

Why Is American Buddhism So White?

Our panel looks at the problem of “whiteness” in American Buddhism and what can be done—and in some cases is being done—to make it more diverse.

INTRODUCTION BY CHARLES JOHNSON

I would wager that every Buddhist enjoys the story about Hui-neng, the sixth patriarch of Zen, who presented himself as a poor “commoner from Hsin-chou of Kwangtung” to the abbot of Tung-shan monastery in the Huang-mei district of Ch’i-chou in hopes of study, and was rebuked by the abbot with these words: “You are a native of Kwangtung, a barbarian? How can you expect to be a buddha?” Hui-neng replied, “Although there are northern men and southern men, north and south make no difference to their buddhanature. A barbarian is different from Your Holiness physically, but there is no difference in our buddhanature.”

For more than two millennia, one of the appeals of Buddhism has been that happiness and freedom from suffering can be achieved by anyone, regardless of race, class, or gender. But we must remember that all convert practitioners are embodied beings who come to dharma study from somewhere. They are firmly situated in a particular moment of history. If they are American practitioners of color, who from childhood learn to be bicultural, some portion of the real, daily suffering they experience in America will arise from racism and social injustice. And in the post-civil rights era, this social suffering assumes forms that are so subtle and so deeply interwoven with our individual being-in-the-world that they are nearly invisible to white practitioners.

These unexamined, ingrained patterns of conditioning are, when viewed from a Buddhist perspective, perfect examples of what we mean by illusion if the racial or cultural self is taken to be an unchanging, enduring entity or substance. They are assumptions about identity that are as close to us as our breathing, so familiar that when these presuppositions are unveiled, “awakening” to them can be experienced as deeply unsettling by practitioners who cling to a sense of “whiteness.” James Baldwin explained this well

CHARLES JOHNSON is a novelist, scholar, and essayist. His novels include *Dreamer*, based on the life of Martin Luther King Jr., and *Middle Passage*, for which he won a National Book Award. He is also the author of *Turning the Wheel: Essays on Buddhism and Writing*.



when he said, “It’s not the Negro problem, it’s the white problem. I’m only black because you think you’re white.”

In societies where Buddhism has taken root, it has adapted to the everydayness of the lives of the laity. But problems arise in a multicultural society if one racial group of practitioners, with its preferences and prejudices, has historically been privileged and dominant over others.

The overwhelming whiteness of American Buddhist centers is not a problem just for teachers who want to transmit the dharma to everyone. The United States is undergoing a dramatic sea change. Demographers predict that by 2042 minorities will outnumber whites. This “browning” of America is arguably one of the greatest cultural issues in the twenty-first century, a change that is already affecting everything from employment to popular culture, and especially our system of public education.

A recent article by Jen Graves titled “Deeply Embarrassed White People Talk Awkwardly About Race” in Seattle’s alternative weekly, *The Stranger*, reports on how progressive whites are addressing this issue through organizations such as the Coalition of Anti-Racist Whites. “Whiteness is the center that goes unnamed and unstudied, which is one way that keeps us as white folks centered, normal, that which everything else is compared to,” CARW cofounder Scott Winn says in the article. “I think many white people are integrationists in that ‘beloved community’ way, but integration usually means assimilation—as in, you’ve gotta act like us for this to work.”

And Peggy McIntosh, the anti-racism activist and Wellesley Centers for Women scholar, sums all this up well when she observes: “I think whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege, as males are taught not to recognize male privilege. I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious.”

To resolve this problem, whites must listen deeply to Buddhists of color who are particularly well suited (and perhaps even karmically directed) to take the lead in healing these wounds, not only in the American sangha, but in the larger society as well.



Meditating at the New York Insight Meditation Center

B **BUDDHADHARMA:** How diverse is the overall Buddhist community in America?

