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Black Buddhadharma: Radical Liberation in Black Buddhist America

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An abstract of
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Abstract

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By Chelsea Cobb

Since the turn of the millennium, black Americans have publically emerged as Buddhists. Socially Engaged Buddhists attempt to reconcile the tenets of the Four Noble Truths however the urge to confront racism in a white-saturated Western Buddhist environment leaves little room for identity in people of color. In order to achieve the fourth Noble Truth, the cessation of suffering, it is imperative that we address the historical and sociological suffering of black Americans. In this integrative essay, I will explore how the teachings of Buddha, or the buddhadharma, leads black American Buddhists to embrace a call to action for a new dharma that dismantles systemic racism, violence and oppression. In this integrative essay, I will explore how tenets of the Buddhadharma, such as meditation and mindfulness, allows a way to address and liberate the deeper layers of suffering from post-enslavement to #blacklivesmatter. Black Buddhist practitioners are arguing for a new way of living – a new dharma - one that defeats the construct of a dehumanizing Eurocentric ego and achieves the Right Mind.

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The Rise of Buddhism in Black America

While Buddhism has long been a popular religion in the East, American Buddhism has become one of the largest religions in America. Since the 1990s, many black Buddhists have emerged with religious publications, stating their faith in the Buddhadharma and discovering peace within their identities. A radical and practical reading of the Buddhadharma, inspires black American Buddhists to embrace a call to action for a new dharma that dismantles systemic racism, violence and oppression. Meditation and mindfulness allows historical and sociologically suffering, or *dukkha*, of black Americans to be liberated. Socially Engaged Buddhists have a goal of providing social justice for all beings however little research has been done on how Buddhists address racism. The fourth noble truth focuses on the cessation of suffering and mindfulness in the black community leads to lovingkindness, a peaceful mind, and the stripping of America's preconceived negative image of the black self.

While Buddhism has always been a contemplative religion, the grounding of Buddhism has essentially exhibited a strong social justice ethic. Socially Engaged Buddhists in the West have long been committed to human rights and environmental justice from the position of Buddhist ethics. Socially Engaged Buddhism are the ideals of Buddhism in action. Socially Engaged Buddhist, Sallie B. King, states the practical results of “nonviolence, loving-kindness, and the rest - in practical action” (26).¹ Since the Buddha taught an end to suffering then Buddhist leaders must address social factors that create suffering. These social factors such as war, violence and repression lead to pain amongst all living beings.

¹ Sallie King. *Socially Engaged Buddhism*. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), p. 26

For the leader of Tibet, His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, the goal of Buddhism is world peace. He states in his autobiography *Freedom in Exile* that “it is not sufficient for religious people to be involved with prayer. Rather, they are morally obliged to contribute all they can to solving the world’s problems” (202).² The Dalai Lama has been committed to social justice since the invasion by the Chinese government against Tibetan people in 1950. He writes in his speeches the atrocious unwarranted arrests, beatings, and tortures carried out by the Chinese government. While freedom from the harsh communist economic environment is a desirable and worthy goal in itself, the Dalai Lama has a firm belief that Buddhist religious practice fosters good will, compassion, and peace in the best of human beings. Therefore, the practice of Buddhism cannot be separated from social conditions. The practice of Buddhism without the care of others or compassion for all kind would not be Buddhism in itself.

The Bodhisattva is one who commits their life to helping all sentient beings. The word Bodhisattva comes from the Sanskrit words Bodhi and Sattva: “Bodhi means the understanding or wisdom of the ultimate nature of reality, and a Sattva is someone who is motivated by universal compassion. The Bodhisattva ideal thus the aspiration to practice infinite compassion with infinite wisdom” (204-25).³ The Bodhisattva has compassion for all sentient beings, as well as the environment.

The Dalai Lama’s approach to environmental justice mirrors the socially engaged approaches of Thich Naht Hahn. Thich Naht Hahn, Zen master and one of the most prominent global spiritual leaders and peace activists of mindfulness, outlines in his book, “The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching: Transforming Suffering into Peace, Joy, and Liberation,” the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths are the four central beliefs in Buddhist teachings. The first noble

² Dalai Lama. *Freedom in Exile*. (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), p. 202.

³ Ibid, 204-205.

truth is suffering. Learning to accept that all of existence is suffering leads to tranquility and peace. The second noble truth is the arising of suffering. While existing is suffering, attitudes and behaviors that we engage in cause more suffering than is necessary. The third noble truth is the cessation of suffering. Thich Naht Hahn reflects on the path of liberation through the realization of suffering: “The Buddha called suffering a Holy Truth because our suffering has the capacity of showing us the path to liberation. Embrace your suffering, and let it reveal to you the way to peace” (33).⁴ This easily translates into the interpretation of Buddhism for social justice. This third noble truth allows us to understand that it is possible to stop creating suffering. The fourth noble truth is the path to not cause suffering.

In the Buddhist tradition, suffering is a result of unnecessary human delusion and ego. This kind of human delusion can be manifested through such qualities as unrestrained desire and anger. Society’s institutions and policies can be understood as mutable entities that reflect this delusion, particularly in the form of human greed and materialism. Thus, because humans create institutions and policies through their actions, these institutions can be changed by their actions. Human beings as creators of these institutions means that they have the means to dismantle these institutions.

If problematic policies and actions are derived from delusions then it takes serious unlearning and dismantling. This is not done easily or quickly. Buddhism as social justice seeks to acknowledge the fact that suffering exists. While some suffering is inevitable, like dying and death, social injustices are rooted in human practice. Much of the suffering involved in uneven power dynamics, such as systemic oppression, involves an inflation of the self, creating this

⁴ Thich Naht Hahn, *The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching: Transforming Suffering into Peace, Joy, and Liberation*, (New York, Hamilton, 1999), 33.

sense of boundary and disconnect. This concept of discordance, that the separate self exists contradicts the Buddhist concept nonduality or oneness.

