reflections on Embodiment, Culture, and Social Justice Work in Selected Buddhist Traditions

by ARISIKA RAZAK

Buddhism has to do with your daily life, with your suffering and with the suffering of the people around you. You have to learn how to help a wounded child while still practicing mindful breathing... Action should be meditation at the same time.

Thich Nhat Hanh

THESE WORDS BY Thich Nhat Hanh resonate with my search for a Buddhist lineage that encourages taking action in the world to alleviate the suffering of all sentient beings. This view calls for interweaving spirituality, physical embodiment, culture, and liberation in ways that attend to our particular socio-cultural positioning in society. If I talk about embodiment and lineage in the context of social justice without acknowledging the ways in which these factors show up in my life, I omit vital information about the importance of these issues for me. So in beginning this series of reflections, let me share a bit about my own background.

I am a U.S.-born, African American woman who came of age during the 1960s Civil Rights, Black Nationalist, anti-war, and Women’s Liberation movements, the integration of social activism and spirituality are extremely important to me. My identity has been shaped by movements which existed at intersections of ethnicity, culture, politics, and spirituality—as well as by decades of organizing in Black communities, women of color communities, and multi-ethnic progressive communities. My life reflects the contradictions and intersections of living as an urban mixed-class woman of color: While I do not identify as biracial, I have been other-mothered by women of Asian-American, Jewish-American and Euro-American descent. I am a survivor of sexual
abuse and domestic violence, and while I identify as bisexual, I live in partnership with a Euro-American man.

All of my identities are important to me, and at 71, they are deeply integrated into who I am. They form a unity of concerns, for I am all of my identities at each and every moment of my life. If I want to find a spiritual home, I can’t belong to a sangha that fails to recognize that we are occupying the stolen land of my Native American relatives, or that marginalizes Asian-American contributions to U.S. Buddhism. I can’t be part of organizations that don’t recognize and support LGBTQI people, or that minimize the continuing effects of anti-Black racism on African Diasporic communities. And while some Buddhist traditions embrace the concept of a “Divine Feminine,” I am deeply troubled when this concept doesn’t include the lives and bodies of “ordinary” women. This essay shares some of my thoughts and reflections on searching for a Buddhist spiritual home resonating with my embodiment, and diverse and intersecting identities.

The Spiritual, Cultural, and Political are Deeply Intertwined

While some consider social justice struggles involving race and racism to be political endeavors rather than religious or spiritual ones, for many people of color the spiritual, cultural, and political realms are deeply intertwined. Spirituality has been a foundational part of many U.S. civil and human rights struggles, providing refuge and healing for marginalized communities enduring state-sanctioned violence and dehumanizing mistreatment perpetrated by the dominant society.

My activist work in the 1960s, ’70s, and ’80s integrated culture, spirituality, and sociocultural liberation. The Civil Rights movement was grounded in African Diasporic cultural norms privileging voice, embodied experience, spirituality, and collective action by women and men. It was not a secular movement. My organizing with women of color was supported and inspired by global trans-historic legacies of powerful women who served their communities as spiritual leaders, healers, artists, freedom fighters, mothers, and traders/entrepreneurs. I am also a midwife practicing for more than twenty years who currently uses body-based methodologies to support the liberation and healing of marginalized populations, especially women, people of color, and LGBTQI communities.
I learned about Buddhism from first- and second-generation Euro-American teachers who travelled to Asia in the 1960s. They studied primarily with Theravāda Buddhism monastics and lay teachers, returned to the U.S., and developed *meditation-based convert Buddhism*, a term distinguishing this form of Buddhism from the *heritage Buddhism* of Asian populations in the U.S. and abroad.

I’ve attended retreats and trainings at predominantly white Buddhist institutions for over twenty years. I also teach in a small, diverse, inner-city meditation center founded by people of color and other members of marginalized communities. My teachings draw from diverse spiritual traditions, including Diasporic Yoruba traditions, North American Indigenous traditions, contemporary Wiccan traditions, and Buddhism.

‘Engaged Buddhism is Just Buddhism’

In the historical context of Buddhism, it is ironic that many meditation-based convert practitioners believe that politics and social justice activism are inherently opposed to Buddhist spiritual practice. This may reflect the secular nature of modern society, U.S. separation of church and state, or Protestant emphasis on spiritual practice for individual improvement.