LARRY YANG: The *Shambhala Sun* did a thirty-year retrospective of Buddhism in America a few years ago, and I scoured the magazine. While there may have been a few Asian teachers who had written articles or were quoted, it was about thirty years of Buddhism in the mainstream culture of America. It had no reference to any of the ways in which the dharma is beginning to touch different communities, whether it's communities of color or LGBT communities or really any communities that exist outside the frame of the mainstream culture. To me that spoke to a lack of diversity within the mainstream Buddhist community. There are certainly pockets of communities that are emerging, in the East Bay and Oakland area or in Seattle or Albuquerque—where there are groups for communities of color and their allies. There's a meditation center now in Magnolia, Mississippi, led by an African American practitioner. New York Insight and Insight Meditation Center in Washington, D.C., have been doing a lot of multicultural work. In general, though, I don't think the North American Buddhist community is very diverse, at least in the traditions I've practiced.

BOB AGOGLIA: Who can say precisely how diverse the overall Buddhist community in America is? But it *is* flourishing in some areas, and we need to understand what fosters that. Then places like Insight Meditation Society can really be, as our mission statement says, a spiritual refuge for *all* who seek freedom of mind and heart.

At IMS we have just started a voluntary survey about demographics and we'll see how people respond to that. You can't spot all racial diversity visually, of course, but it is clear by looking around that the vast majority of our population is white. I have been very impressed that one of the fastest growing segments of New York Insight's sangha is people of color sitting groups. It is clear that there is a thirst for teachings on the part of people and communities of color.

That has forced us to begin to confront the question of why more people of color are not finding their way to IMS retreats. That's been an active and ongoing exploration for us for the past four years and will continue to be so.

AMANDA RIVERA: I can't speak for the broader Buddhist community, but I think that one of the things that makes Soka Gakkai International unique is its diversity. I often pinch myself when I find myself at a meeting or a conference, and I look around

and I start counting the different varieties of people in the room. I think to myself how very uncommon it is in America to find a setting where so many different types of people are gathered. When I look around I can see an African American, an Asian, a lesbian, gay, or transgender person, a young person, an elderly person, a Hispanic person, and more. I find it very comforting and validating. I don't think our organization is really focusing on diversity per se. It just kind of happens and we respond to the need and inspiration that people have and we have to find ways to address the different types of people who come to us in a way that is respectful and inclusive. We encourage everyone to practice Buddhism, regardless of their race, color, sexual orientation, or class. Buddhism is not exclusive.

BUDDHADHARMA: Why do you think that what you're offering appeals to such a diverse group of people?

AMANDA RIVERA: I think the appeal comes from the fact that the Lotus Sutra emphasizes the absolute equality of all people to be able to attain buddhahood, to attain their enlightenment. Nichiren Daishonin wrote letters of encouragement to female disciples in thirteenth-century Japan reminding them of their equality, their equal ability to attain enlightenment. We follow in that spirit. We may look different but we are all equal in our potential to achieve enlightenment.

BUDDHADHARMA: You've created separate language groups so people can come together for something specifically for their language or ethnic group, but also in settings where there is diversity, right?

AMANDA RIVERA: Yes, for example, our Spanish-language group is one of the fastest-growing language-based groups in the country. In some places in the United States we have neighborhood meetings that are held in Spanish because people in those neighborhoods have limited or no English-speaking skills. The leaders come from those neighborhoods and are Spanish-speaking, so they're able to chant, study, share their experiences, and deepen their understanding of Buddhism together, as well as introduce other people who speak Spanish. We have the same for people who speak Korean, Japanese, or other languages.

ANGEL KYODO WILLIAMS: I want to say that I'm especially appreciative of SGI being in this conversation, because I think for quite some time, the American Buddhist community did a poor job in making sure that SGI's voice was present. What Amanda has pointed out about SGI notwithstanding, I would affirm what Larry said about an overall lack of diversity and attention to diversity.

An important transition in my dharma life was to stop expecting something particularly different from the Buddhist community, so for me the lack of diversity in Buddhism is not as interesting as the differential, especially in the last ten years, between the Buddhist community and the mainstream community. That's what is really notable. The mainstream community that surrounds predominantly white Buddhist communities has changed and become more diverse. Nevertheless, those predominantly white Buddhist communities are remaining predominantly white. Where there's real concern



LARRY YANG is a leader of the East Bay Meditation Center in Oakland and a member of the teachers' council at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre, California. He has taught many retreats for communities of color and LGBTQ communities nationally.