While the approaches to Socially Engaged Buddhism from both the Dalai Lama and Thich Naht Hahn, both leaders do not specifically acknowledge racial oppression. There is a significant amount of work to be done when addressing oppression based on embodied entity. Philosopher Rima Vesley-Flad compares approaches to Socially Engaged Buddhism within White Western communities and black communities. She states that it is important to trace the lineages of white practitioners typically settled in West with practitioners of African descent. The three main lineages in Buddhism are Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. These are primarily known as Vipassana, Zen, and Tibetan Buddhism in the West. White Jewish practitioners transmitted Insight meditation when they studied in India and Southeast Asia with their lay people and monastics. These teachings were then transmitted through meditation centers on the East and the West Coast. When immigrants and teachers from Korea, China, Japan, and Tibet settled in the United States, they brought along Zen teachings. These Zen teachings then reached white, affluent communities. Since the 1970s, throughout the evolution of Socially Engaged Buddhism in the West, predominantly white communities lived out their practices.⁵

Buddhist teachings and interpretations embrace the concept of “no self.” Acknowledgment that there are varying levels of suffering, especially based on racial constructs, is not central to Buddhist teachings. Teachings of “no self” means that humans have no fixed nature. What we perceive of ourselves is a repetition of habits. We created our own characteristics patterns and responses to events in our lives. Buddhism stresses that the patterns we have created for ourselves can be transformed with intentional effort. Ultimately, we are in

⁵ Rima Vesley-Flad. “Black Buddhist and the Body: New Approaches to Socially Engaged Buddhism.” Warren (Wilson College, Swannanoa, NC, 2017), 3.

charge of our own lives and it should be shaped to incorporate our well being as well as others.

The Buddha describes the use of 'I' as erroneous and a fiction. The Buddha's argument for impermanence has three basic structures:

1. If there is a self it would be permanent.
2. None of the five kinds of psychophysical element is permanent.
3. There is no self.⁶

In general, this interpretation of "no self" is translated and established throughout a majority of texts in Socially Engaged Buddhism. Rima Vesley-Flad summarizes the common interpretations of no self: "Humans suffer due to defilements of the mind; there is no fixed nature with human beings; we must overcome our suffering and liberate our minds, by engaging in concentration practices and ethical social commitments" (4-5).⁷ While this concept of "no self" has been a root of analysis throughout the West, this concept ignores racialized bodies.

For practitioners of color, the teachings of "no self" erases experiences of racism. Vesley-Flad analyses that "no self" is often interpreted as "diminishing the corrosive experience of racism that has resulted in pervasive anguish and suffering" (5).⁸ Describing "no self" dehumanizes and dismisses the effects of racism, colonialism, genocide, enslavement, and systemic racism that has been justified. This type of suffering has been justified by interpretation of the body and in this case, black and brown bodies. Black dharma teachers have pushed to engage people of African descent into the Buddhist practice while also recognizing that the reality of their bodies are recognized. In this way, the premise and truth of "no self" is challenged and reformed.

⁶ Mark Sideritz, "Buddha", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/buddha/>>.

⁷ Vesley-Flad. "Black Buddhist and the Body." 4-5.

⁸ Ibid, 5.

Whether the Buddhist tradition of “no self” chooses to realize it or not, identity and intersectionality is a key experience of blackness. Lama Rod Owens, who found his way to Buddhism through his negative experiences of being a gay black man, asserts that “identity is wounding only because we survive in places where difference remains invisible instead of being seen and celebrated” (63).⁹ Lama Rod Owens chooses to recognize and celebrate his differences even though he has been taught to repress difference in order to gain social privilege. This privilege would be to participate and be accepted into a white dominated Sangha, in which one is asked to strip away their identity. However, this cannot be easily done nor should it be. For practitioners of color, heritage is the root of a person’s being.

Fifteen thousand black practitioners of Soka Gakkai Buddhism are of the first black generation in America to embrace Buddhism as a social movement. Their practice and belief recognizes the relevance of the Dharma. The Dharma provides a way to recognize “the specific historical and existential forms of suffering that are the residue of slavery and racial segregation in a very Eurocentric country” (71).¹⁰ The history of black suffering has long created a hunger for liberation.

Black Buddhists have been writing about their religious practice since the 1990s. Practitioners of color wrestle with multiple cultural identities - black, Buddhist, American. This presents challenges, internally and externally. American Buddhism was not a significant field in education until the 1960s. As Buddhism came into the Western context, the only focus on race was the subject of two Buddhisms - ethnic Asian Buddhism and white American convert Buddhism.

⁹ Rev. angel Kyodo williams, Lama Rod Owens, Jasmine Syedullah, PhD, *Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love and Liberation*. (Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, 2016) (63).

¹⁰ Charles R Johnson, *Taming the Ox: Buddhist Stories and Reflections on Politics, Race, Culture, and Spiritual Practice*, (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 2014), 71.

James Coleman reports in the survey titled “The New Buddhism” that only one-tenth of respondents identified as black, Hispanic or Asian. The survey of “The New Buddhism” did not involve the Soka Gakkai Buddhist organization because “a separate study would be required to do them justice” (92).¹¹ Soka Gakkai has the largest population of people of color in a Buddhist organization where about one-third of the total membership identify as non-white. The membership figures for Soka Gakkai since 1996 was 330,000 people overall. The survey configured assumes a range of 32,000 to 100,000 black Buddhists but does not account for Soka Gakkai which includes prominent figures like Charles Johnson, Jan Willis, bell hooks, angel Kyodo Williams, along with others.

While the precise number is unknown, the 1990s and early 2000s became a time when a number of Buddhists of color began to speak out and publish their religious affiliation in many Buddhist publications. Some of these publications include *Shambala Sun*, *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, and *Turning Wheel: The Journal of Socially Engaged Buddhism*.

