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*Dharma, Color and Culture:
New Voices in Western Buddhism*

Edited by Hilda Gutiérrez Baldoquín

Introduction

Dharma, Color, and Culture brings together a community of Native American, African, Asian, and Latina/o heritage teachers, practitioners, and lovers of the Dharma to share their insights on the Buddha's seminal teaching, the Four Noble Truths. These writers can be seen as contemporary versions of the students of ancient times who are "locking eyebrows" with their teachers of old. Resembling an elegant, yet earthy and informal five-course dinner, each writer has given us the fruit of their practice for us to savor. You will find twenty-five vibrant expressions of the Buddha's basic teachings to lock eyebrows with, regardless of who you are; whether you call yourself a Buddhist or not; whether you are just discovering the path or have been walking it for miles; whether you are just looking for a bit of inspiration and support; even whether you just want to look at the beautiful art found within these pages. Causes and conditions arise, something manifests, and eventually it will disappear. What is left, if we are fortunate and aware, is experience.

Why these writers? Why these truths? I can answer this best by sharing a few stories of my own path from Afro Cuban immigrant to Zen priest.

Before I learned how to read, I learned how to pray. Sharing a bed with my grandmother and younger sister in the small town of Victoria de las Tunas in Cuba, I would listen to my grandmother pray out loud. I don't recall at what point she began to slow down her recitation and encourage us to repeat after her. Together, our voices formed an intergenerational triad petitioning for protection, peace, happiness, and well-being for all people. My grandmother was my first Dharma teacher. Perhaps she knew of

something greater than the gunshots, running footsteps, and cries right outside our bedroom windows—incidents that often made me and my sister hide under our grandmother's bed. It was the late fifties in eastern Cuba and the times were changing.

On my sixth birthday, the 1959 Cuban Revolution was only five days old. As I was preparing to enter first grade, my life would take an irrevocable turn. In 1962, my sister and I were sent to the United States less than two months before the October missile crisis, the showdown between John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev and what at that time appeared to be an imminent nuclear war. The Buddha Shakyamuni said it well: *There is Suffering. This is the First Noble Truth.*

Though not officially, my exodus from Cuba was part of a larger, historical event. In *Operación Pedro Pan*, thousands of Cuban children were sent away from the island by parents fearful that the new Socialist Revolutionary government would take away parental rights or, in the worst case, take away their children. Vividly, I recall hearing, *“Los rebeldes barbudos nos van a cortar en pedacitos, y enlatarnos para darle de comer a los niños Rusos.”* The bearded rebels are going to cut us up into little pieces, can us, and send us to feed hungry Russian children. The Buddha Shakyamuni said it well: *The causes of Suffering are greed, aversion, and delusion. This is the Second Noble Truth.*

Many of the children sent from Cuba went to strange places, both in the United States and abroad: orphanages, foster homes, and religious institutions. I was fortunate and privileged. Unaware that almost twenty-five years would pass before I would see my mother again, I came to live with my grandmother, aunts, and uncles in New York City on La Salle Street and Broadway, right where Oscar Hijuelos's mambo kings played their songs of love. I adored my grandmother, who had left Cuba a few months prior to my arrival in New York. For a nine-year-old little girl, being with her *abuela*, who never said “no,” meant great happiness. The Buddha Shakyamuni said it well: *There is an end to Suffering. This is the Third Noble Truth.*

Almost to the day of my first anniversary in the United States, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke of his dream at the Lincoln Memorial. And a couple of years later, at the threshold of my adolescence, I recall Malcolm X being assassinated in the

midst of the community where I was growing up. The wheel of *samsara* is endless.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama continuously reminds us that each of us wants to be happy, and that each of us seeks not to suffer. After leaving my Harlem Elementary School for a Catholic school near Columbia University, happiness for me meant doing what the boys did. Attired in white robes, they helped the priests (white, male priests, of course) with the water and wine, spent time in the sacristy among the colorful vestments, rang bells, and walked in the procession, carrying Jesus on the cross. Little did I know at the time that some of these young boys might have been carrying their own crosses of deep suffering caused at the hand of God's representatives on Earth.

