



In Response: A Black Buddhist Hermeneutic within the Field of Buddhist Studies

RIMA VESELY-FLAD

B *BLACK BUDDHISTS AND THE BLACK RADICAL TRADITION: The Practice of Stillness in the Movement for Liberation* locates the Buddhist interpretations and practices of people of African descent within a genealogy rooted in the Black Radical Tradition and argues that the emphasis on psychological freedom is congruent with teachings on Buddhist liberation. As Dr. Tracey Hucks notes in her response, it decenters the textual study privileged within the field of Buddhist Studies and lifts up the lived experiences of Black Buddhists and their orientation toward ritual-centered meaning-making. It centers on embracing the Black body in this practice of meaning-making—from bowing and prostrating, to being grounded in the breath, to dancing to the beat of African drums. Indeed, as Hucks describes, it offers “a distinct Africana Buddhist hermeneutic within the wider tradition.” Hucks notes the significance of a tradition for Black people in which release from all suffering is the central teaching. She writes that in *Black Buddhists*, she can see that “Black Buddhists incorporate into their devotional systems a creative and life-sustaining repertoire of spiritual practices and sacred rituals designed to heal suffering and trauma.”

In seeking to understand and explain the psychology of displacement of people of African descent in the United States, Africana scholars adopt a compassionate tone. Hucks quotes Dr. Charles Long, whose groundbreaking book, *Significations*, illuminates the psychological meaning of landlessness. In applying Long’s theory, Hucks writes: “More broadly, in response to their identity as a displaced population grappling with ambiguous questions of origins, home and homeland, and belonging, African descendants in the diaspora have consistently engaged in finding a new ‘land language’ through which to politically,

culturally, economically, and religiously encode a meaningful existence.” Hucks reiterates that Buddhism, as people of African descent interpret it, provides a meaningful lens through which to grapple with and heal intergenerational trauma related to dispossession and dislocation from one’s family and land. However, such healing work does not replace the work of justice, but rather, is uplifted as necessary *alongside* the work of justice. This includes, but is not limited to, dismantling the system of mass incarceration and engaging in housing justice and other anti-poverty work.

As aforementioned, Hucks asserts that *Black Buddhists and the Black Radical Tradition* offers a new hermeneutic within Buddhist studies. I affirm that my method of interpretation starts with the intertwining definitions of freedom that support the lived experiences of Black Buddhists: spiritual, psychological, and political. Indeed, Black Buddhists point to socially-induced suffering as well as suffering that arises from craving. While there is an emphasis on enlightenment, it is not starkly distinguished from political freedom. There is a recognition of the importance of causes and conditions and changing the degrading conditions that Black people have been forced to disproportionately endure. Yet, Black Buddhist interpretations of liberation do not stop at dismantling oppression: the voices included in this book emphasize cultivating practices that facilitate turning toward internal *conditioning*. Thus, there is a concerted effort on engaging in grassroots activism and turning outward to dismantle oppressive structures while simultaneously turning inward to skillfully address inner suffering, including internalized oppression. Again, Hucks uses Long’s work to refer to Black Buddhist practice as meaning-making for people experiencing intergenerational trauma.

Hucks asks: how do I understand multiple religious belongings? The grassroots research for this book illuminates how claiming multiple religious identities and practices is generative rather than oppositional in the lived experiences of Black Buddhists. Most interviewees grew up in the Christian church, and indeed, many still find great meaning in the music, community life, and resistance to white supremacy embedded in their childhood church institutions. Buddhism, for these practitioners, offers practical methods for turning toward their internal suffering and practices that incorporate not only Christian images, but also African-rooted images and rituals. Rather than adopting a binary worldview, which can be found in Northern European religious and philosophical interpretations of the body,¹ Black Buddhists embrace a pragmatic view of belonging, which embraces and incorporates multiple religious identities rather than hardening fixed dualities.

The emphasis on meaning-making through claiming multiple religious identities, among other identities, is also central to Dr. Toni Pressley-Sanon’s

response to *Black Buddhists*. There is ample weight put on the experience of meaning-making simply in reading the book. For Pressley-Sanon, a practitioner and a scholar of Black studies herself, there is an experience of being mirrored and celebrated in the practice of reading quotes from the interviewees. Pressley-Sanon echoes the optimistic tone that undergirds the approach of this book, in which she feels mirrored. Indeed, it was deeply gratifying to hear from both of my respondents that they, too, engage this book not only as senior scholars, but as Black women who embrace contemplative practices and have found sustenance in this book.