However, with influences of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the black prophetic voice has long been associated with Christianity, aside from Malcolm X. In these times, many prophets call for a voice of multi-religiosity. Reverend angel Kyodo williams found her way to Buddhism by visiting American Zen monasteries in both New York and San Francisco. Influenced by *D.T. Suzuki’s Zen and Japanese Culture and Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, william’s received her first formal training at San Francisco Zen Center. She was ordained as a priest by Francisco “Paco” Lugovina. From Paco, she received denkai and hoshi empowerments, determining her position as a Zen priest. In October 2013, she became the world’s second black female Zen teacher.

¹¹ James Coleman, *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition*,

Growing up in New York City, Williams bore witness to drug use and cycles of violence. The harsh crackdown of police particularly troubled her. She saw how police and the government responded to people of color, in particular black and brown bodies. She found that government authority was not taking responsibility for what was happening in her environment. Her upbringing involved a heavy narrative that deeply questioned worldviews about races and cultures. This gave her a lens to her activism. She knew that there were stories behind stereotypes. She discovered spirituality in high school when she came upon Zen Buddhist art. Since then, she wanted to know everything about Zen Buddhism, where she stumbled upon the Zen priest and author Shunryu Suzuki.

While Williams found her way to Buddhism, the initial impression of American Buddhism was not positive. In the 1990s, the majority of the population in American Buddhist sanghas were middle aged, middle-class, educated White men. A recent study indicates that is still the case reporting that “the median age of an American Buddhist is 39, nearly half have a college or master’s degree, and the largest single racial group is white (44 percent).”¹² Not wanting to leave her community behind, she witnessed the racist, patriarchal, and anti-poverty regime in government and noticed the harm within these ideals. However, Williams felt a strong pull to remain within Buddhism and went on to become a Zen priest. She studied Zen on her own to understand how to interpret the need for social justice entailed for people color, and not according to the main white narrative.

Her experience as a “black sheep” in the world of Buddhism led her to write her book *Being Black: Zen and the Art of Living with Fearlessness and Grace*. The book soon became critically acclaimed among both Buddhists and non-Buddhists. However, high-brow Buddhists

¹² Pew Research Center, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” May 12, 2015.

claimed that her book was not a “Buddhist” book and instead labeled her book as a “black” book. Again, she was an outsider within her tradition.

Williams stresses that as human beings, we grow attachment to things, people, and situations. This clinging causes frustration. Communities of color have for a long time lived with this tension of discomfort. The black community has lived without access to material possessions with a long history of poverty. The struggle for equality and need for gratifications leads to an “entrenched belief that who you are directly related to what you have” (21).¹³ Combined with a need for gratification and craving, this creates a double discomfort.

This double discomfort, present throughout william’s life as she wrestled with her position in the black community and the Buddhist tradition, led her to found the Center for Transformative Change in Berkeley, California. This center serves as a place where social change agents, activist, and allies can come together for a sustainable movement in social justice. Williams created Transformative Change (XC), a national center where social change agents, social activists and allies can create a sustainable movement of social justice for all. These agents of change believe in health care reform, education, fair housing, the government, LGBT rights, women’s rights, immigrants, etc. Essentially, it is a movement that believes in rights for everyone. Transformative Change exists to inform, incite, and empower a presence-centered transformative social change movement.¹⁴ While working with spiritual activists, she pushes all of her fellow Buddhists to think critically about race.

Another prominent black figure in Buddhism is Jan Willis. Willis identifies as a Black Baptist Buddhist, simultaneously. In her nonfiction work, *Dreaming Me: An African American*

¹³ angel Kyodo williams, “*Being Black: Zen and the Art of Living with Fearlessness and Grace.*” (New York, New York: Penguin Group, 2000), 21.

¹⁴ angel Kyodo williams, “About Us.” Transformative Change. <http://transformativechange.org/about-us/>

Woman's Spiritual Journey, she reflects upon her journey as a Baptist in small town Docena, Alabama and studying Tibetan Buddhism with lama Thubten Yeshe. Similar to Williams, Jan Willis found her way to Buddhism by reading books. As a young girl, she also became interested in Suzuki's writings leading her to study Buddhism. Many Western converts of Buddhism often come to Buddhism through books which has often been read as a marker of the elite middle-class white American. Willis notes in an interview that "people of color, because of our experience of the great and wrenching historical dramas of slavery, colonization, and segregation, understand suffering in a way that our white brothers and sisters do not" (70).¹⁵ The suffering of the black experience, as described in the previous author's lives, leads to a doorway to Dharma.

Along with identifying as black and Buddhist, comes a strange tension of having to choose between the two. Practitioners of color often find themselves defending Buddhism or their "blackness." They receive disapproval from both black and white people, often feeling singled out for interest in Zen like bell hooks in her book *Waking Up*. White practitioners often asked hooks why she was interested in Buddhism. People's reactions to blacks shifting to Buddhism comes from people's own cultural preconceptions. Often, Asian Buddhists are epitomized as serene while blacks are outspoken and emotional (39).¹⁶ Black Buddhists are labeled as too ethnocentric, a critique among nonblack Buddhists. Fellow Christians among the black community present their fears of Black Buddhists getting rid of the religion they grew up with - Christianity.

However, as Christianity was introduced as an oppressive religion to African Americans in bondage, the Bible's message of exodus became a liberating motivator story. Similarly, black practitioners find that Buddhism resonates with their experience as black Americans. Black

¹⁵ Charles R. Johnson, *Taming the Ox*, 70.

¹⁶ Williams, *Being Black*, 39.

practitioners write about Buddhism's emphasis on suffering and liberation. This creates a concrete grounding, especially in suffering. The historical oppression of black people serves as a motivator an a new way of overcoming struggle.

