



Breaking our Brains and Hearts Open: Dr. Rima Vesely-Flad's *Black Buddhists and the Black Radical Tradition*

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FIRST OF ALL, thanks to Rima Vesely-Flad for this rich offering to those of us who have been studying the dharma for a while and to those who are new to the dharma. Vesely-Flad's work sets the "table" and tone for all of the scholarship that is sure to follow. As a Black woman in academia who turned to meditation several years ago—at a time when I was suffering—the author's personal story in the opening pages very much resonated with me.

I recently read a blurb from Rev. angel Kyodo williams about Christina Cleveland's text, *God Is a Black Woman*. About the book, Rev. angel says, "Black women broke the academy's brain with personal narrative as collective scholarship and liberatory path all-in-one..."¹ This is precisely how I felt as I read Vesely-Flad's manuscript; she is breaking our brains *and* hearts open and ushering the reader into re-memembering ourselves to our bodies. She does this by being firmly grounded in the scholarship while simultaneously following the lead of those who are the subject of her text.

Although her personal story ends with the introductory chapter, I could still hear Vesely-Flad's voice from beginning to end. This ability to be present in the text while letting these collective voices shine through exemplifies and models the work we, as people of color, are called to do around our quest for liberation. Moreover, the way the author gathers these individual voices, which form a kind of tapestry of interpretation and deployment of the Buddha's teachings in practical ways, echoes the work of ancestors who did not necessarily call themselves Buddhists nor adherents to the Black radical tradition. They just did their work on behalf of us all, in the name of our collective liberation.

As I was reading, the tension I sensed between practice and theory, and the theory being embedded in the practice, kept nagging at me. As I mentioned, I

came to the dharma because I needed to deal with my suffering before it dealt with me. This experience kept returning as I read Vesely-Flad's thorough explanation of the history of not only the Buddha and his teachings but also the debates around certain concepts, including, for example, the highly debated definition of "non-self." I think part of my discomfort comes from Westerners' intellectualizing practices that must be felt and experienced. This is something that Rev. Zenju Earthlyn Manuel speaks and writes about extensively. Nevertheless, because of the revolutionary potential that these teachings have for those of us of African descent in a white supremacist society, the work Vesely-Flad does to historicize and contextualize the importance of these practices cannot be understated. I would have devoured and benefitted from this text if it had been available to me when I started on this path in academia, where *the head* is the priority.

The subtitle, "The Practice of Stillness in the Movement for Liberation," also intrigues me. There are several ways to read it: as a political, social justice movement *and* as the internal movement of waking up to the potential for liberation. Even though the society may not move, our practice can help us avoid being tossed around by it. I was drawn to reflect on the Black Christian tradition of movement when one is in worship—singing, swaying, getting happy—and its relationship to the stillness that, even as many of us challenge it, remains one of the primary instructions of meditation. I was inspired to spend some time considering the paradox of finding stillness *within* the movement of the body. Of course, I am not the only one considering this idea, as the wisdom of somatics exemplifies—which Vesely-Flad mentions is making its way into conversations on releasing both intergenerational and quotidian trauma that people of African descent in the U.S. experience. Sometimes being still can actually trigger the trauma that we are trying to face and respond to in our meditation practice. At those times, we may *need* to move our bodies. Because movement is a part of so many of our other religious traditions, we let ourselves indeed move in order to move the trauma through and usher it out.

I found myself sitting up a little straighter as I read Vesely-Flad's words, reminded of the countless ways that people of African descent have adopted and adapted what we need in our quest not just to survive but to thrive in a country that did not mean for us to do either. Clearly, Black Buddhists at the center of the author's study carry on this tradition, "reinterpreting Buddhism in distinctive and important ways."² They drum, hum, sing, and pour libations, "dance, clap, and shout," as the author says in the epigraph to the introduction. She does an amazing job of illuminating how they take the insights that come through the silence they cultivate on the cushion to make their voices heard out in the world, not on *behalf* of others, but because they understand

that their fates are inextricably bound up with those who are victimized by state-sanctioned violence. Instead of turning away from their suffering, they embark on the difficult work of skillfully responding to it—an awakening in itself, I think.

I want to take Vesely-Flad up on her extensive exploration of the concept of non-self, with which I personally have a difficult time, and with which her other writings have helped me—“Black Buddhists and the Body: New Approaches to Socially Engaged Buddhism” and “Racism and *Anatta*: Black Buddhists, Embodiment, and Interpretations of Non-Self.”³ She explains in its simplest form that *anatta* (non-self) is composed of Five Aggregates: “body, feeling sensations, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness.”⁴ I also appreciated her extensive consideration of different Black Buddhist practitioners’ interpretations of what that term means for them. Rather than the spiritual bypassing for which non-self can be used, it becomes a tool for Black people to step off the hierarchical ladder where we are at the bottom, especially Black women. I especially love Devin Berry’s thinking about non-self as not being simply the absence one’s own self, but rather of something filled with one’s ancestors. For me, this kind of thinking about this highly contested concept, again, lends itself to the goal of collective liberation. It also brings into the discussion the inexorable relationship between the relative and the absolute, something with which I think Black Buddhists are keenly aware and grappling. Perhaps it is analogous to racism in some ways: how it is an illusion yet has real-world implications. Black people have a larger self that cannot be hemmed in by white supremacist notions of the Black body, but we must learn how to deal with our history and its legacy in the way that our bodies are devalued. We must be on the alert against internalizing others’ delusions, which then contribute to our continued practice of harming ourselves and each other.