Pressley-Sanon acknowledges at the outset that she engages *Black Buddhists* not only as a reader who is writing on similar themes, but also as a Black woman meditator who sat a little bit taller and felt pride as she read the book. Such personal engagement is particularly meaningful to me as a scholar-activist. As I acknowledge in the introduction, the impetus to write this book arose not only from intellectual curiosity as I observed the response—and lack thereof—of the church in the Black Lives Matter movement in Ferguson, but also from my personal quest to attain inner stability in the face of overwhelming suffering. Pressley-Sanon notes at the outset that the personal voice that I bring to the introduction, and the depth of acknowledgment that my interviewees bring to the book as a whole, resonates with her on multiple levels.

I appreciate as well the different themes that Pressley-Sanon uplifts as meaningful: an emphasis on multiple ways of understanding stillness; the importance of processing trauma somatically; the nuanced and perhaps opposing ways of interpreting teachings, such as non-self; and the reflection on what it means to see core dharma teachings embodied in Black liberation figures such as Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth.

With regards to privileging resilience and the narratives of Black super-humanness, Pressley-Sanon makes an important point. In my introduction, I quote Kevin Quashie, whose book *The Sovereignty of Quiet* points to an underlying racism in the celebration of Black public protest, which can be read as a kind of resiliency. One of the reasons I wrote this book is to challenge the dominant narratives with the counter-narrative that Quashie offers: it is important that Black people cultivate and honor an inner refuge in which one does *not* have to project resilience or greatness, but rather, can withdraw and allow for experiences of confusion, self-doubt, shame, exhaustion, and immobilization to arise.

For many Black people, such experiences of falling apart are a result of trauma. Pressley-Sanon aptly recognizes the importance of acknowledging traumatic experiences, and in the somatic experience of working with trauma, allowing it to be transformed. Perhaps what is most salient in Pressley-Sanon's response

is her acknowledgment that dharma teachings must be experienced in order to be fully understood. While the academic field of Buddhist studies emphasizes textual interpretation of primary texts—an approach acknowledged by Hucks as well—Pressley-Sanon disrupts this emphasis by pointing to the importance of understanding the personal interpretations and lived practices of Buddhists, including Black Buddhists. Her experience of *Black Buddhists and the Black Radical Tradition* is in line with Black feminist and womanist scholarship that uplift one's personal voice as central to intellectual engagement.

Indeed, Black feminist and womanist scholars critique academic scholarship as myopic for its failure to acknowledge how one's social location influences the selection of topics for academic study, interpretation of texts and subjects, and concluding assertions. The dominance of white, male-bodied elites in the academy has privileged certain discourses and undermined others. In deconstructing and disrupting patterns of white patriarchal approaches to academic study, Black feminists and womanists disrupt unacknowledged norms. Pressley-Sanon and Hucks similarly disrupt standard academic norms by naming the departure from orthodoxy in both the methodology embedded in this text as well as the Black Buddhist subjects whose voices are uplifted.

Hucks asks if I can imagine Buddhism, as a tradition and set of institutions in the cultural landscape of the United States, taking the place of the Black Church as an institution to foreground and support public protest, such as the street protests of the Black Lives Matter movement. I respond to this query with a qualified “yes.” There is increasing visibility of Black Buddhist teachers in the landscape of Buddhism in the United States. There are numerous books published by Black Buddhist teachers that explore the wisdom of the Buddha, opportunities to directly study and be mentored by Black Buddhist teachers, and increasing numbers of retreats led by people of color, Black women, and African-descended monastics. Such accessibility may fuel the inner lives of activists and assert the importance of rest, healing, and solitude alongside sustained activism. Yet, there remains a lack of institutions led by Black Buddhists, in contrast to a long history of the Black church and Black preachers in the United States.

Thus, I suggest, in 2022, that the iterations of Buddhism articulated by Black teachers will primarily fuel the engagement of Black activists *within* their communities and that the Buddhism articulated by Black people will take a long time to be institutionalized and therefore visible. Perhaps Black Buddhist teachings and rituals will support a broader “Healing Justice” movement in which activists focus on their own internal healing and growth even as they work to dismantle oppressive structures. Perhaps Buddhism will be claimed as a tradition within Black communities, and core teachings on the nature of

suffering, impermanence, causes and conditions, and liberation will be claimed as salient and meaningful. Perhaps changes in social media will facilitate new iterations of and accessibility to Buddhist institutions in the social sphere. As forms of activism change, it is likely that the religious institutions that have anchored Black activist protests will also change. I contend that Buddhism will be one of many traditions that provides meaning and sustenance to Black people whose particular forms of suffering are distinct and ongoing and whose paths toward liberation must also be nuanced, meaningful, and accessible.

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NOTES

1. See Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). Alcoff discusses binaries in Northern European Protestant thought, in contrast to more inclusive approaches within Southern European Catholicism.

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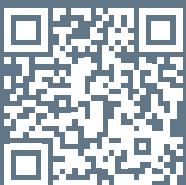
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