Black *Dukkha*: A Historic Cycle of Suffering

Black Americans navigate in a life of post-enslavement, consciously living under a guise of oppressed history. This problem of navigating from a life that has been historically and socially burdened implies a thirst for identity. Adjoa Aiyetero, director of the National Conference of Black Lawyers states “if there was an essence or *eidos* for black life during slavery and the seventy years of racial segregation that followed it, that invariant meaning would have to be craving, and the quest for identity and liberty” (65-66).¹⁷ A profound cultural change is essential, one that allows room for identity and liberty for black Americans.

When analyzing suffering in the black community, it is important to look within the lived experiences of black people amidst *dukkha* while also comparing the stark difference of black people in esteemed success. In the new millenium, there are two polarizing and very culturally different groups of black Americans. On one hand, there are black millionaires and billionaires, such as Beyonce, Oprah Winfrey, and Michael Jordan.

In contrast, 25 percent of black Americans live in poverty. Since 2006, half of the population of prisons are black. A report in November 2009 by Council of the Great City Schools titled “A Call for Change” states that America’s black boys are in a state of crisis. Black boys on average fall behind in school. They have a higher mortality rate and are twice as likely to live in a single parent home. Black boys are twice as likely to drop out of school as their white peers and as of 2008, only 5% of black men attend college (65).¹⁸

Congressman John Lewis calls for “a new way of living” for black people. He states that if Martin Luther King could speak today he would say “we need to accept nonviolence not

¹⁷ Johnson, *Taming the Ox*, 65-66.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 65.

simply as a technique or as a means to bring about social justice, but we need to make it a way of life, a way of living” (66).¹⁹ This new way of living constitutes a new self for Black Americans, one that abandons and lets go of the preconceived notions of blackness as suffering, demonized, and other. As Congressman Lewis stated, King held a legacy of nonviolence that could serve as a root for this new way of living

Martin Luther King Jr, as the most prominent figure of the civil rights movement insists throughout his entire career the importance of nonviolence and compassion. King’s core beliefs have three transcendently profound theses: “nonviolence ... must be understood not merely as a strategy for protest but as a Way, a daily praxis men must strive to translate each and every one of their deeds, so that, in its fullness King’s moral stance implies noninjury (*ahimsa*) to everything that exists” (50).²⁰ King approaches the liberation of suffering through a Christian lens and yet, he also embraces Buddhist ideals to eliminate the plight of *dukkha* in the era of the civil rights movement. Johnson asserts that while American history remembers King as a prominent leader, he is oversimplified in terms of race as an eloquent. This forgetfulness glosses over the personal minutiae of King. Martin Luther King Jr.’s story not only pushes and questions America’s race relations but questions what it means to confront social evil without creating evil. King also confronts what Buddhists call *pratitya samutpada*, dependent origination. *Pratitya samutpada* suggests that nothing is independent, aside from nirvana. This principle of *pratitya samutpada* is part of the twelve links of dependent origination doctrine in Buddhism (Twelve Nidanas) that represent the chain of rebirth and suffering. Breaking the chain would lead to liberation.

¹⁹ Ibid, 66.

²⁰ Ibid, 50.

In this case, King understood interdependence as taught in the Buddhadharmā. Johnson even claims that “King embraced as a Christian as much of what a Buddhist would see as the bodhisattva vows” (49).²¹ King understood interdependence as an essential part of what we understood of our lives and springing from this framework produces an intertwined unity. King states that “all life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly” (51).²² King evaluates the intrinsic value of each individual life already linked and tissue together. The link of human lives are interwoven together “ontologically, with the presence of Others in a We-relation the recognition of which moves us to feel a profound indebtedness to our fellow men and women, predecessors and ancestors” (51).²³ He goes on to say that the universe is structured in a way that we have no choice but to be connected. When one takes a shower, they use a sponge created by a Pacific Islander or drink coffee from someone who picked the beans in Ethiopia, etc. Throughout the day, even in one morning, a person has depended upon about half the world. Simply participating in life is to be interrelated. He affirms that peace on earth will not exist without this understanding.

The Buddhist concept of self, or the Sanskrit term *anatta*, refers to the doctrine of nonself. This means that there is no unchanging permanent self. Along with suffering (*dukkha*), and *anicca* (impermanence), *anatta* is one of the three Right Understandings, or the Noble Eightfold Path, about the three marks of existence. For example, human ego is the concept of self. Often, ego is used to express megalomania or vanity, however ego is a psychological term coined by Sigmund Freud meaning consciousness. The awareness of one’s own consciousness as opposed

²¹ Ibid, 49.

²² Ibid, 51.

²³ Ibid.

to one's unconsciousness means to be aware of one's own identity and existence. Reverend angel Kyodo Williams asserts that "whiteness is a social ego as void of inherent identity as the personal ego" (17).²⁴ The ego-mind is a construct that reinforces itself, developing attitudes and views to maintain its validity. In this case, the construct of whiteness also reinforces itself, dubbed as "the Mind of Whiteness."

Therefore, in the complex of whiteness lies privilege. Williams describes the Black Radical Tradition as one that is "foundational to people who are not Black, for it is only with the liberation of Black people that humanity can be freed from its chains of oppression, just as Black people cannot be liberated while humanity is in chains" (xx).²⁵ The construct of privilege and whiteness in the Mind of Whiteness, specifically in white Sanghas, contributes to this bondage. Williams calls this the White Superiority Complex that can only be eliminated once racial bias is eliminated. White practitioners and white teachers without intention affirm this complex. However, it is imperative to understand how pervasive this complex is, whether it is known that one participates in this mindset or not. As a result of this privilege, white practitioners have the access to place themselves inside of a lens of awareness centered around whiteness. However, once we choose to live in a radical way, living in the fundamental nature of Truth, then liberation will work.

Furthermore, in order to break the chain of suffering as described in the Twelve Nidanas, one has to overcome the need for power. Racial politics are characterized by dualism and the hunger for power. Racial politics is essentially a representation of the Samsara, the cycle of repeated birth, mundane existence, and death. The world of politics, in particular racial politics,

²⁴ Rev. angel Kyodo Williams. *Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation*. Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books. (2016), 17.

