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"Buddhish" Not Buddhist: Womanist Reflections on My Journey Towards Buddhism

ARISIKA RAZAK

> *"Though I am a Black* lama *(Tibetan Buddhist teacher), in my heart is the Black Church."*
>
> —Lama Rod Owens[1]

> *"Once at breakfast in a café, with my teacher sitting nearby, I said that Vodou and Zen were the same."*
>
> —Zenju Earthlyn Manuel[2]

> *"Our ancestors also taught us mindfulness from the juju of the drums, the stomp of our feet, and through the resounding and healing a capella voices."*
>
> —Valerie Mason-John (Vimalasara)[3]

> *"I am the daughter of Black writers who are descended from Freedom Fighters who broke their chains and changed the world. They call me."*
>
> —Amanda Gorman[4]

UNLIKE MANY of those who were initiated, ordained, or born into a particular religious tradition, I define myself as spiritual rather than religious, a concept suggesting that one can be deeply committed to the spiritual life without formal affiliation with one particular religion. While I embrace Buddhism, I have continued to use the spiritual practices I encountered prior to my engagement with Buddhism and prefer the label "Buddhish," a term I first heard at a celebration of 75 Buddhist teachers of Black African descent and diverse Buddhist lineages in 2019 called "The Gathering II." I subsequently discovered that this term had been used in 2017 to describe those who found value in Buddhist practices without naming Buddhism as their primary religion.

One such example is Dr. Melissa Yuan-Innes, the daughter of Chinese Canadian immigrants who were raised as Christians, but refused to expose their children to any particular spiritual tradition. While Yuan-Innes initially identified as agnostic, in her book, *Buddhish: Exploring Buddhism in a Time of Grief: One Doctor's Story*, she describes the support she found in Buddhism after a devastating stillbirth:

> "I like Buddhism, but I can't say I'm a world-class Buddhist… However, even a few tablespoons of Buddhism helped save my sanity, and I believe that it can help anyone become more grounded and open-hearted especially after tragedy butchers your life."[5]

Similarly, Kaya Oakes uses the term "nones" in her article, "Meet the 'Buddhish' Nones," to describe the thirty-plus percent of young people between the ages of twenty and forty who, when asked to identify their faith, respond "none." Oakes states:

> "I spent a year conducting in-depth interviews with… young adults who choose no single religious practice… [N]early half of them had discovered Buddhism… [M]any… mix Buddhist teachings or practices with those of other religious traditions. They often hesitate to call themselves Buddhists because they don't belong to a sangha, because they have concerns about cultural appropriation or because they don't want to abandon the religions in which they were raised."[6]

Currently, I teach at a Buddhist meditation center and have formally engaged in many mindfulness retreats and multi-year programs in Buddhist studies. Like the young people Oakes describes as "Buddhish nones," I integrate diverse spiritual traditions with Buddhism. Like Yuan-Innes, I apply mindfulness techniques and dharma teachings to my everyday life. Unlike her, in times of crisis, I turn to earth-based, female-centered spiritual practices of African Diasporic religions, Indigenous belief systems, and contemporary neo-Paganism, rather than the silent meditation taught in western convert Buddhist establishments.[7]

My Early Buddhist Practice

In the 1990s and early 2000s I worked with many multi-ethnic, BIPOC,[8] and exclusively Black groups. Many of these groups were ceremonially based and used a variety of female-centered, spiritual practices. However, they often lacked clear ethical guidelines for resolving interpersonal conflict. Some routinely ignored the needs and priorities of non-dominant members, whether those members were Black, queer, working class, multi-racial, disabled, or BIPOC. I was exhausted from confronting the anti-Black racism and implicit bias of our so-called allies—whether they were Euro-Americans or other people of color—and I was no longer willing to work with Black groups unable to hold all of my intersectional identities and personal alliances.

I was overjoyed when a friend asked me to join her new private sangha consisting of seven women of color led by Jack Kornfield. I didn't know a lot about Buddhism, but I knew and had worked with many of the sangha's members. We met about nine or ten times a year for close to a decade, and in the last year and a half, we added the biracial (male) partner of one of our members. This sangha provided me with a basic introduction to Buddhism and a community in which silent meditation, dharma teachings, Buddhist precepts, and our familial and worldly concerns as women of color activists, artists, spiritual practitioners, teachers and healers were freely spoken and discussed. We shared our everyday experiences of racism, sexism, classism and homophobia and we reflected on the practical applications of Buddhist values in our daily lives.

