

Awakening Together

By Larry Yang, in Inquiring Mind, Spring 2015

Many Euro-American Buddhists seek diversity in their sanghas and make efforts to reach out to minority groups, often with negligible results. Insight teacher Larry Yang, one of the founders of a uniquely diverse sangha, the East Bay Meditation Center in Oakland, CA, explains the underlying philosophy and on-the-ground practice that has led to their success at building such a multicultural community.

Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., writes: “Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives.” In seeking to create a beloved community for all of us, how do we make the qualitative and quantitative changes that will be necessary?

In the Satipatthana Sutta, it is said that “The Noble Ones abide contemplating internally, they abide contemplating externally, they abide contemplating both externally and internally.”

Awareness when practiced exclusively with our internal experience can develop into a self-absorbed and self-referential focus. This is a kind of creation of Self that is characteristic of our Western culture. One can become preoccupied with one’s own experience, at the expense of being aware of the experience of others, and of how one’s actions impact on others. Internal and external contemplative mindfulness practice begins to balance this. It brings into the full range of our awareness the multiplicity of life experiences that the Buddha was inviting us to embrace.

Our practice is necessarily relational within the refuge of Sangha and Community. There may be people you know well in your meditation environment, and others that you do not know at all. You may like them or not. Despite this, an underlying vision and intention connects us all through our differences. This is the key: we all have a reason to be in the room together. That fundamental reason is the deeply human aspiration toward seeking freedom, happiness and less suffering in a world that already suffers so greatly.

Complexity of Needs in Multiple Communities

East Bay Meditation Center (EBMC) has been successful at attracting a multiplicity of communities and individuals into our space for spiritual practice. Usually, at any given event, the room holds 40-50% people of color with almost equal numbers from the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender and Queer communities. This is a highly unusual demographic for Western Vipassana practice centers, and reflects EBMC’s stated mission: *Founded to provide a welcoming environment for people of color, members of the LGBTQI community, people with disabilities, and other underrepresented communities, the East Bay Meditation Center welcomes everyone seeking to end suffering and cultivate happiness.* From our very inception, even before we had a fully developed spiritual home, we were including the voices and needs of diverse communities, rather than trying to retrofit them after the center was created, as happens in so many mainstream cultural venues.

EBMC’s Founding Leadership Sangha or Board was made up of an African American lesbian, an Asian American heterosexual woman, a white gender-neutral queer-identified person of size, an Asian American gay man (that’s me!), an African American heterosexual woman, a White lesbian parent, two people with multiple chemical sensitivities, one differently abled person, and a

white heterosexual man. There were differences in age, education and class. We even held different views of what defined the precepts and ethical behavior.

It was a *spiritual practice* to serve on the Board, fully embracing its diversity. Our differences ran so very deep. We didn't always get along; we didn't always like each other. But rather than splitting apart over our differences, we did our best to hold those tensions because we knew we were creating something much more important than our individual preferences or beliefs. The whole is so much greater than the sum of its parts. This is despite the fact that, at times, we feared the parts could implode or self-destruct.

But being skilled at inviting people through the door is only the first step. Once people arrive, the broader efforts of building Sangha must offer skills to diverse communities to *live* together. This is not so simple when the needs of one community contradict or even harm the needs of another. For instance, the recalibration of male gender language within the patriarchal dominance of traditional Buddhist texts might be re-aligning for the experience of women, but continue to feel harmful to people who do not identify along the binary gender roles of male and female. Or, in another example, the fragrance-free needs of those who experience multiple chemical sensitivities may conflict with the needs of diverse cultural communities who use fragrance as a form of cultural expression and identity.

When differences arise, our conditioned response is to fragment. What would it be like, even in the complexity, even in the injury, even in the harm—to break *together* rather than to break apart? How do we stay in relationship with each other even when the unconscious, reactive mind wants things to be different from the way they are? Embedded in this aspiration are the teachings of our Buddhist Path; we know that there is a higher place we all could go. We may not have the skills yet, or the awareness, or even the kindness, but that will come if we have that intention of not leaving the room. This is where peace begins.

In one recent example, at a large meeting whenever I raised multicultural issues I found myself repeatedly challenged by a particular individual, someone I'd met but barely knew. After the third time, I felt my opinion against that person solidifying. I realized that as I had no real relationship with them, it was my attachment to my views and opinions that was creating the separation (and much of my own suffering). I invited this person into a conversation, first by sharing how hurt I was by feeling so persistently challenged. The person shared that their goals were actually similar to mine; what I perceived as challenges were inquiries. Hearing this, I felt a tangible relaxation in my body and psyche. When we began to share our stories, there was more of a connection to hold the differences in our personalities, our backgrounds, and even our views. Relationship is a powerful tool for transformation.

When we work with people who hold different views and/or life experiences, it often takes longer than we think it should and carries more contradictions than we would like. We need to remember that what matters is not what we think or what we like: it is *how we are with each other*. I have been working with and within Spirit Rock for the past 15 years on diversity issues. There have been substantial strides made, including 15 years of retreats for communities of color, increasing participation in multi-year programs by multiple diverse communities, and the possibility of collaborating with IMS to train Teachers of Color into full dharma teacher status. However, I still get activated and triggered by interactions that I have with both my colleagues and the larger Dharma community. In those gnarly places where differences prevail, I still struggle with how and what to

say; how to hold the integrity of the Dharma and the commitment to collective awareness; how to be authentic in my feelings and understanding; what is my internal work and where the responsibility is external. It is never clear-cut, well-defined, or easy to articulate—and therefore is often uncomfortable and laden with tension.