²⁵ Williams, *Radical Dharma*, xx.

is an Us v. Them mentality “where the Buddhist insight into impermanence is given concrete laws that may last only as long as the time between two elections” (56).²⁶ Social justice, then, which usually involves political affairs directly opposes greed in its search for liberation.

Shakyamuni asks for a movement from delusion and ignorance to one of awakening, providing us with *upaya kaushala* (skillful means) when we feel that our culture must change. Of course, our culture will change as will everything else however the Buddhist must examine themselves and understand their own desires. During this period in transition of our societal and political climate “we cannot afford to be trapped and limited by our own narratives, by a miscellaneous list of egoistic likes and dislikes, or by the forever running magic show that is a product of the conditioned monkey mind. All that we must give up” (21).²⁷ Similarly, Thich Naht Hahn teaches that in order to have peace, we must be peace ourselves.

Furthermore, the Eightfold Path as taught by the Buddha includes the fourth aspect of Right Action, or *samyak-karmanta* in Sanskrit. This is the ethical portion of the path, along with Right Livelihood and Right Speech. Right Action, in particular, appeals to the ideals as exemplified by Charles Johnson, Thich Naht Hahn and many other Buddhist activists. Right Action is guided by nonviolence and *ahimsa* (harmlessness). In particular, Right Action “necessarily demands that our deeds do not contribute to division and divisiveness in the world” (21).²⁸ While keeping the ideals of Right Action in mind, one must ask if there is a lack of transformation in traditional Buddhism. This lack of transformation, then, precedes the urge and need for Socially Engaged Buddhism.

²⁶ Ibid, 56.

²⁷ Johnson. *Taming the Ox*, 21.

²⁸ Ibid, 21.

Buddhism acknowledges relative truth or *samvrti-satya*. This relative truth refers to individuality, in which everyone has a phenomenal and historical substance. The past and our histories have shaped each individual person and the fact that our lives differ radically. Individuality will eventually die away as with everything else in this earthly realm. Thus, Johnson claims then that “what is required of us in the social world is nothing less than vigilant mindfulness” (28).²⁹ While each person has their own unique history, it is important to acknowledge that everyone is a process and not just a product. Martin Luther King Jr. frequently states in his speeches that the human experience is a network of neutrality. In Buddhism, this shifting of everything is of no essence or substance, meaning that practicing mindfulness is an ever radiating sense of newness. Buddhist meditation pays careful and extraordinarily close attention to every nuance of our experience. Even in excruciating detail, everything is interconnected and nondual.

On the concept of nonduality, Seattle author and retired University of Washington professor Charles Johnson recalls the story of an ancient Buddhist parable. In the parable, a young herder finds that his ox has ran away. A series of ten drawings, titled “Riding Home,” drawn by 15th century Rinzai Zen monk Shubun of Japan depicts the boy riding the beast once he finds it. Once the ox is in the boy’s possession, he takes charge and rides it back home. Johnson reflects on the separate self in his collection of essays, *Taming the Ox: Buddhist Stories and Reflections on Politics, Race, Culture, and Spiritual Practice*. Johnson explains in the parable of finding and taming the ox means that one has to work to learn that the separate self is a false self. No boundaries exist because there is no separateness, meaning that there is

²⁹ Ibid, 28.

nonduality. Since all is one, the tenth panel of the drawings shows the boy returning to his village. The boy is full of compassion and he helps alleviate the suffering of all beings.

Johnson asks “what insight can this Buddhist lesson, and other traditional teachings collectively called the Dharma, bring to racial conflicts currently roiling American society? Does Buddhist practice offer something of value to black people born into the era of what Johnson calls “Jim Crow lite?”³⁰ Johnson also notes that the suffering by black Americans creates a natural doorway into the Dharma, the teaching of the Buddha. Buddhist teachings, he argues, should be a part of everyday conversations, incorporating its ethics in the larger community. Johnson also advocates for mindfulness meditation in schools, citing a study of boys in the United Kingdom who learned to increase their self control and their ability to approach experiences with peace and calmness.

When attempting to approach peace on the global level, citizens often feel that we helpless in the wake of terrorism, war, violence and poverty. Some cultural commentators have suggested that people simply withdraw from the world that we have no power over. Likewise, these commentators share a similar philosophy of Voltaire’s *Candide* in which renowned philosopher A.J. Ayer comments on the Modern Library edition: “When we observe ... the stubbornness of political intolerance presents to the whole world, we must surely conclude that we can still profit by the example of lucidity, the intellectual honesty and the moral courage of Voltaire” (2).³¹ Pangloss, *Candide*’s tutor, responds to worldly challenges as a sort of cause and effect relationship, opting to “cultivate our own gardens” (23).³² However, opting to essentially “drop out” of social problems and instead choosing to only attribute and cocoon one’s self with

³⁰ Judy Lightfoot, “Charles Johnson: Subdue racism by ‘Taming the Ox’ of the self, (2015).

³¹ Charles R Johnson, *Taming the Ox: Buddhist Stories and Reflections on Politics, Race, Culture, and Spiritual Practice*, (2014).

³² Voltaire, and Peter Constantine. *Candide, or, Optimism*. New York: Modern Library (2005), 23.

their own personal projects and families creates a feeling of disillusionment. The belief of living in a historical and progressive Grand Narrative, one with essential Enlightenment meaning, has been lost.

However, the mission to tackle social injustices cannot merely be to turn away from the issues of the world at large. On the other hand, a more Buddhist approach is found in Morris Berman's *The Twilight of American Culture* in which he argues that the "culture has to change if it is to survive" (13)³³ Berman argues for what he calls New Monastic Individuals (NMIs) which promotes Enlightenment values of truth, art, and critical thinking despite the effort of modern America to counter against these ideals. However, Charles Johnson argues that both "the cultivate your own garden" and NMI approach are missing the clarity provided by the Buddhadharma, Buddhist teachings. Johnson relates to the works of Thich Naht Hahn in which he voluntarily came to the aid of wounded soldiers, women, and children in the Vietnam War. Instead of merely tending to their own gardens, the helpers in Vietnam alongside Thich Naht Hahn put the Dharma into practice, mindfully in the present as they alleviate suffering of sentient beings regardless of their own politics.