Historically, Shakyamuni Buddha (c. 563 – 483 BCE) is said to have directly intervened to prevent the occurrence of war. His rejection of caste can be viewed as an act of social justice—inspiring the Buddhist conversions of many Dalit people and the creation of new twentieth-century Buddhist lineages. Thich Nhat Hanh’s definition of “engaged Buddhism” is supported by these types of actions:

> Engaged Buddhism is just Buddhism. When bombs begin to fall on people, you cannot stay in the meditation hall all of the time. Meditation is about the awareness of what is going on—not only in your body and in your feelings, but all around you.

In addition, the global establishment of Buddhism can be traced to political edicts of Emperor Ashoka, who ruled most of India between 268 and 232 BCE. Recognizing the devastating effects of war, he converted to Buddhism and sent Buddhist monks to Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Central Asia, and Greece. He developed a model of kingship which travelled to other Asian countries; in this model, the king was a pa-
A History of Euro-centric and Culturally Diverse Buddhist Practice Styles in the U.S.

U.S. Buddhism did not begin in the 1970s based on the efforts of Euro-Americans teachers who imported the tradition to the U.S.; rather, the first practicing U.S. Buddhists were Chinese immigrants in the 1820s, followed by Japanese monks in the 1890s. Nor is there one source of American dharma, since new elaborations of Asian Buddhist lineages continue to be exported to the U.S. Currently, two-thirds of the people identifying as U.S. Buddhists are Asian or Asian-American. And, as Asian heritage Buddhists practicing in convert establishments informed me, most Buddhists don’t meditate. “Meditation [is]… one branch of the eight-fold path taught by the Buddha—a path which includes ethical teachings, intellectual study, and transformation of personality and character through wholesome attitudes and deeds.”

The Buddhism promulgated in predominantly white, meditation-based convert Buddhist establishments is a Buddhism that reflects contemporary upper-middle-class, Euro-American norms. It emphasizes meditation, as well as “individualism, freedom of choice and personal fulfillment. These ‘non-negotiable cultural demands’ have reshaped Buddhist ideas… yielding a genuinely new religious product uniquely adapted to certain segments of the American ‘market.’”

This may not seem like a bad thing, since Buddhism has adapted to the cultural norms of each country to which it has spread. As Theravāda Buddhist teacher and author Larry Yang declares:

…”history seems to show us that the Dharma has survived multiple adaptations to the languages and cultural contexts of those who receive it. Since the Dharma is always necessarily expressed via a language and a culture, Dharma nec-
Reflections on embodiment, culture, and social justice work

A. Razak

ecessarily comes to reflect the different cultural experiences of different cultural communities.\textsuperscript{18}

However, the U.S. contains multiple cultures that exist in a system of race-based hierarchies. Asian Americans are often viewed as perpetual outsiders to America—and to “American culture”—no matter how long they’ve lived here. The exclusion of Asian American heritage Buddhism from contemporary discussions of “American dharma”\textsuperscript{19} may reflect unconscious assumptions that privilege the meditation-based practices of Euro-Americans as “true” or “essential” Buddhism while denigrating longstanding devotional and religious practices of Asian Americans as “cultural baggage” or superstitions that need to be rejected.\textsuperscript{20} Helen Terekhov’s claim in a 1992 issue of Tricycle: The Buddhist Review—that Asian Americans had made no significant contributions to Buddhism in America—generated significant push-back by Asian-Americans. Jodo Shinshu priest Rev. Ryo Imamura declared:

I would like to point out that it was my grandparents and other immigrants from Asia who brought and implanted Buddhism in American soil over 100 years ago despite white American intolerance and bigotry. It was my American-born parents and their generation who courageously and diligently fostered the growth of American Buddhism despite having to practice discretely \[sic\] in hidden ethnic temples and… concentration camps because of the same white intolerance and bigotry… Asian Buddhists… welcomed countless white Americans into our temples, [and] introduced them to the Dharma.\textsuperscript{21}

While meditation-based convert practices use physical embodiment as touchstones for individual practice,\textsuperscript{22} devotional rituals in heritage Buddhism are often collective embodied rituals involving families or communities. Japanese artist Mayumi Oda states that a Buddhist service commemorating her grandmother’s death occurred every month. Her step-grandmother lit candles, placed flowers, and burned incense, while a Buddhist priest led the family’s chanting of a Buddhist sutra.\textsuperscript{23} For many heritage practitioners, setting up altars for ancestors, lighting of incense, and offering of foods, chants, and other materials to the deities and the dead, as well as the practice of prayers for good fortune in the material world, are essential parts of the practice of Buddhism.
The ‘Body-Mind’ in Buddhist and Many Other Traditions

As a woman and a person of color, embodied spiritual traditions that connect to the material worlds are significantly important to me. Embodied spiritual practices (1) support movements for social justice; (2) generate courage in the face of fear; (3) help us survive grief, trauma and physical pain; and (4) remind us that we are more than our physical bodies.