It was only after entering predominantly white Buddhist institutions and formally studying Buddhist texts (in translation) that I found myself questioning my affiliation with Buddhism. This essay discusses some of the insights and challenges that have emerged in my twenty-plus-year relationship with Buddhism, and my struggles to bring my Black, female embodiment into my Buddhist practice.

Disclaimers and Limitations

This essay is exclusively based on my very limited experiences with US Buddhist communities. When I speak of Buddhism, I am primarily speaking about western meditation-based convert Buddhism, particularly the USA Insight tradition which is based on Theravada teachings.[9] This is the tradition to which I was first introduced and in which I formally studied Buddhist texts in Spirit Rock Meditation Center's two-and-a-half-year Dedicated Practitioner Program. I have never been to Asia or spent time in a Buddhist monastery. Most retreats I have attended—with the exception of retreats for people of color—have been primarily populated by Euro-American participants. And while I have attended numerous week-long and ten-day retreats, I have never participated in month-long or three-month-long silent retreats.

The convert meditation-based Buddhist establishments I attended were largely silent about the fact that Buddhism came to the United States via Asian Americans in the late 19th century. I did not learn that Asian *Americans* taught the first Euro-American practitioners and are the majority of US Buddhists today. While contemporary authors like Chenxing Han (*Be the Refuge: Raising the Voices of Asian American Buddhists*), Ann Gleig (*American Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Modernity),* Duncan Ryuken Williams (*American Sutra: A Story of Faith and Freedom in the Second World War),* and Larry Yang (*Awakening Together: The Spiritual Practice of Inclusivity and Community*) have all challenged the idea that "US Buddhism" is defined by western convert institutions, this belief still exists. The idea that convert, meditation-based Buddhist institutions are the *only* US Buddhist establishments is so normalized that I was once asked by a white practitioner why people of color didn't like Buddhism!

Most people don't know that the contemporary emphasis on silent meditation as *the* primary practice for Buddhist monastics and lay people only emerged in the late nineteenth century. Worldwide, most Buddhists don't meditate and many schools of Buddhism that serve large numbers of people of color in the US do not emphasize silent practice. The peer-led Nichiren Soka Gakkai International is the most diverse Buddhist community in the US and the world. It is one of many Mahāyāna Nichiren Buddhist traditions, and its adherents study the teachings of the Japanese monk and reformer, *Nichiren* (1222-1282). They chant "Nam Myōhō Renge Kyō," the Japanese title of the Lotus sutra. The noted African American singer, Tina Turner, is a well-known Nichiren Buddhist practitioner and Myokei Caine-Barrett who is of African American and Japanese descent, is the first woman and the first Westerner to become a bishop in the Nichiren Order of North America. This essay does not address these groups since I lack direct experience with their teachings and praxis.

I also cannot address the practices of Zen teachers of color like the late Thich Nhat Hanh, Angel Kyodo Williams, or Zenju Earthlyn Manuel—or the work of Black or Asian teachers of color in Vajrayāna (Tibetan) lineages, for I know their work primarily through their writings.

My *Womanist* Identity

When I joined my initial Buddhist sangha, I was already a self-defined healer, teacher and *womanist*, a term used by Alice Walker to define a Black feminist or feminist of color.[10] My two decades of work as a health activist, midwife, and women's retreat leader, my identity as "spiritual but not religious," my "other-mothering" by women of diverse ethnicities, and my work with spiritual and activist women of color organizations, all supported this identity which Walker defines as follows:

> "**Womanist** 1. From *womanish.* (Opp. of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. *Serious.* 2. *Also:* A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non-sexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as a natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or non-sexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?" Ans.: "Well you know the colored race is just like a flower garden with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time." 3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless.* 4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender."[11]

Like Walker, I am a Black, bisexual cis-gendered female elder who *loves* music, dance, Spirit and the Folk. I resonate with Walker's call for healing, self-care, and spending time in nature, especially with other women of color. Her definition describes the embodied spiritual activism and woman-centered traditions of the African Diaspora. My identities as female, Buddhist and *womanist*, converge in the term, "*Buddhish.*"