The call for social action, then, as we examine the suffering of Black Americans forces us to question conventional truth and the status quo. Johnson gives examples of Ashoka realizing that the slaughter of the Kalingas brings him no happiness. He also notes the Buddhist monk Claude AnShin Thomas after realizing that he is not happy after killing civilians in the Vietnam war. We also can consider the generation of African Americans growing up during segregation and discrimination post-Jim Crow. In examining these types of suffering, one "discovers that many Eurocentric whites project fictitious racial 'substance' (or meaning) onto people of color,

³³ Morris Berman, *The Twilight of American Culture*. New York, W. W. Norton & Company (2001), 13.

never seeing the mutable individual before them” (29).³⁴ Whiteness and blackness are created in illusory constructions, creating false mental projections that contribute to social structures. As renowned Christian theologian Paul Tillich declares, this fuels attachment, clinging, and prejudice.

On the same note, Paul Tillich, German-American philosophical theologian calls Buddhism one of the greatest, strangest, and at the same time most competitive of the religions proper. The rise of Black Americans becoming Buddhist has accelerated significantly in the past decade. However, Black Buddhists are still an extremely small minority. Black American Buddhists in the post-civil rights era are attracted to the Dharma for two reasons: “first, because one’s happiness and salvation, awakening and liberation from suffering, rests entirely in one’s own’s hands” (75). This exemplifies the karmic cause and effect relationship. Karma, as a law of nature, means “action” or *kamma* in Sanskrit. Every volitional action, whether motivated by compassion and love or hatred and greed brings about a certain result. Since it is possible in Buddhism to alleviate suffering from one’s own hands, this brings about a true sense of liberation, not necessarily from the power of a Higher being, but of one’s own being. The root of freedom in Black suffering can be achieved and this is exceptionally powerful to a lineage of bondage.

The second reason why black Americans are attracted to Buddhism is because of the understanding of *annica*, impermanence. The understanding of *annica* is in the Buddha’s observation that whatever is subject to arising must also be subject to ceasing. The idea of impermanence is an ontological starting point for Buddhist reflection of all things and begins with an experience of emptiness or lack of substance in everything. This leads to the perception

³⁴ Ibid, 19.

of dependent origination. Dependent origination is the principle that all dharmas are dependent upon other dharmas. This leads to the realization that the self is a construct. Therefore, if the self is a construct then race is an illusion. Johnson points out that “we have no relation whatsoever to the evil, racist iconography that caricatures black people in popular culture and the national consciousness” (76).³⁵ It is this realization that gives birth to clinging, an attachment to prejudices which ultimately leads to dukkha. The goal of the Buddhadharma is to extinguish the fire within and it allows us the experience to be free from of ourselves.

Buddhism in the Era of #BlackLivesMatter

In light of the disproportionate number of black Americans killed by police officers in recent times in the United States, Socially Engaged Buddhists have incorporated practices in their traditions to expand compassion, alleviate suffering, and ultimately cease suffering. One particular prominent movement today is Black Lives Matter. Black Lives Matter is an international social movement, originating in the black community that campaigns against systemic violence against black people. The use of the hashtag #blacklivesmatter spread widely throughout social media after the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting death of African American teen Trayvon Martin. After the deaths of African American men, Michael Brown and Eric Garner, Black Lives Matter became an international movement, known worldwide. The organization continues to be controversial, with criticisms for its campaigning strategies. However, despite its differences, the movement calls into question the reality of the African American experience.

³⁵ Ibid, 76.

Black Lives Matter presses into the idea that lives have to ask for validation and importance, a value that is already inherent in the Buddhadharma. Pamela Ayo Yetunde, a black practitioner trained in the Insight Meditation, offers an alternative to the Buddha's life story in the age of Black Lives Matter. She presents Buddhism in a way that is culturally relevant to African Americans. She comes to the conclusion that "Buddhists need to connect African Americans to a larger story than the Buddha's individual liberation, one that is relevant and inspires them to advocate for their lives in the #BlackLivesMatter age" (Yetunde).³⁶

In the article, "Buddhism in the Age of #BlackLivesMatter", Yetunde recounts the life of Siddhartha Gautama and compares it against the reality of African Americans. Siddhartha grew up wealthy. Most black people in America are living in poverty. Siddhartha's father protected him when he was a little boy so that he would not see suffering or death. African Americans are not protected from suffering, especially not in the wake of economic disparities, racism, enslavement, poverty, discrimination, and violence. Siddhartha was shocked when he saw people get sick, age, and die. African Americans encounter death early in life, even dying as children. This is where #blacklivesmatter fits in the picture of suffering, from the death of a black child, Trayvon Martin, that started a movement.

Charles Johnson considers the trial of George Zimmerman who was found not guilty in the death of Trayvon Martin. After the trial, an international response of outrage followed. He argues that rarely, if ever, does the media discuss the demonization of black men. In the first American Edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica in 1798, Negroes are described as "being cruel, impudent, revengeful, treacherous, nasty, idle, dishonest, and given to stealing" (94).³⁷ Johnson

³⁶ Pamela Ayo Yetunde, "Buddhism in the Age of #BlackLivesMatter, Lion's Roar. February 8, 2017.