As someone who draws from diverse spiritual traditions, I define embodiment as: (1) birth in a physical body embedded in the natural world; (2) deep alignment with the physical body, and metaphysical heart; (3) engagement with transpersonal realms via the body; and (4) acknowledgement of sociocultural identity and meaning in the world and the self. Fundamentally, embodiment matters. We journey from birth to death in an impermanent and changeable body, subject to illness, disability, and death. Our body-minds are vulnerable to the effects of social oppression: Our target and non-target social identities (e.g., race, class, age, ethnicity, disability status, etc.) literally shape the bodies in which we live. If I consider the issue of race, while science informs us that race is a fallacy, racism is utterly real. If we are institutionally targeted by racism, we—and our offspring—die sooner. We experience more illnesses, our immune systems are less robust, and we frequently lack the resources needed to survive and thrive.

Given the ubiquitous nature of the body-mind, almost all Buddhist lineages employ some embodied modalities. Theravāda teachings say that the “Four Foundations of Mindfulness” contain the Buddha’s instructions for contemplating mindfulness of the body, mindfulness of feelings, mindfulness of mind, and mindfulness of mind objects. This discourse provides instructions for meditating on eating, breathing, physical elimination, wearing clothing, and contemplating the decay of the body after death. It affirms that the body—and bodily processes—as well as mental states of hatred, delusion, distraction and contraction, and perceptions of sensual desire, doubt, and ill-will are all subjects fit for meditative awareness.

As Buddhism developed, embodied practices came to include devotional singing, chanting, dancing, and drumming; engaging in physical prostrations; circumambulating stūpas, and walking on pilgrimages. While some practitioners engaged in these modalities as individual
rituals of grief or devotion, others undertook them as a result of collective trauma or war. Embodied Buddhist modalities may have special resonance for socially oppressed groups who can use these modalities to explore their oppression and mindfully take action to end their suffering. As Mahā Ghosānanda declares:

We Buddhists must find the courage to leave our temples and enter the temples of the human experience, the temples that are filled with suffering. If we listen to the Buddha, Christ, Gandhi, we can do nothing less. The refugee camps, the prisons, the ghettos, and the battlefields they become our temples. We have so much work to do.

Contemporary Embodied Buddhist Practices Supporting Social Justice

Many Black, Latinx, and mixed heritage people of color have been drawn to Buddhism, although they may feel unwelcome in predominantly white Buddhist establishments. This can be due to high financial costs, access issues, unfamiliarity with silent practices, lack of other people of color, and silence in the face of social injustice endemic to many communities of color. In other words, many barriers to entry reflect some aspect of material embodiment in relative reality.

However, two newer versions of Mahāyāna Nichiren Buddhism have actively recruited people of color, in part by centering more embodied, less cerebral practices, and in part by emphasizing a commitment to anti-racist practices. Japanese Nichiren Buddhism emphasizes the Lotus Sutra, which proclaims that everyone possesses an internal Buddha-nature and can be enlightened in their current lifetime. Nichiren practitioners regularly chant Nam Myoho Renge Kyo, and study the writings of 13th century Japanese Buddhist monk Nichiren (1222 – 1282), who rejected the mainstream policies of government officials and Buddhist clergy of his era.