Indigenous Earth-Based African Spiritual Traditions

While one should never generalize about the continent of Africa, African/Diasporic scholars generally acknowledge certain themes as common to many African Traditional Religions. Some of the themes that occur in diverse West African Traditional Religions but that may or may not be found in *all* African religions include:

1. Belief in a sentient, ensouled universe populated by sacred ancestors, elemental powers and other-than-human entities whose actions influence human life and well-being;

2. Integration of sacred and secular realms so that "everyday" acts (cooking, healing, story-telling, weaving, farming, metalwork, and the creative arts, etc.) are often accompanied by prayers, and rituals which praise and propitiate other-than-human entities;
3. Diverse pantheons of male, female, non-gendered, fluidly-gendered or ambiguously gendered deities;
4. Community-based rituals inclusive of drummers, dancers, praise-singers, and storytellers who promote human interaction with Spirit/s, ancestors, and elemental powers;
5. Highly trained priesthoods inclusive of women;
6. Embodied worship styles enabling trance, spirit possession, healing and prophesying, via direct access to Spirit and the Divine;
7. Social recognition of complementary spheres of male and female influence and power, which are reflected in women's roles and responsibilities in the political, spiritual, social and cultural arenas. Normalization of female leadership within these arenas;
8. Culturally specific definitions of "femininity" which include physical strength, business acumen (expressed in holding positions of authority outside of the home), spiritual leadership, fertility, and artistic creativity; and,
9. Personal and community rituals that employ music, dance, singing and artistic expression to support morality, critique wrong-doing, and comment on daily events.

Even though I am second generation "spiritual but not religious," many of these principles were familiar to me as a child. We had limited experiences with the outdoors, but my mother found inspiration in nature, and I spent many hours in urban parks and playgrounds. I instinctively knew that Spirit communicated in the shape of clouds, the colors of leaves, the movement of water, and the flight of birds.

While she was a deeply troubled and abusive parent, my single mother was also a socially engaged activist and organizer. I took for granted that women parented, worked outside the home, engaged in racial uplift, and were spiritual and political leaders. Although my spirituality was not primarily shaped by the Black Church, I grew up hearing the deeply embodied drumming and singing that pulsed through the doorways and windows of Harlem's numerous "holiness" churches.[12] I learned about Black congregational singing listening to repurposed spirituals sung in demonstrations and picket lines during the Civil Rights Movement. When I listened to Nina Simone singing "Young, Gifted and Black" in a Philadelphia concert hall, and heard congregants in Selma, Alabama singing about "Black power" in church, I knew that spirituality, creative expression and liberation were all connected.

Womanist Spiritualities: My African/Diasporic Foremothers

Although my mother was nominally Christian, we only attended Church sporadically. However, she was a woman of faith who regularly prayed for our health and safety. On New Year's Eve, she made an annual prayer at midnight, invoking health and wellbeing in the coming year. When we were ill, we rarely went to doctors; prayers, rest, and the laying on of hands were her preferred healing modalities. This was not unusual for a Black woman born in 1910, for medical care for Black people in the early twentieth century was frequently expensive, limited, or not to be trusted.

In spite of lacking formal medical training, Black women successfully served their communities as healers, root workers, conjure women, and midwives before, during and after slavery. Their call to healing was often a spiritual one, and during the evangelical ferment of the "Second Great Awakening" (1790-1845) many Black women experienced a divine revelation, calling them to the ministry. When sexism restricted access to the pulpit, many became itinerant lay preachers—and they persisted in their ministry in spite of significant social obstacles.

The gospel preached by many of these women integrated spirituality, liberation, Black moral uplift and the empowerment of women. Rebecca Cox Jackson (1795-1871) founded a Black female Shaker community after experiencing racism in a predominantly white Shaker community. Sojourner Truth (c. 1797-1883) was a celebrated orator, abolitionist, and women's rights advocate. Maria Stewart (1803-1879), writer, evangelist, anti-slavery activist and women's rights proponent is credited as the first US woman to publicly address mixed-race, mixed gender audiences.