³⁷ Ibid, 94.

asserts that “to be a black male in America means to be wrong, no less” (93).³⁸ No matter if Martin was guilty or not, he was guilty of something. His guilt comes from the essence of who he is. Labeled as a predator, thug, thief, there was already a preconceived notion of who he was before he was killed. Philosopher George Yancy writes that as a black man, he is “possessed by an essence that always precedes me” (94).³⁹ The black male, before his name is known, already comes with perceptions and assumptions. This preconceived notion that comes with being black is ignorance, or *avidya* in Sanskrit. Johnson describes this *avidya* as “a deeper cultural, moral, and spiritual nightmare, one that for a Buddhist or anyone else is all about ignorance (*avidya*) and a long-postponed awakening for white America” (94)⁴⁰.

In the Zen tradition, practitioners take vows to not nurture anger. However “every feeling or thought that enters consciousness, even anger, can strengthen the practice of mindfulness that might extinguish at its root this endless cycle of early death for young black men” (96). Anger can be enlightening to mindfulness if it rids the endless cycle of violence for young black boys. This type of mindfulness, one that extinguishes preconceived notions and accepts with peace, ultimately leads to liberation.

Liberation is especially important in an age as our nation witnesses the policing of black bodies. Angel Kyodo Williams offers a cyclical mandate of the police force:

The mandate is to control Black bodies.
 The need is to have the constant specter of the other.
 When the other exists, it strengthens your need to belong.
 Your belonging is necessary for compliance.
 Your compliance maintains the system.
 You are policed, too.
 You are policed by your need for belonging.
 Your need for belonging requires control of the other.
 ... Or at least the illusion of it.

³⁸ Ibid, 93.

³⁹ Ibid, 94.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 96.

You are policed through the control of my body.
You are policed, too (xxvi).⁴¹

Williams argues that the policing we are witnessing, through murders of black men like Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, expresses a destructive construct. This mandate serves as a cycle. The “need” is the constant idea or attitude that the Other is a threat. This threat would be black bodies. Just as Charles Johnson described, this ignorance and preconceived notions is as avidya or ignorance. The construct of ignorance keeps the cycle of suffering running.

The Black Lives Matter movement in this era of violence and police brutality places suffering on the forefront. The need for justice, while living in the black community has created different dialogues on how to counteract against the violence imposed upon bodies of color. Practitioners of color have turned inward, choosing to practice compassion and mindfulness in order to cease the senseless suffering of all beings. Mindfulness has had significant impact upon the mental health and well-being of those exposed to the practice of the black community.

⁴¹ Williams, Radical Dharma, xxvi.

Mindfulness in the Black Community

In order to understand why the Buddhadharma carries a significant weight and importance to the black community, then it is imperative to comprehend the teaching of mindfulness. Mindfulness is the root of all Buddhist practice. The word for mindfulness in Sanskrit is *smriti*, meaning literally recollection.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, the biologist who first coined the term mindfulness in the '70s, defines it as a state of mind. Kabat-Zinn describes mindfulness as the act of “paying attention on purpose” to the present moment, with a “non-judgmental” attitude. While mindfulness is in hindsight a secular philosophy, whereas anyone from any religion can practice, it is adapted from a set of techniques of old Buddhist traditions.

Another variation for mindfulness is *smritimat*, meaning possessing full consciousness.

Bhikki Bodhi, American Theravada Buddhist monk, explains mindfulness as immediacy:

The task of Right Mindfulness is to clear up the cognitive field. Mindfulness brings to light experience in its pure immediacy. It reveals the object as it is before it has been plastered over with conceptual paint, overlaid with interpretation. To practice mindfulness is thus a matter not so much of doing but of undoing: not thinking, not judging, not associating, not planning, not imagining, not wishing (81).⁴²

George Mumford, sports psychologist who also teaches vipassana meditation to the Chicago Bulls and Los Angeles Lakers came to the practice because all he had was “*dukkha, dukkha, dukkha.*” Mumford describes mindfulness meditation as:

impulse control. The inner city is a pressure cooker, full of tension and anxiety. It's easy to go off or to reach for something to ease the pain. Meditation helps people understand the operation of their minds and emotions. It teaches us how to detach ourselves from outside provocation and from our habitual patterns of reaction. Now, I'm not suggesting that we should take abuse and racism and all that other stuff, and just breathe in, breathe

⁴² Bhikku Bodhi, *The Noble Eightfold Path: The Way to the End of Suffering*. (Sri Lanka, 1994), 81.

out. That's something else. But the first thing we have to do is have control of ourselves, and then we can choose with a clear mind (68).⁴³

Through meditation practice, Mumford overcame years of drug addiction and alcoholism. For most of his life, Mumford depended on painkillers for chronic pain and after becoming tired of prescription medicine, he learned vipassana, a type of meditation widely taught by Satya Narayan Goenke. Vipassana in Buddhism means to see things as they really are or insight into true reality. When Mumford first discovered vipassana, he learned that he had authority and control over his life when he finally held control over his mind.

In 2010, a group of researchers at Cambridge University examined 155 boys from a school in the United Kingdom and gave them a course on mindfulness. After the course, the group of fourteen and fifteen year old boys were “found to have increased well-being, defined as the combination of feeling good (including positive emotions such as happiness, contentment, interest and affection) and functioning well” (69).⁴⁴ The researchers found that “the effects of mindfulness training can enhance well-being in a number of ways ... calming the mind and observing experiences with curiosity and acceptance not only reduces stress but helps with attention control and emotion regulation - skills which are valuable both inside and outside the classroom” (69).⁴⁵

Since mindfulness has moved into mainstream, many nonprofit organizations have provided mindfulness education for students and teachers. The practices of mindfulness, contemplative education, and social and emotional learning (abbreviated as SEL) are now being widely explored in schools throughout the United States and other countries. Volumes of

⁴³ Johnson, *Taming the Ox*, 68.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 69.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 69.

research has shown that mindfulness practices decreases stress, attention deficit issues, depression, anxiety, and hostility in children.