Nichiren-based Soka Gakkai International (SGI), founded in 1975, is the largest and most diverse lay Buddhist group in the world. Founded in direct opposition to 20th century Japanese militarism, U.S. SGI chapters regularly hold meetings in Spanish, and they celebrate diversity by offering conferences on race or language-related issues. In 2003, over twenty percent of SGI leadership positions were occupied by African Americans. According to Clark Strand “SGI members… are taught
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to transform themselves through daily practice as a way of transforming their environment, with an emphasis on demonstrable results… this, more than merely chanting for worldly benefits, is what [motivates] so many African Americans and other minorities to join SGI.”31

Black SGI practitioner J. Sunara Sasser notes:

It’s a fundamental SGI teaching that every member should do all they can to create peace and happiness in our lives and the lives of others… We fight to overcome the part of our nature that separates us from others and encourages conflict and division… That’s why the meetings involve chanting and heart-to-heart dialogue. We chant for the clarity and wisdom to identify the limitations and unjust thoughts within, as well as the courage to transform them.32

She also notes that SGI president Daisaku Ikeda:

…has publicly stated a passionate commitment to anti-racist engagement since the first time he visited the U.S. in 1960, [and] witnessed an act of racism against a black child… This moment [profoundly impacted] Ikeda, shaping his conviction that propagating Buddhism in the U.S. would have to involve directly addressing the prejudice and bias found in people’s hearts…33

Nichidatsu Fujii founded the pacifist Nichiren-based Nipponzan Myohoji Buddhist group in 1917. It conducts national and international peace pilgrimages accompanied by drumming and chanting.34

In 1998, two female Nipponzan Myohoji Buddhists co-led a year-long “Afro-Buddhist Interfaith Pilgrimage of the Middle Passage,” commemorating the Maafa (Great Disaster) that forcibly transported enslaved Africans throughout the world. Pilgrims prayed, chanted, drummed, and performed rituals together, travelling through the Americas, Europe, the Caribbean, and West Africa.35 Nipponzan Myohoji clergy also joined California Ohlone Indians and their allies for a walking pilgrimage (2005-2008) to honor the sacred Shellmounds of the Ohlone peoples.36

Pilgrimages are powerful collective, ritual endeavors. Their physical hardships encourage contemplation of personal and ancestral suffering, as well as their transformation. For many people of color, pilgrimages to sites of historic injustice may support culturally specific values of ancestral respect and renewed commitment to social justice.
Singing, chanting, and prayer are empowering, embodied technologies, enabling oppressed people to resist pain, fear, and bodily suffering. As Civil Rights-era singer and scholar-activist Bernice Johnson Reagon explains:

Sound is a way to extend the territory you can affect. Communal singing [announces]... you are here and possessing the territory. When police... would enter mass meetings and start taking pictures and names... we knew our jobs were on the line, and maybe more... inevitably somebody would begin a song. Soon everyone was singing and we had taken back the air in that space.37

My Personal Journey to Knowing Embodiment

While I have focused much of this discussion on the importance of socio-cultural identity and the use of embodied cultural practices to support contemporary people of color in the practice of Buddhism, especially in predominantly white convert establishments, I am equally concerned with female embodiment. My two decades as a nurse-midwife led me to inextricably link embodied experiences of the female body38 to the numinous or sacred. In my work with birth-giving women39—and in the home birth of my son—I witnessed a primal rite of passage that can serve as a template for spiritual initiation. Like “the dark night of the soul” that precedes spiritual transformation, the birthing process includes: willingness to sacrifice in service to life; acceptance of suffering and physical pain; surrender to uncertainty in the face of doubt; release of the ego and everyday identity; confrontation with death or the fear of death; profound transpersonal experiences; and the potential for spiritual, psychic, and emotional transformation.

The tools I used to guide women through labor included critical elements of meditation: mindful breathing while walking, sitting, or lying down; moment-to-moment attention to physical sensations; and intense focus on the ever-changing present. Midwifery also connected me to the work of parenting and the way that women—and other-gendered caretakers—employed Buddhist paramis (pāramitās)40 like patience, morality, sacrifice, determination, and unconditional love41 in the struggle to make a better life for themselves and their children. Unfortunately, birth-giving, and the roles of householders and mothers, were rarely discussed by my Buddhist teachers.42 As I explored Bud-
dhist scholarship, I discovered texts describing the womb and vagina as foul, disgusting, virtual hell-realms. How could the Buddha, who used maternal love as a metaphor for the tenderness with which we are to treat others, be reconciled with teachings that used the female body as a metaphor for the vileness of physical life?

The Complex Role of Female Embodiment in Buddhist Culture

The issue of female embodiment in Buddhism and its relationship to enlightenment is complex and contradictory. While many writings discuss the initial resistance of the Buddha to the ordination of women, according to Sponberg:

> The earliest Buddhists clearly held that one’s sex, like one’s caste or class… presents no barrier to attaining the Buddhist goal of liberation from suffering. Women can… pursue the path. Moreover, they can (and did) become arhats, Buddhist saints who had broken completely the suffering of the cycle of death and rebirth.