Diverse communities often ask why not just do it on our own. At times this can be a skillful means to create change—we know that transformation sometimes comes from outside the system and sometimes within it. And it is never completely one or the other. If we can keep the larger aspiration of all means and methods to transform our world together, rather than apart, and to awakening together—that might be extraordinarily inspirational and generative toward what the world so desperately needs.

Safety in Order to Belong

People often come into spiritual practice looking for respite from a world that has so much busy-ness and burden, even challenges that threaten our well-being. They look for peace, and sometimes they also look for safety from harm, pain, violence and trauma.

At the EBMC, in order to promote that safety, we have created culturally-specific sitting groups. The “Alphabet” group on Tuesdays includes the LGBTQI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning and Intersex) and people of nontraditional gender identifications. The Thursday night POC group provides a dedicated spiritual space for Communities of Color. Every Body/Every Mind on Sunday nights welcomes differently abled persons with any physical or mental capacity. We have groups for Young People and Teens, Families, and practitioners in Recovery from addictions. The Friday Open group serves everyone.

Along with these efforts to create safety, we have found that no space is 100% safe in this world. We’ve had to learn what it means to live that reality, to work with the way things are. We ask ourselves, “How do we create conditions for a community to feel *safe enough* to practice, develop skills, and explore the possibility of freedom together?”

We all have felt unsafe at times in our lives, so we can understand and empathize with the experience of others who feel ignored or disrespected or dismissed. We can use the insight and compassion from our own personal experience to reach out to others and develop our collective sense of safety as a larger whole. Safety is not an individual matter, even though it might be felt individually. Issues of different physical abilities or limitations are not just about accommodating individual needs. They are issues for all of us. Sexism and violence against women are not just about the experience of women. Homophobia and transphobia do not just involve gays, lesbians, bisexuals, or trans communities. Anti-racism and multicultural work do not involve just communities of color. All of these issues require involvement from us all. As Dr. King reminded us, creating a beloved community requires us to make qualitative change in our souls as well as quantitative change in our lives.

In trying to understand why diverse communities sometimes create separate sanghas relevant to their own particular life conditions, it is instructive to consider the history of our senior Euro-American teachers when they returned from Southeast Asia in the 1970’s. They set up their own centers for themselves and others with a like identity. They did not practice and teach in the already established Asian temples and centers—Chinese, Japanese, Tibetan, Thai, Burmese, and Vietnamese. Why did European Americans feel the need to form their own sanghas and retreats in

spite of existing Asian practice venues? I suspect that one primary motivation was that European Americans did not see themselves reflected within those Asian centers with their different cultures of origin. European Americans did not hear their life stories in the way the Teachings were languaged. So, European Americans created sanghas centered around their own experiences for the exact same reasons that diverse communities have formed sanghas centered around their experience. This is why People of Color, Queer folks, and other diverse communities need to create culturally specific relevant sanghas—because it is a deeply *human* need to feel safe and seen within sacred space.

Indeed, regardless of our cultural differences, we are the same—in that we respond in the same way to many of the same cultural circumstances. That is a piece of our interconnectedness and our universality. We all (not just People of Color, or Women, or LGBT communities, but also Euro-Americans) create our spiritual practice based on identity issues—because we have that human need to feel safe enough to explore who we are, especially in the beginning of our practice. While there may be a superficial dissonance when looking at the surface of these groups, there is a deeper and greater harmony in a larger picture—if we collectively hold each other’s needs with the same kindness and care that we hold our own.

Of course, the deep exploration of practice through different identity groups is not the ending of the Path, not the final goal. But the experience of identity, for many practitioners, can be a threshold, an invitation to walk through a doorway into practice. And the continuing invitation is not to be attached to the “door” of identity. That is where ultimate freedom lies for all of us.

The Talmud says—“we don’t see the world as it is, we see the world as we are.” We cannot assume that our personal, internal explorations into the profound spiritual question “Who am I?” are exactly applicable to any other person on the Path. This focus on oneself is skewed until we broaden the question into a collective “Who are *we*?” We will not know who we truly are until we bring all levels of our Mindfulness and practice toward the multiplicity of our communities and needs. We begin to explore all of “who we are” by living collectively through the challenges and complexities of our diversities. We begin to experientially feel *how much we don’t know about what we don’t know* about the human condition. And that leads to more openness, awareness, insight and compassion for all of who we all are.

This can sound daunting and challenging and even painful. But the invitation of our Dharma practice is to turn our awareness towards the First Noble Truth of Suffering—not because we enjoy suffering, but because we have the possibility of transforming suffering into freedom.

At EBMC, despite our inevitable differences and conflicts, we have created an incredibly beautiful and so far unique center for practice communities. Injuries still occur but by navigating the suffering over and over again we break through thoughts that we are unable to create a sangha together or that we do not have enough resources to do it or we are not good enough to deserve it. We actually become more skilled in not only getting through suffering, but in truly living with one another in community. We do it by living our diverse lives with mindfulness and kindness—for ourselves and for others—awakening together.