In areas of the Diaspora, where African-based religions were syncretized with Christianity, Black women held formal positions of spiritual authority and led nation-wide liberation struggles. Haiti's Cecile Fadiman (1771-1883) was an initiated *mambo* or *Vodou* priestess.[13] In a ceremony with *houngan* (priest) Dutty Boukman (1767-1791), she was possessed by the Haitian *loa* (deity*) Erzulie,* who called for an uprising of enslaved Africans, an event that initiated the Haitian revolution. Queen Nanny of Jamaica, an *Obeah* practitioner*,* founded the free maroon settlement of Nanny Town.[14] And Marie

Laveau (c.1801-1881) was a celebrated New Orleans *Vodou* priestess, herbalist, activist, and midwife.

Whether they were formally ordained as priestesses and preachers, or self-proclaimed healers, holy women, prophets, and freedom fighters, I claim these women as my spiritual ancestors. They used their power to liberate their communities. The fictional character of Baby Suggs in Toni Morrison's novel, *Beloved*, provides a powerful example of these healers:

> Uncalled, unrobed, unanointed… Baby Suggs, holy, followed by every black man, woman and child who could make it through, took her great heart to the Clearing—a wide open place cut deep in the woods… She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them that they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure. She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they could not have it.[15]

In the sermon that follows, Baby Suggs tells the people to laugh, dance, and cry together, and to love and touch their despised and holy flesh. While fictionalized, this sermon reflects the healing spiritual modalities of Africa and the Diaspora.

Ordinary and Extraordinary Awakenings in Embodied Spiritual Traditions

Many Indigenous African/Diasporan spiritual practices use complex, highly developed systems of music, dance, drumming, and song to facilitate individual and collective healing. Individuals seeking mastery of these technologies often spend years being trained and tested. However, the mundane experiences of "ordinary" human life also serve as catalysts for spiritual transformation. Childbirth, lovemaking, immersion in nature, or situations provoking deep suffering and grief can support or trigger spiritual awakenings.

Many of the 19th century preachers and healers I have described lacked formal religious training. Some were illiterate. However, they had deeply personal experiences of slavery, sexism, and poverty. If they were enslaved, their lives, their bodies—and the lives and bodies of their kin—were controlled by a system that regarded them as animals. If they were free, they were subject to patriarchal norms demanding their silence and obedience to men.

For some, it was suffering that precipitated their awakening. Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman (1822-1913) were brutally treated by the people who owned them. Truth, who was physically isolated on her owner's farm, built a small temple in the woods. God spoke to her there, encouraging her escape.[16] Tubman was severely injured by an overseer and suffered lifelong sequelae. However, her injury also led to visions and premonitions. She led 300 enslaved Africans to freedom, crediting God as the source of her success. She claimed she only went where God sent her, and that God helped her elude the slave catchers pursuing her.[17] Rebecca Cox Jackson's first vision occurred during a horrific thunderstorm—a phenomenon so terrifying that she prayed for death or redemption.

In the Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Color Purple,* Alice Walker's fictional character, Shug, has an epiphany as she contemplates suffering while immersed in nature:

> My first step from the old white man (the Christian God) was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed.[18]

The experience of these women speaks to me, for I know that formal religious training is not required to encounter the Sacred. We simply need a body/mind/psyche that is opened to wonder—and the ability to recognize the moments when Spirit is present. While pregnancy, childbirth, and deep emotional connection have precipitated some of my own spiritual epiphanies, I have also encountered the Divine in the midst of mundane activities. Driving my car to or from work, I would notice sunlight striking my windshield—and suddenly, Spirit descended. In that moment, I *knew* I was connected to the whole of creation—and that in that moment *all was well*.

Buddhism's Lack of Congruence With My Buddhish Beliefs

As an African American woman who has experienced mystical moments in a female body, I honor female embodiment and divinity, liberatory activism, and body-based practices inviting a direct experience of the sacred. While these beliefs are the core of my identity as *Buddhish*, they are not core elements of western convert Buddhism. Although the founders of the US Insight Meditation tradition consciously affirmed female deities, teachers and nuns, they were often silent about the misogyny and female body hatred in many Buddhist texts. As a midwife and birth-giver, I knew that the natural birthing process employed critical elements of mindfulness: intense focus on the breath while sitting, walking, or lying down; sustained attention on physical sensations of pain; and a constant awareness of the ever-changing moment. Mindfulness and meditation were applied to grief, to pain and to sports, but none of my teachers spoke of the experience of childbirth. In academic presentations made by Buddhist scholars, I learned of early Buddhist texts that described the womb and vagina as hot, suffocating, hell-realms. In some traditions, the Buddha was never physically in contact with his mother's polluting womb, gestating in a crystal vase inside her body, and exiting through her side, rather than through her vagina.