Tibetan Vajrayāna traditions affirm the fully enlightened status of Tara, the female liberator who vows to return to the world in female form until all beings are liberated. While Tara is associated with stereotypical “feminine” values of compassion and healing, her wrathful form uses arrows, swords, or axes to destroy ignorance, enabling a swift path to enlightenment. Many contemporary U.S. feminists have been drawn to Tibetan teachings that offer positive images of female embodiment and the Divine Feminine.

Barbara Reed suggests that as Avalokiteśvara, the Indian male bodhisattva made his way into China, he “became a beautiful white-robed Chinese woman. In addition to the sex change, the female symbolism of the bodhisattva was expanded… by the addition of yin symbols (for example, moon, water, vase) from the yin-yang polarity of Chinese thought.” Mahāyāna Buddhism’s Prajñāpāramitā, variously described as the “mother of all the Buddhas, genetrix of awakened states… [and] the womb of totality” has provided refuge and inspiration to many contemporary meditation-based convert Theravāda female teachers.
Recognition and Transformation

I deeply respect my Euro-American convert teachers who travelled and studied in Asia, especially those who included themes of embodiment in their teachings. Their experiences with Buddhism were profoundly transformative, inspiring them to share the teachings with others. However, their adaptations of Buddhism, inadvertently and unconsciously contributed to the marginalization of people of color and other oppressed groups. Fortunately, some predominantly white convert institutions have acknowledged institutionalizing oppressive dominant culture norms and are working to change this.

I’m lucky to teach at an institution created for marginalized communities. Founded to support marginalized groups and individuals, the East Bay Meditation Center offers multiple self-identified affinity-group sanghas; explicitly acknowledges the impact of social oppression; and runs almost entirely on donations. It is a place where I can not only recognize the complexity of the nature of Buddhism in the west but also where I may bring through my teaching essential embodied practices to students and offer a deeper more inclusive meaning to the idea of the sacred feminine. I’m also profoundly grateful for some of the Black Dharma teachers in other convert establishments who included elements of African Diasporic culture in their dharma teachings.

In closing, I would like to cite the writings of Larry Yang, renowned Chinese American Theravāda Buddhist teacher:

“…the evolution of the different Buddhist schools (Theravāda, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna) was not strictly a matter of scriptural development and interpretation but also a matter of the Dharma being transformed by the cultures with which it came into contact… [This] development is sometimes couched in the language of multiple ‘turnings of the Wheel of Dharma’… But we can also say that distinct Dharma lineages blossomed… as the Dharma encountered and was integrated into particular geographic, social, and cultural worlds.

I am blessed to live in times when diverse Dharma lineages are still blossoming—and I hope to see more sharing between U.S. Buddhist lineages.
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Notes


2. The term, “woman of color” is derived from the term “people of color”. It originated in the U.S. where notions of “whiteness” and “non-whiteness” (aka “color”) determined whether one could be killed without redress, legally retain land and property or access necessary resources. Currently this term is applied to people of African, Asian, Latinx, Indigenous, Caribbean, Pacific Islander, or Western European (aka “Middle Eastern) heritage, including their biracial and multicultural descendants.

3. “Other-mothering” is a concept used in a variety of African Diasporic communities to refer to the nurturing care offered to children by women who are not their biologic mothers. This care can be provided by actual relatives or ‘fictive’ kin.

4. While this is a problematic term, referring to socially constructed notions of an “ideal” cis-gendered feminine construct who is often dissociated from the bodies and realities of living women, it is a term employed by some Buddhist teachers I am citing.

5. A U.S.-centric term based on the importance of “whiteness” and “non-whiteness” (aka “color”) as a category that determined whether one could be killed without redress, access necessary resources or legally retain land and property. Currently applied to people of African, Asian, Latinx, Indigenous, Caribbean, Pacific Islander, or Western European (aka “Middle Eastern) heritage, including their biracial and multicultural descendants.