Pre-puberty, I did not want to be a girl or a boy. I wanted to be a priest. And I said so, very proudly and emphatically, to the tall, handsome young Spaniard in Sunday green and gold vestments who administered to the parishioners who did not speak English. I never forgot his outright laughter, a mixture of disbelief and amusement, his green eyes opening wide, or his holy gesture of patting my head full of kinky curls. In the dismissive act of one who is entitled to smash dreams, he said: "*Que dulce, pero las niñas no nacieron para ser curas.*" How sweet, but girls were not born to be priests. However, even more powerful than his dismissal is the memory of my own response, a silent thought in my native language, *Este hombre no conoce a mi abuela*. This man doesn't know my grandmother. From her I learned a fundamental teaching: you can do anything you set your mind to do. As an adolescent, brown-skinned, immigrant girl, I set my mind to be free in this very lifetime. From that point on, it was only a matter of time and place before I fulfilled one of my heart's deepest desires by shaving my head, putting on the robes of a Soto Zen priest, receiving the eating bowls, and committing my life to practicing the Bodhisattva Vows.

I came to Zen not knowing that such a thing as Buddhism existed. I came to Zen knowing that only in silence and stillness would I intimately know the mind that is inherently free and luminous. I came to Zen because the causes and conditions of my life brought me here. The Buddha Shakyamuni said it well: *There is a path to the end of Suffering. This is the Fourth Noble Truth.*

Buddha Shakyamuni discovered how to be free in this lifetime. He did this without becoming a god, an anointed one, or a bigger-than-life superhero. At the moment of his most difficult challenge, when many forces tried to tempt him away from his practice, he touched the earth as the witness to his effort. Upon enlightenment, the Buddha (“the awakened one”) said: “All beings are, in their essence, Buddha. They just don’t know it, and thus, continually drown in a sea of suffering.”

The Four Noble Truths and Their Significance for People of Color

Originally beginning its turning in India, the Dharma traveled south to Sri Lanka, and on to Burma, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand. Traveling north, the teachings reached China, Korea, Japan, Tibet, and Vietnam. Centuries later, the Dharma made its way to Europe and North America. When speaking of the history of Western Buddhism in general—and its presence in the United States, in particular—it is imperative that the point of origin not be located in a white, European American context. The story of how the Dharma reached the shores of the United States is embedded in the history of immigrants of color. The Chinese were actually the first Buddhists to reach America, whether the date is marked by the legendary party of monks who accompanied Hui Shan in the fourth century or by the immigrants of the 1860s. The next significant wave of Asian as well as Tibetan and Theravada Buddhists would not occur in significant numbers in the United States until the late 1950s and on through the 1970s.

When we speak of Buddhism in the United States, we are speaking of a cultural movement that has brought to this continent ancient Indian, East and Southeast Asian, and Tibetan spiritual teachings and practices. For the first time in history, these teachings have arrived in a land that is racially heterogeneous. At the same time, they are taking root in a society that was founded, by a white majority, on the unwholesome seeds of colonialism, genocide, and slavery. In this meeting, the values of community, interdependence, and collaboration come face-to-face with the values of the pursuit of individualism, self-interest, and

competition. Deep bow meets handshake. The cultural encounter is not only East meeting West, it is the spiritual encounter of heart meeting mind.

Today, we are able to speak of the Dharma due to the generosity and compassion of an ordinary man who woke up. When Shakyamuni Buddha set the wheel of the Dharma rolling, he was not giving us instructions for the modern day, highly acclaimed practice of self-improvement. When the Buddha spoke to the ascetics who had previously practiced with him, he offered the teachings of liberation itself. In the ancient tradition of the healer administering to the sick, the Buddha gave us a diagnosis and a prescription. He identified the disease and its cause, gave us a pronouncement on whether it can be cured, and a prescription for the medicine.