And while I heard the term "liberation" frequently used by Euro-Americans in their dharma talks, liberation was rarely connected to contemporary struggles of Black people in the US. My teachers talked about the engaged Buddhism of Thich Nhat Hanh (1926-2022) in Viet Nam, the peace work of Maha Ghosananda (1913-2007) in Cambodia, and the non-violent teachings of Martin Luther King (1929-1968). However, I did not hear about recent peace pilgrimages conducted by *Nichiren* Nipponzan Myohoji Buddhists who created the 1998-1999 "Afro Buddhist Interfaith Pilgrimage of the Middle Passage." Pilgrims drummed, chanted and offered prayers and libations at former plantations, auction sites, and slave dungeons throughout Europe, the Americas, the Caribbean and West Africa. Nipponzan Myohoji Buddhists also joined California's Indigenous Ohlone people as part of a four-year pilgrimage honoring Ohlone sacred shellmounds.

While silence and contemplation are present in many religions, chanting, and drumming are also forms of mindfulness. While walking meditation, yoga and chi gung were always offered in the retreats I attended, they were rarely presented as being as important as stationary sitting. If singing and chanting were offered, they were rarely framed as foundational practices.

Diverse Buddhist Cultures

In Hawaii, a predominantly Asian state where Buddhism is the second largest religion, traditional Asian cultural norms form a container for Buddhist practice. Reverend Christina Moon resides at Daihonzan Chozen-ji, a Hawaiian Zen monastery and temple predominantly populated by Asian Americans. She contrasts the performative practice of wearing Japanese clothes, or using Japanese expressions that she often found among Euro-Americans in American Zen centers with Asian cultural values of humility, respect for elders, and willingness to serve that permeated Chozen-ji:

> Right now, the fridge is bursting with homegrown papayas and avocados from *dojo* members who know we have monks to feed. Several days a week, one of our Zen priests comes to trim the grass for hours

> in the hot sun, his visage covered in grass clippings. We practically have to force him to get reimbursed for equipment repairs.[19]

These traditional Asian American Buddhist values are similar to the values that sustained many southern Black rural communities in the twentieth century. The sharing of food, the offering of service, and the establishment and maintenance of churches and schools were often community responsibilities. They were echoed in my initial sangha where we broke bread together, cleaned up, and offered support to one another outside of our meetings. Refuting the idea that cultural Buddhist practices are somehow less valuable, Rev. Moon writes:

> …Culture itself should be regarded as something that actually matters. Encompassing more than… ritual and arts, culture is how beliefs become actions… That's why when Western convert Buddhists dismiss Asian approaches to Buddhism—because they focus on maintaining a shrine, prayer, prostrations and pilgrimage, engaging in the arts… or espousing a Buddhist worldview without… emphasis on formal meditation—they're missing what it means to allow the Buddha's teachings to penetrate from all angles.[20]

The founders of the Insight tradition made a conscious decision to remove Buddhist religiosity to make it more acceptable to secular US participants:

> We wanted to offer the powerful practices of insight meditation, as many of our teachers did, as simply as possible without the complications of rituals, robes, chanting and the whole religious tradition.[21]

However, this decision implies that prayers, chanting, bowing, and ritual are unnecessary, inappropriate, or undesirable elements of Buddhism. In *The Shamanic Bones of Zen: Revealing the Ancestral Spirit and Mystical Heart of a Sacred Practice,* Zen priest Zenju Earthlyn Manuel asserts that it was in the daily embodied practices of Zen chanting, bowing, sitting, and walking that she encountered the precolonial and transformative foundation of Zen:

> I experience Zen practice as a shamanic journey of the spirit and I have found this to be true for many other practitioners… I found ritual and ceremony in my life to be the most profound way to enter into a realm of liberation and embody compassion for my life and all others."[22]

Early Asian monasteries may have been more inclusive of ceremony, and ritual than is commonly assumed. Jack Kornfield writes of research done by Thai Buddhist Kamala Tiyavanich in her book, *Buddha in the Jungle:*