6. Many scholars list 3 major schools of Buddhism. 1) The Theravāda tradition (the Way of the Elders) focuses on the Pali canon—written transcriptions of the Buddha’s teachings produced approximately 600 years after the Buddha’s death. The Theravada tradition emphasizes meditation, monastic life and Buddhist teachings. Theravadin teachings are predominant in Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos. 2) Mahāyāna Buddhism arose about 500 years after the Buddha’s death. It emphasizes the role of compassion and wisdom, focusing on the enlightened deities (buddhisattvās) who commit to return to the world until all sentient beings are liberated. Mahāyāna Buddhism includes Zen Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, Pure Land Buddhism and Tantric Buddhism; it’s found in China, Tibet, Korea, and Japan. 3) Vajrayāna Buddhism, found primarily in Tibet
and Bhutan, has links to Mahāyāna Buddhism but emphasizes secret teachings, tantric and artistic rituals, and an accelerated path to enlightenment for lay people as well as monastics.

7. Terms used to describe the Buddhism brought to the U.S. by white Western converts include: “convert Buddhism,” “import Buddhism,” “Protestant Buddhism,” “elite Buddhism,” “meditation-based ‘convert’ Buddhism). This article uses the terms “meditation-based convert Buddhism” or “convert” Buddhism. (See: Ann Gleig, “The Shifting Landscape of Buddhism in America,” Lion’s Roar: Buddhist Wisdom for Our Times, February 3, 2018, https://www.lionsroar.com/the-shifting-landscape-of-buddhism-in-america/.


10. The Dalits, formerly titled “untouchables” make up between 1/6 and 1/4 and of India’s population (250-300 million persons). As members of Hindu’s lowest social class, they endure tremendous social oppression. See https://www.dalitsolidarity.org/dalits-and-untouchability.html.

11. The Sakya Buddhist Society of India (1898) was founded to introduce Dalit people to Buddhism. Independence advocate, B.R. Ambedkar, a Dalit contemporary of Gandhi was India’s first Law and Justice Minister, authoring its first constitution. Believing that Hinduism was incompatible with justice for Dalit people, in 1956 he publicly converted to Buddhism with half a million of his followers. The Narayana Buddhism (Neo-Buddhism) he created emphasized social justice, and rejected many traditional Buddhist beliefs (karma, rebirth, meditation, the Four Noble truths, etc.).

12. Thich Nhat Hanh, “In Engaged Buddhism, Peace Begins with You.”

13. According to Ann Gleig, prior to these reforms, meditation was rarely practiced even in Theravāda monasteries. See: Ann Gleig, American Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Modernity, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 21.


15. The Three Jewels of Buddhism include 1) the figure of the historic Buddha, Shakyamuni Buddha, c 563-483; 2) the Dharma or the teachings of the Buddha and their various lineages; and 3) the Sangha, the community of people who practice together and study the Dharma.


17. Jan Nattier, “Buddhism Comes to Main Street.”
19. Many popular articles in mainstream publications initially identified convert-based meditation practice as the new American Dharma.
22. In the meditation-based convert establishment in which I practiced, movement via embodied practices of chi gung, or yoga as well as vipassana “walking meditation” accompanied most retreats. However, these offerings were generally presented as practices beneficial to individual practitioners.
26. In the aftermath of the killings of thousands of Cambodians, Mahā Ghosānanda defied threats of death to lead refugees in a chant affirming that only love could conquer hatred. See: Jack Kornfield, *The Buddha is Still Teaching: Contemporary Buddhist Wisdom*, (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2010), 237-238.
30. Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871-1944) is credited with starting Sōkka Gakkai in 1930. He was jailed for his resistance to WWII Japanese nationalism and militarism, as was his student, Josei Toda.
33. Ibid.
34. Nipponzan Myohoji Buddhists participated in the Indigenous “Longest Walk” (1978), and in 1994-95 their Interfaith Pilgrimage for Peace and Life, travelled from Auschwitz through Bosnia, Iraq and Cambodia to Hiroshima.

35. For a discussion of the complexities, contradictions, and difficulties rooted in race, class and trauma, that emerged between Pilgrimage participants, see Peter Sutherland, “Walking Middle Passage History in Reverse Interfaith Pilgrimage, Virtual Community and World-Recathexis,” *Etnofoor* 20, no. 1 (2007): 31-62.


38. Virtually all of my clients identified as cis-gendered women.

39. Currently, birth givers include a variety of genders. However, my midwifery service was exclusively with cis-gendered females.

40. Theravāda Buddhism’s Ten Paramis/Ten Perfections include: generosity, morality, renunciation, wisdom, energy, patience, truthfulness, determination, loving-kindness, and equanimity.