I especially enjoyed the last few chapters of the manuscript in which Vesely-Flad brings into focus the felt experience of Buddhism and how Black people deploy it as a pathway, or perhaps as Rev. Zenju would say, as a gateway to their individual and collective liberation. It was here that the tension that I experienced between the headiness or intellectualizing of Buddhism and my bodily experience of the practice was reconciled. This is where I could sit cross-legged (because lotus pose doesn’t work for me) and feel into the revolutionary potential of Buddhism for Black people. I kept being reminded of Charles Johnson’s essay, “Why Buddhism for Black America Now?” and I could see why.⁵ There were many moments of full-on exhale while I was reading, knowing that this refuge was available to me and those who look like me.

I only struggle with the use of the word “resilience” to describe people of African descent in this country, and it’s partly a result of my quarrel with

language. Bringing in our neighbors in the Global South, the Haitian people, I was reminded of how people often use this word to describe them. But, as blogger Ryan Jiha notes, the term “glorifies the oppression that Haitians have faced at the hands of colonialism since their independence almost 220 years ago—the same oppression Haiti continues to face in a white supremacist world. It reinforces a narrative that Haiti and other ‘failed states’ are supposed to survive, rather than thrive.”⁶ Or, as novelist Edwidge Danticat says, just because Haitians are resilient doesn’t mean that they can suffer more than other people. Likewise, I think the narrative in the United States that African Americans are “resilient”—that we can make a way out of no way, or take our suffering and turn it into the blues (and indeed, this is what we do)—can contribute to the narrative of Black super/sub-humaneness.

I also think it’s important to face and acknowledge two additional points: first, meditation is not a panacea. Living out here is hard, and because we are flawed humans, it’s not always easy to tap into the truth of the Four Noble Truths—and certainly not the Eightfold Path! Meditation is not a stand-in for professional psychological guidance. I mention this not to suggest that there is a gap in Vesely-Flad’s work but because I have heard people want to use meditation as a panacea. In fact, meditation may actually arouse a bunch of experience that will increase our suffering. I *want* to say that those who have been a part of these traditions for centuries know that. How do we bring that knowing to the United States where, especially if we’re just beginning, we want immediate relief from our suffering? Relatedly then, another thought that arose for me is around being ever mindful of the fact that the assimilation of these teachings to support our liberation demands continual practice. It’s not a one-and-done.

I appreciate Vesely-Flad for including the teachings of luminaries like Audre Lorde and James Baldwin. The more I’ve been reading them these past few years, the more I hear the Buddha’s teachings in their words. This brings me to my final reflection: people like Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, and Sojourner Truth lived into their liberation, always mindful of their individual freedom as inextricable from that of the collective. That, of course, brings me to the now with the teachers and practitioners the author highlights in her book, all committed to Black collective liberation. This honing in—as one gateway—and making these larger connections are critically important.

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Imagination. She is currently at work on a book project that explores the autobiographical writings of several Black women Buddhists as part of the African American literary tradition. You can find her blogging about all things African and African diasporic at www.alligatorwoods.blog.

NOTES

1. ICYMI: Rev5: Facing War +Waging Peace-March 6, Email newsletter, March 6, 2022.
2. Rima Vesely-Flad, *Black Buddhists: The Practice of Stillness in the Movement for Liberation* (New York: NYU Press, 2022), 6.
3. See: Rima Vesely-Flad, “Racism and *Anatta*: Black Buddhists, Embodiment, and Interpretations of Non-Self,” *Buddhism and Whiteness: Critical Reflections*, eds. George Yancy and Emily McRae (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2019), 79–97; and Rima Vesely-Flad, “Black Buddhists and the Body: New Approaches to Socially Engaged Buddhism,” *Religions* 8, no. 11 (2017): 239, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel8110239>.
4. Vesely-Flad, *Black Buddhists*, 8.
5. Charles Johnson, “Why Buddhism for Black America Now?” in *Taming the Ox: Buddhist Stories and Reflections on Politics, Race, Culture, and Spiritual Practice* (Boston: Shambhala, 2014), 63–78.
6. Ryan Jiha, “Haitian Resilience is Not a Sign of Strength; It’s a Sign of Our Betrayal,” *Medium*, August 11, 2020, <https://medium.com/@rjiha/haitian-resilience-is-not-a-sign-of-strength-its-a-sign-of-our-betrayal-80b1ecfa49f3>.

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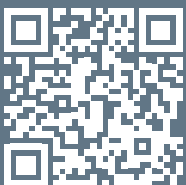
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