> [In] Thailand… you see a very wide range of meditation practices… [F]orest lineages included healers, educators, schoolteachers, priests,

> peacemakers… soothsayers… and shamans who worked with the ghosts and spirits of the other realm. In most of these monasteries, there were rituals and festivals and dharma arts, such as painting and music. Other monasteries trained elephants… There were even monasteries… where the monks used to enter into boat races with one another… The monasteries were community centers, education centers, and centers for people in every aspect and phase of their lives.[23]

When I read this passage, I realized that if the next Buddha is the sangha, as Thich Nhat Hanh has suggested, I want a sangha that can laugh and cry as my foremothers did. I want a dharma that loves and praises the flesh. I want a Buddha that shape-shifts and testifies and speaks to our condition as Black people in the vernacular modalities that are part of my heritage. I want words of liberation, and songs of freedom, and to have my skin color, my gender and my sex cherished as tenderly as a parent holds their well-loved and wanted newborn. I want more dharma talks on the rituals, the festivals, the arts, and the elephants!

And I know that these changes were possible. In *Awakening Together: The Spiritual Practice of Inclusivity and Community,* senior teacher and Buddhist practitioner Larry Yang suggests that Buddhism has changed to fit the contours and contexts of various cultures it encountered. It took over six hundred and fifty years for the Buddhism that originated in India to integrate Chinese philosophies of Taoism and Confucianism—and until that happened Buddhism was unable to take root in China.

In the last five years, while I was not yet comfortable expressing it openly, I began to feel that Black Buddhish people needed to change how the dharma was taught. We have endured so much body shaming as Black people and Black female people that it broke my heart to encounter it in Buddhism. We have endured intergenerational trauma at the hands of the dominant culture for centuries—and in spite of colonization and internalized oppression, we have developed profound body-based methodologies that support Black healing, resilience and self-love.

Insights from Other Black Teachers

As I became aware of other Black teachers in the Theravāda tradition—and encountered Black teachers in other forms of Buddhism—I realized that many Black teachers were making the Dharma more accessible to African descended people. Finally, I could exhale! Ruth King is trained in the western Insight tradition. She is the author of *Mindful of Race: Transforming Race from the Inside Out,* a book and learning program that applies Buddhist teachings to the transformation of racism. She was the first teacher I knew to include videos of

Nina Simone and other Black artists in her retreats. Vajrayāna teacher, Karla Jackson-Brewer, included Black Church music in one of her presentations. Zen priest Zenju Earthlyn Manuel is an African drummer, who has attended Two Spirit Women's Sun Dances. She taught me that Black Buddhists could continue to practice in other religious traditions. Her recent book, *The Shamanic Bones of Zen* is a revolutionary project that exhumes the Indigenous, embodied, and *shamanic* roots of Zen.

However, it was not until I attended "The Gathering II," at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in 2019, that I began to fully appreciate the diversity of Black Buddhist teachers. Some of them teach in traditions that center embodied practices and ancestral veneration. Others who work with the Black community routinely employ trauma-informed mindfulness and themes emphasizing Black liberation. I was invited to contribute to that event, and I used body-based methodologies to help us connect with our ancestors. Composer, social artist and vocal consultant, Rachel Bagby, brought African-based sound methodologies to her healing session—and our public event opened with African drumming.

Several recent publications—including *Black and Buddhist: What Buddhism Can Teach Us About Race, Resilience, Transformation & Freedom,* edited by Pamela Ayo Yetunde and Cheryl A. Giles, and *Afrikan Wisdom: New Voices Talk Black Liberation, Buddhism, and Beyond*, edited by Valerie Mason-John/Vimalasara—are ground-breaking anthologies that center the analysis, praxis, and embodied Diasporic methodologies of diverse Black religious scholars, practitioners, healers and activists. *Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation*, by Rev. angel Kyodo williams and Lama Rod Owens with Jasmine Syedullah, PhD, offer essential ruminations on race, queerness, sexuality, and a new *radical dharma* that that foregrounds Black liberation. And, Rima Vesley-Flad's *Black Buddhists and the Black Radical Tradition: The Practice of Stillness in the Movement for Liberation* reviews the ways in which Black Buddhist teachers are using the hard-won insights of radical Black thinkers to produce a dharma that prioritizes our healing, resilience and liberation.