When people from groups who have historically found themselves socially, economically, and politically outside the margins, hear that the Buddha taught liberation, nothing more needs to be said. There is no need to proselytize or seduce. All our lives we thirst for freedom, and when we recognize the path that will lead us there, our hearts validate that recognition. To wake up is the task at hand. Not wishing that our lives are better, nor different, we wake up to the reality of our lives, just as they are.

To see this reality clearly is the first step to freedom. Such is the significance of the Four Noble Truths to the racially and culturally excluded people living today in the United States. Teachings of liberation heard clearly in a culture driven by ignorance, fear, anger, and hate is like the breaking of chains after centuries of subjugation. This is the gift the Buddha Shakyamuni gave us.

The five sections at the heart of *Dharma, Color, and Culture* speak to the teachings of the Four Noble Truths and to a fifth truth, the truth of Bringing the Teachings Home. Each section is illustrated by the beautiful art of Mayumi Oda. Her paintings shine the way as we walk through these pages. Each painting brings the spiritual and the feminine quality of these truths to light.

The essays in the first section focus on the truth of suffering. Maxine Hong Kingston looks at the painful reality of situations completely outside of our control. In the midst of the loss of loved

ones, home, and treasured possessions, the heart surrenders to the truth of impermanence and change. Marlene Jones and Eduardo Duran come from two different cultures and worldviews, but each reminds us of the pain of invisibility and exclusion. And Earthlyn Marselean Manuel's lyrical and raw description of her experiences in the Dharma pulls us close to the suffering caused by sexual violence and oppression, while simultaneously enveloping us in her steady search for healing and liberation. Rounding out the first section, elder Vipassana teacher José Luis Reissig invites us to pay close attention to the cages we build in an effort to avoid suffering. Reissig challenges us to stay connected to the here and now, even in the midst of profound suffering.

For people who throughout history have been subjected to the systemic experience of oppression, finding a place to call home is the search of a lifetime. Opening section two, the teachings of Venerable Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh shine as a brilliant morning sun. He asks us, "In your true home, is there any suffering?" He takes our hand and we learn to embrace the suffering; for without it, we cannot learn compassion.

Recalling painful discoveries he made while practicing as an ordained monk in Burma and Thailand, Ralph Steele writes about external and internal suffering and the relationship between the two. Michele Benjamin-Miki remembers her ancestors as core to her practice of gratitude. She reminds us that there is hope and choice and always the possibility of freedom. Drawing from his experience working with inner city male adolescents, George T. Mumford acknowledges the unpleasant feelings of anger and outrage that arise when we are mistreated. By applying the teachings of the Buddha, he says, we are able to lessen suffering and begin the practice of letting go. And in the last essay for this section, Sala Steinbach reveals how the stories that shape us are also footsteps on the path to compassion and wisdom. With grace and honesty, she shares her journey.

During my long years of practice, I have often thought that such was the wisdom of the Buddha that he did not just leave us with naming the illness and telling us the cause. Fortunately for us, he assured us that there is indeed an end to the suffering. The experiences shared by the contributors in section three speak to the cessation of suffering. Gaylon Ferguson, an *acharya* in the

Shambhala tradition, talks about developing a deep friendship with ourselves, cultivating the compassion to truly embrace our life in both the good times and when things are rough.

In a voice as clear as Basho's pond, Soto Zen Dharma lineage holder Merle Kodo Boyd remembers those that came before her as she taps into her early life experiences as a child of the Jim Crow era. Envisioning the Buddha as a spiritual freedom fighter, Viveka Chen writes of the moment he launched a spiritual movement empowering people to end slavery, teaching that "even in oppressive conditions, freedom can be had by freeing the mind." Infused with present-day humor arising within teachings of old, Mushim Ikeda-Nash vividly describes the two moments in her life when she experienced the end of suffering and dissatisfaction. And Sister Chan Chau Nghiem's essay on coming home is a journey of self-discovery enveloped in a mantle of healing. We walk with her as she allows an opening of the heart as the path for touching our ancestors.