For example, a team of researchers from the Erikson Institute, a graduate school in Chicago, spent a year studying whether students who are taught to be in touch with their emotions do better academically. Amanda Moreno, assistant professor at Erikson Institute, lead the study to conduct mindfulness in more than 30 high-poverty Chicago public schools over the course of four years. The study included approximately 2,000 kindergarten through second-grade students. The basic idea of the study was to allow kids to “slow down and not be on automatic-pilot and not be overwhelmed by all the things they could be focusing.”⁴⁶ This study has been the largest mindfulness study of children funded by the federal government. It is also the only study in the country to focus on whether mindfulness exercises improve academic achievement for young kids of color.

The focus on mindfulness for children of color is important because children growing up in poverty are more likely than their peers to be exposed to violence. Children living in high stress environments (drug abuse, domestic violence, gun violence) are constantly in fight or flight leading to suspensions and expulsions. Moreno argues that an angry and frustrated kid isn't going to learn well. Learning new techniques would keep them on track. She comments that mindfulness helps reduce their suffering. Helping to reduce suffering is a direct link to the fourth Noble Truth of alleviating suffering. Through this study, the tenets of Buddhism are applied, helping to achieve peace for children of color.

When students are selected to do mindfulness exercises, the practice is not to be entirely quiet. Some students in Chicago participate in music scribble exercises. In music scribble

⁴⁶ Amanda J. Moreno. “A Theoretically and Ethically Grounded Approach to Mindfulness Practices in the Primary Grades,” *Childhood Education*, 93:2, 100-108.

exercises, they listen to African drumming or classical tunes and “scribble” what they feel on paper. This type of exercise was developed by the Luster Institute, a nonprofit program dedicated to launching mindfulness in Chicago Public Schools.

In the Chicago study, students are also encouraged to get up and refocus by going to a “calm spot.” Moreno has found that the exercises have reduced suspensions and has helped students process their emotions in a productive way. While improving student achievement is a significant attribution to the mindfulness study in Chicago, there is still a deeper message within the effects of mindfulness for people of color. Black children live in a time now where Black Lives Matter is at the forefront, a generation that has direct access to information. This millennial generation of black children are in a post-civil rights era, one that is still attempting to validate the lives of black Americans.

Charles Johnson describes the post-civil rights period for black Americans as a “systematic undoing of the cultural indoctrination, the ‘conceptual paint’ we have received from a very decadent, violent, materialist, and Eurocentric society, is crucial for our liberation, personally and as a people” (80).⁴⁷ One of the ironies of being a black American is the idea coined by W. E. B. Du Bois as double consciousness. African Americans have to cognizant of how to “read” American society, in terms of what African Americans know from the contributions from people of African descent since colonization and enslavement. Second, African Americans had to understand as both a social and racial outsider, cultural formations of White Anglo-Saxon Protestants simply to navigate American institutions (schools, universities, businesses, etc.). Johnson describes white *Weltanschauung* as the American standard for good, true, and beautiful.

⁴⁷ Johnson. *Taming the Ox*. 80.

In America, it is to be expected that European descent controls much of cultural apparatus. This cultural apparatus shapes public and popular consciousness. While one group stays in power or enlightened, one must be unenlightened: “if one is the majority, unenlightened, and holds the reins of power in the realm of Samsara-the world of racial dualism, egotism and Them vs. Us - one naturally defines the world in one’s own (white) image” (81).⁴⁸ The Samsara fuels off of suffering and the cycle of death, thus the cycle must be broken from the side with the power. However, unfortunately, White Americans are hesitant to step outside of the “parochial fishbowl they created” (81).⁴⁹ Black Americans have had to stay open to the Western experience, wrestling with racial dualism of being American and black, absorbing multiple visions of human experience.

This Western fishbowl or the American mind, of all races, is described by philosopher Vivekananda in *Raja Yoga* as “monkey mind.” Zen Buddhists refer to the constant chatter of the mind as monkey mind. In the nidanas, monkey mind is symbolized by a monkey inside a house whose windows represent the senses: the human mind is like that monkey, incessantly active by its own nature; then it becomes drunk with the wine of desire, thus increasing its turbulence” (82).⁵⁰ Johnson asserts how difficult it is for black people to live in a racially balkanized world, one in which so many negative images of themselves are incessantly active in their minds. Meditation and mindfulness finds a way to tame that mind. Meditation and mindfulness provides a way of undoing biased interpretation of the world. These practices help to deliver a perception of the world before it has been exposed to samsaric influences and before inflicted suffering. Mindfulness is described, if nothing else, “the practice of radical attention, of clear seeing, of

⁴⁸ Ibid, 81.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 82.

listening” (82).⁵¹ With mindfulness, especially moment-by-moment mindfulness or vipassana, thought patterns are allowed to pass through the mind without clinging or attachment.

Without attachment and clinging, one can let go of the illusions of social conditioning. One can let go of a Eurocentric, claustrophobic social conditioning steeped in metaphysical dualism and suffering. The practice allows one to know where their thoughts come from and know what is genuine. Ultimately, mindfulness allows one to let go of the belief in a “separate, enduring (black) self” (83). When Johnson refers to “self,” he does not mean for African Americans to let go of their culture and heritage. He means to let go of the deeper layers of social conditioning, thirst, and attachment from ephemeral pleasures that have long been denied. Letting go allows room for the ego to be eliminated. When the ego is gone, peace arrives. Specifically, one becomes peace embodied.

The problems created from deeply ingrained cycles of suffering can begin to be addressed by working within. Living a lifestyle of harmlessness, *ahimsa*, and calming the “monkey mind” through practice of mindfulness allows the liberation that lies beyond a false sense of dualism. In all, the cessation of suffering for black Americans starts from within. The rise of black American Buddhism has become a space where African Americans can identify with the Buddhadharma. The Buddhadharma provides a foreground for social justice and engagement with racism. The suffering of black Americans from a long history of racism and oppression as well as present day violence can be alleviated through mindfulness. In all, the Buddhadharma provides freedom and liberation from *dukkha* and ultimately, can be a grounding source for the embodiment of peace within the black community.

⁵¹ Ibid, 82.

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