41. These qualities are present in other caretaking roles, e.g., caring for one’s parents or spouse during illness, dying, etc.

42. Exceptions include Stephen Levine and Debra Chamberlin-Taylor who focused on couple relationships as gateways to spiritual development.

43. In the Metta sutta, the Buddha says: “Even as a mother protects with her life, her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings.” See: Kittisaro and Thanissara, *Listening to the Heart: A Contemplative Journey to Engaged Buddhism* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2014), 225.

44. See Alan Sponberg, “Attitudes Toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism,” in *Buddhism, Sexuality and Gender*, ed. Jose Ignacio Cabezon (Albany: State University Press, 1992/1985), 3-36. Sponberg suggests that early Buddhist writings discuss women’s ability to become fully enlightened in a female body, while later writings reflect the institutionalization of monastic life which emphasized 1) the undesirability of birth and rebirth; and 2) strategies for resisting attraction to female bodies generated by celibate, (heterosexual) male monastics.

45. Ibid, 8.

46. Venerating female deities doesn’t always connote respect for human women; the Tibetan term for women can be translated as “inferior being” or “lesser birth”. Some Tibetans deny the possibility of ‘awakening’ in a woman’s body. See: Michaela Haas, *Dakini Power: Twelve Extraordinary Women Shaping the Transmission of Tibetan Buddhism in the West* (Boston: Snow Lion, 2013), 5-7.


49. Examples include 1) Stephen Levine’s *Opening the Heart of the Womb Meditation*, which honored and praised the female body; 2) Jack Kornfield’s public declaration that racism is the core wound of American society, and his teaching stories highlighting contemporary people of color and their struggles against oppression; 3) Debra Chamberlin-Taylor’s commitment to chanting, movement and qigong—and to embodied immersions in nature.


51. The East Bay Meditation Center website states: “Founded to provide a welcoming environment for people of color, the LGBTQI community, people with disabilities, and other underrepresented communities, the East Bay Meditation Center welcomes everyone seeking to end suffering and cultivate happiness. Our mission is to foster liberation, personal and interpersonal healing, social action, and inclusive community building. We offer mindfulness practices and teachings on wisdom and compassion from Buddhist and other spiritual traditions.” [https://eastbaymeditation.org/about/mission-history/](https://eastbaymeditation.org/about/mission-history/).

52. Deep bows to Ruth King (Theravāda Insight Meditation traditions), Karla Jackson-Brewer, (Vajrayāna traditions), and Rev. Jamil Scott, who included African/Diasporic songs and ancestral honorings in presentations I attended.


54. The importance of culturally relevant, embodied, cross-lineage sharing was validated at a historic, international gathering of 70 Buddhist teachers of Black African Descent at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Northern California. Group panels, dharma talks, embodied workshops and creative modalities reflected a diversity of Buddhist/African Diasporic cultural norms, rituals, aesthetics and activisms. Most participants found the gathering was a profoundly healing and transformative space. The two-day public portion of the event brought an additional 250 Black people to the site.
How can we become conscious of the hidden story our bodies are telling with their every motion? While our words can speak falsehoods, the language of our body will not allow us to deny the truth. Movement has the capacity to unearth repressed memories and ancestral traumas that shape the way that our DNA is read and transcribed. Our stories are literally encoded in the way we move through the world—move through life. Movement and its symbology are the language of the subconscious. I became conscious about the repressed trauma that my body was carrying through the narrative I was expressing in my freestyle dance movement.

This question of how we become conscious of our body’s hidden story is the core inquiry of my dance company, Embodiment Project. In my study of movement, spoken word, and the human condition, I’ve learned that dance can speak, language can move, and bodies are walking vessels of history. Consider the way a loved one’s idiosyncratic gestures encapsulate the distinct quirks of who they truly are, or the way metaphors can hang in the air after they are spoken as though they are living, breathing beings.

In 2008, I established Embodiment Project using kinesthetic movement to energize and celebrate contemporary liberation movements such as Black Lives Matter, Restorative Justice, and Me Too. Our quest is to embody the movement within these movements. We utilize concert dance as a platform to amplify the voices of organizers and movement leaders to truthfully represent their perspectives. Dance evokes e-motion—energy in motion. Art propels us forward; it begs us to question. Embodiment Project is just that: energy in motion.
that supports these liberation movements not as a stationary structure but instead as a dynamic, emotive, cyclonic entity.