The writers in the fourth section look at the last of the Buddha's original Truths—the path to the cessation of suffering. Charles Johnson lays out the road map given to us by the Buddha. According to Johnson, we can go to the mountaintop with "this time-tested guide for spiritual and moral progress." Bonnie Duran walks this road in her journey from Native American mixed race child to university professor to social activist. Larry Yang's essay on the practice of right concentration is one beautiful flower in a bouquet. Writing on the last element of the Noble Eightfold Path, Yang offers us a way to cultivate a non-distracted mind. Kenneth Kenshin Tanaka explores the element of conduct or right action, reminding us that "the aim of the Dharma is to know oneself." This modern exchange of questions and answers could very well be a direct Dharma descendant of age-old master-student existential inquiries. In the final essay for this section, I hope to pass on a bit of my personal journey of discovering how to dig deep and work on that which matters most.

For the past two and a half millennia, in every land where the winds of change have brought Dharma seeds, indigenous manifestations of the teachings have arisen closely woven to the cultural context of the times. In the last section of this anthology,

truth speakers accentuate the personal connection to the Dharma and how they have integrated it into the realities of their lives. These essays stretch the Dharma path wide and deep to include multiple approaches to practice—a necessary requirement if Buddhism is going to survive in this hetero-racial, twenty-first century Western land.

With her unmistakable directness, Alice Walker takes us into the heart of suffering as a door to reclaiming our place; a place Buddha also claimed in trusting himself to the earth. Collaborating in the public sphere, as well as moving in the world as life partners, Lourdes Argüelles and Anne Rivero bring us close to their vulnerable selves as they reflect upon their work in India on behalf of animal beings. Rosa Zubizarreta questions what appears to be a basic tenet of Western convert Buddhist practice as we know it—sitting meditation—and handing us a spiritual gauntlet, forcing us and requiring us to grapple with what exactly it means to be a Buddhist. And having met kindness at the pivotal age of adolescence, Julia Sagebien invites us to walk with her side by side as she hikes into self-discovery.

*Growing up with my paternal grandmother, profound teachings fell from her lips just as the sweat fell from her brown skin as she toiled over a hot stove in a small, overcrowded West Harlem apartment. One of the things *abuela* always said was how important it was to mark endings, whether it was to a long conversation, a succulent meal, or a dearly loved relationship. She would refer to this as the importance of *cerrar con broche del oro*, to close with a golden broach. And this indeed is what Professor Jan Willis does in her essay. Bringing the anthology to a close, Professor Willis engages us in critical inquiry motivated by a question posed to her by a young black woman at the end of a conference: “Was there anything left out as Buddhism made its way to the West?” With laser-like accuracy, she gives us a dose of reality, mixed with an inquisitiveness of purpose, shaken through cultural assumptions, and served with precision. She gently holds the door open for us to experience the Buddhist teachings of freedom while simultaneously remaining true to our familial history and faith roots.*

It is our birthright to be free and it's our responsibility to wake up to that freedom. The writers in this anthology have made

a commitment to do just that. Individually and collectively, we are swimming to the other shore and discovering the sweetness and grace of liberation. Each essay here speaks to the basic teachings given to us all by Gautama Buddha out of his deep compassion for all beings. Each essay reflects the writer's heritage and Buddhist lineage. Together, they represent various ages, classes, sexual orientations, cultures, genders, languages, immigrant statuses, physical abilities, and they weave a beautiful tapestry, bringing the teachings alive for our times. With this anthology, the Dharma wheel continues to turn in the West and specifically among those who physically resemble most closely the original practitioners who followed the Buddha Shakyamuni.

This book is an experience of love, kindness, trust, and support by Dharma sisters and brothers, friends and strangers alike. It is a work of profound ache.¹

May the merits of these labors benefit all beings, in all directions, in all realms, and may all beings be happy, protected, peaceful, and free from suffering.

*Ryūmon Zenji
(Hilda Gutiérrez Baldoquín)
The Sea Ranch Lodge, California,
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Notes

¹ *Ache* is from the Yoruban word for divine power. In Santería/Lukumí and related traditions, *Ache* is life force. It is invoked as both gratitude and blessing.