Books are not the only way by which Black Buddhists incorporate African methodologies. A plethora of free or low cost online summits, classes, and real time healing journeys are being presented by Black Buddhist who link ancestral reverence, intergenerational healing, and African Diasporic methodologies and mindfulness practices. Many major online venues, book and journal publishers, and predominantly white Buddhist establishments are supporting these efforts, which must continue.

For too long, Black Buddhist practitioners have worked in isolation. There is no one door to the dharma—and no one way of practice. But the need in our communities is great. We need to share the many ways in which we address our community's healing and how, as senior practitioners, younger practitioners, iconoclasts and traditionalists, we are making new bridges across the river of suffering.

Conclusions

I entered the western Insight convert community because of the positive experiences of my initial sangha. That sangha was predominantly female, small and BIPOC, and it applied Buddhist teachings to our experiences of oppression. I was able to practice in large, predominantly white convert Buddhist establishments because I had other communities which met my needs for embodied female-centered practice. I decided to pursue formal studies of the Dharma because I was asked to teach with the late Marlene Jones at Spirit Rock Meditation Center and to lead retreats at the East Bay Meditation Center *prior* to engaging in formal Buddhist studies. While both these institutions honor other wisdom traditions, *I could not teach with integrity without deeper knowledge of Asian Buddhist traditions.*

However, deeper immersion in the study and praxis offered by predominantly white, convert Buddhist institutions helped me understand that I am *Buddhish,* not Buddhist. I need to practice—and teach—the Dharma through the inclusion of sacred and secular traditions elaborated by peoples of African descent. Embodied spiritual traditions exist in many Asian and African cultures, and as Olusola Adebiyi, (Sola Story), asserts, the practices of "African Mindfulness":

> …allow us to make links between the *orisha* trance of Ifa and *deva* invocation dances of India, the meditational chants of the !Kung and the Twa people, the Buddhist chants of Tibet… the role of the Nepalese gongs, the sublime music of the Mbira, and modern Western "mindfulness" inductions.[24]

In closing, I want to acknowledge my first Euro-American teachers who showed me only kindness. I want to acknowledge the Asian/Americans who brought the Dharma to the West, and maintained their practice in spite of racist hostility. I also want to acknowledge my Indigenous, African-Diasporic and neo-Pagan teachers. Finally, I want to acknowledge the collective sangha of Black Buddhist teachers who are serving our people in these challenging times.

ARISIKA RAZAK is a Professor Emerita of Philosophy and Religion with a concentration in Women's Spirituality. She is the former Director of the Women's Spirituality MA and PhD Program at the California Institute of Integral Studies, where she also served as Director of Diversity. Arisika is an African-American healer, ritualist, and spiritual dancer, who practices an eclectic mix of Earth-based spiritual traditions. Currently a core teacher at the East Bay Meditation Center, she served as an inner-city nurse-midwife for more than 20 years.

NOTES

1. Lama Rod Owens, "The Dharma of Trauma: Blackness, Buddhism and Transhistorical Trauma Narrated Through Three Ayahuasca Ceremonies" in *Black & Buddhist: What Buddhism Can Teach Us About Race, Resilience, Transformation and Freedom,* 44-64 (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2021), 60.
2. Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, *The Shamanic Bones of Zen: Revealing the Ancestral Spirit and Mystical Heart of a Sacred Practice* (Boulder: Shambhala, 2022), 27.
3. Valerie Mason-John (Vimalasara), "When Will We Sing, Dance, Tell Our Stories, Dwell in Silence and Begin Breathing Again?" in *Afrikan Wisdom: New Voices Talk Black Liberation, Buddhism, and Beyond,* 271-281 (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books), 271-272.
4. Doreen St. Félix, "The Rise and Rise of Amanda Gorman," *Vogue*, May 2021, https://www.vogue.com/article/amanda-gorman-cover-may-2021 accessed 4/7/2021.
5. Melissa Yuan-Innes, *Buddhish: Exploring Buddhism in a Time of Grief: One Doctor's Story* (Olo Books, 2017).
6. Kaya Oakes, "Meet the 'Buddhish' Nones," *Tricycle*, Spring 2017, accessed February 1, 2022, https://tricycle.org/magazine/meet-buddhish-nones/.
7. Terms for the Buddhism brought to the US by Euro-Americans who studied in Asia in the 1960'-70's (including founders of the US Insight Meditation Society) include: "convert Buddhism," "import Buddhism," or "meditation-based 'convert' Buddhism. I use the terms "meditation-based convert Buddhism" or "convert Buddhism." (See: Ann Gleig, *American Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Modernity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 34-37.
8. Black, Indigenous, people of color (BIPOC) is a US-centric term that reflects the different levels of oppression experienced by communities of color in the US. It centers the impact and experience of slavery and genocide of Black and Indigenous people.
9. Many scholars list three major schools of Buddhism: First, Theravāda, the Way of the Elders, focuses on the Pali canon—written transcriptions of the Buddha's teachings produced about 600 years after his death. Theravada emphasizes meditation, monastic life and Buddhist teachings; it's found in Thailand, Burma/Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos. Second, Mahāyāna Buddhism arose about 500 years after the Buddha's death. It emphasizes the role of compassion and wisdom, focusing on enlightened deities (bodhisattvas) who vow to return to the world until all beings are liberated. Mahāyāna Buddhism is found in China, Tibet, Korea, and Japan. It includes Zen, Pure Land and Tibetan Buddhism. Third, Vajrayāna Buddhism has links to Mahāyāna Buddhism. Found primarily