Embodiment Project explores real stories of sexual trauma, structural racism, and everyday prejudice to validate women, queer people, youth, and communities of color. The company consists of nine core street dance artists, most of whom found their way to concert dance through freestyle battling and club/social dancing. I am committed to choreography as a tool to reclaim the healing capacity of street dance traditions, to initiate individuals into their power, and to connect with ancestral lines.

Our work questions the prevalent system of ideals that calls vulnerability and emotional expression weakness. Embodiment Project creates a space where these emotional intricacies can be mapped through the body and then materialized into form and flow to show their raw beauty, courage, and strength. We further challenge cultures of silence on stigmatized experiences by entertaining and engaging audiences in themes that many people want to avoid—and can avoid if they are in a place of privilege. We articulate vulnerable autobiographical narratives about trauma that challenge hip hop’s commercial veneer.

Embodiment Project’s most recent work, Ancient Children, delved into the school-to-prison pipeline and how structural racism harms children in school settings. This work examines the ways that colonization and white supremacy shape the dominant discourse on educating children, which continues to fail children of color. The following photos were taken from various performances exploring themes of race, sexual trauma, state-sanctioned violence, and healing.

Rather than offering traditional captions for these photos, I included poetry because choreopoetry (the emotive intersection of spoken word and dance) is the organizing methodology to Embodiment Project’s work. The street dance styles (i.e., popping, waacking, house, breaking, and hip-hop) open the physical space necessary to embody and animate the performance poetry.
The birds become the fish
The mammals become the land
The world embraces the reality
That we are Both/And.
a two spirited seahorse hatched new skin in the place where my legs gave out
on the concrete when I first tried to rewrite my history
old moons got swallowed by generations deprived of bedtime stories
and now reappear at the nape of my fingernails
that which you resist becomes overgrown orchards of the obvious
when you amputate a
creation story
five more moons in five more fingernails spring up in its place
and lizard tails will always grow back sharper
N. Klaymoon

The Movement Within the Movement

love how you
resurrect the bee colony out of colonized honey
draw the silence out of music
the stillness out of dance
the law out of gravity
the grain of tooth out of sand
the blues out of the roots of a fire
flames growing from her sorrow
the s/he who has no eyes, no ears, no nose
and yet she can still smell the pheromones of my future lives
and can resurrect the imaginal cells
from the wing patterns of matriarchal butterflies
a phenomenon encoded in the genetics of a warrior
disguised as all things delicate
N. Klaymoon

The Movement Within the Movement

a water-based wholeness
purging my most haunted archaeology
an extinct language
to tell her
that she is
extraordinary
we travel the astral plane in dream time,
to the place where mermaids take mud baths
in Atlantean soil and exfoliate their scales
with Lemurian coral.
ladies laced in aquamarine
and fossils of all of our secret thoughts and forgotten dreams
we hold the space where
infants go during their 9th month of sleep
the temple of the fema-9 priest,
and her polyrhythm transform the infant’s fins into human feet.
and then she clips the new toenails with her teeth
and then spits them into the sky to display a moon crescented on both sides—
there the moon hangs on cumulus clouds like stretch marks in her inner thighs.
born from death
regenerating her seeds in the footprints of human sickness weeds
and immortal bulbs
redwood forests that have created barter systems undergroinds
transporting water through their connected roots
this is Grandmother Spider
who invented the alphabet in her web for humans to document evolution
the 8-legged creatrix who spins new universes from the spool
inside her belly
this is the sweetest fruit that gets its seeds eaten and secreted
through animal bodies and back into the soil
the more of it that is eaten
the more of it that can grow
this is survival of the tastiest
survival of the sweetest
survival of those who know
N. Klaymoon  The Movement Within the Movement
NICOLE KLAYMOON founded Embodiment Project (EP) in 2008. As a solo artist, Klaymoon created and toured the dance theater production, Sixth Vowel, choreographed by Rennie Harris and directed by Kamilah Forbes of the New York City Hip Hop Theatre Festival. At the intersection of trauma research, conceptual live performance, and personal testimonies, her signature approach to dance-making emphasizes the sacred practice of voicing stories of trauma in the context of community. In her time serving as Artistic Director of Embodiment Project, Klaymoon has directed and choreographed nine evening-length productions including Music of the Actualized Child, which delved into the school-to-prison pipeline and how structural racism harms children in school settings.