in Tibet and Bhutan it emphasizes secret teachings, tantric and artistic rituals, and an accelerated path to enlightenment for lay people and monastics.

10. Although Alice Walker, Clenora Hudson-Weems and Chiweenie Oconto Ogunremi independently developed definitions of "womanism" in the early 1980's, it is Walker's definition with which I identify.
11. See: *womanist* definition: Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983.) xi-xii. While Walker's "womanist" definition was created as a culturally Black, female centered, spiritually grounded, southern alternative to the term, "feminist," her definition did not specifically reference Christianity. Pagan, Native American, and earth-based spiritual traditions are all referenced in this definition. See: Arisika Razak, "Her Blue Body: A Pagan Reading of Alice Walker," *Feminist Theology* 18 no. 1 (2009): 100-126.
12. Black Holiness churches emerged in the evangelical ferment of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They emphasized a personal relationship with God, included female preachers, and incorporated practices of singing, shouting, falling out and speaking in tongues.
13. Haitian *Vodou* (aka *Vodoun, Vudu, Vodun)* is an African Diasporic religion based on the traditional religions of the Ewe and Fun peoples of Dahomey (now Benin), Nigeria and Togo, West Africa as syncretized with Catholicism. In the USA, particularly in Louisiana, *Vodou* was further syncretized with European spiritism, and Indigenous Caribbean/Amerindian spiritual traditions to become *Louisiana Vodou*.
14. *Obeah* is an African Diasporic religious tradition found in Jamaica, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, Belize, and other Caribbean nations. It combines West African religious traditions, European spiritism, Christianity, and Caribbean/Amerindian spiritualities.
15. Toni Morrison, "From Beloved" in *My Soul Is a Witness: African-American Women's Spirituality – A Sourcebook,* ed. Gloria Wade-Gayle's (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 103-104.
16. "Sojourner Truth," This Far by Faith, PBS, accessed 2/28/22, https://www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/people/sojourner_truth.html.
17. Joyce Elaine Noll, *Company of Prophets: African American Psychics, Healers and Visionaries* (St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 1991), 71-73.
18. Alice Walker, *Living by the Word: A Writer's Activism* (New York: Random House, 1997), 8.
19. Reverend Christina Moon, "From 'Just Culture' to a Just Culture," *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, October 29, 2020, accessed May 2, 2021, https://tricycle.org/trikedaily/asian-american-erasure-buddhism/.
20. Ibid.
21. See Ann Gleig, *American Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Modernity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 54.
22. Manuel, *The Shamanic Bones of Zen*, 5.
23. Jack Kornfield, "This Fantastic Unfolding Experiment," *Buddhadharma: The Practitioner's Quarterly*, Summer 2007, 38.
24. Olusola Adebiyi (aka Sola Story), "African Mindfulness" in *Afrikan Wisdom: New Voices Talk Black Liberation Buddhism and Beyond,* ed. Valerie Mason-John (Vimalasara) (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books 2021), 225.

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