AMANDA RIVERA is a Soka Gakkai International member and long-time practitioner of Nichiren Buddhism. She is a leader of the SGI-USA culture department and national language coordinator for Spanish-speaking members.



ANGEL KYODO WILLIAMS is the leader of the New Dharma community and the founder of the Center for Transformative Change in Berkeley, California. She is the author of *Being Black: Zen and the Art of Living with Fearlessness and Grace*.



BOB AGOGLIA is executive director of the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts, where he is working to ensure that IMS better serves a more diverse population.

PHOTOS (LEFT—RIGHT): STEPHEN PICKARD; SUSAN FORNER; BETHANIE HINES; ELIZABETH VIGEON



(Above, below) *New York Insight Meditation Center*



People of color retreat at Deer Park Monastery in Escondido, California

for me is that when the areas in which the centers reside are not shifting with the demographic that they find themselves within, it speaks a little more deeply to how we as dharma practitioners are presenting ourselves in a way that's either welcoming or potentially unwelcoming.

BUDDHADHARMA: If there are people who feel unwelcome, that is clearly an obstacle. What in general, then, are the obstacles and challenges to having more diverse communities? What would cause some people to feel that becoming involved in Buddhist practice or a Buddhist community was something that didn't make sense for them?

LARRY YANG: One of the main obstacles is how long it takes to cultivate an increased multicultural awareness. This always takes a lot more time than we would like because, as we know, awareness practice is incremental. It blossoms slowly. To increase this kind of awareness requires role models—teachers of color, diverse teachers, who tell a diverse set of life stories and use a diverse set of materials in their teachings so they can reach a multiplicity of audiences. To have that, you need to develop teachers from diverse life backgrounds and communities of color. That has slowly been happening, but of course we know that the practice cycle required for teacher development is very long. Time itself becomes a little bit of an obstacle when the need is so present right now in these cultural conditions.

It's not just about making different cultures feel welcome in our environments, but how to actually reach into the culture itself so people recognize a piece of their lives when they walk through the door. When they recognize a piece of their lives, they can relax and begin to explore whether the place can be a spiritual home for them. Opening to diverse groups is an extension of the effort to create a real dharma community, which requires going beyond our own cultural experience.

BUDDHADHARMA: To be very specific, you are talking about, for example, the sorts of metaphors and examples that a teacher might use and the style of presentation. A teacher might not even see that how they've chosen to frame their talk on impermanence actually comes out of a limited cultural context.

LARRY YANG: One of the ways good teachers teach is from their own experience. But if you don't pay close enough attention and you only draw on your own life experience you probably are only going to reach those people who have similar life experiences. It will resonate deeply with them, but others may be left out. To reach beyond that, you have to go into life experiences, life stories, and the ways that communities communicate differently and incorporate that into your presentation. Even if I am rooted in my Asian American culture, the fact that I've lived and played and worked in other cultural contexts or other cultural communities allows me to bring that experience into my dharma talks. I can talk beyond my personal experience.



(Above, below) People of color retreat at Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts

As long as people see and feel signs that communicate “this is not for me, not about me,” they will feel that this supposed place of refuge is just like all the rest of the world that they have to negotiate and be constantly on alert within. —Bob Agolia

modification of that. That immediately sets up a construct in which you’re on the outside of whatever is central. It’s a myth, but it’s presented as truth to such a degree that we don’t even question it anymore.

What presents itself as a challenge and a barrier for people being able to enter into a really meaningful experience and relationship with practice in this country is just that. It’s the very fiber of how we’re operating and how we’re taught to operate. As a result, people outside the dominant group have to become bicultural, to learn the norms and the language, so they can function and survive in the larger society. It’s not necessarily true for white folks, which causes the white community to exist in ignorance of the very environment it is perpetuating. They can survive without having to reach into other people’s experiences, without having to reflect on what it’s like to be a part of a so-called minority group.

We have not had the kind of sophisticated, deep conversation about this in our dharma communities that we need to have. And therefore the lack of diversity remains fixed in so many places. We are wrestling with the same



ANGEL KYODO WILLIAMS: One of the largest obstacles we face is structural racism. There is a more than lingering white supremacy that suggests that the ways in which white folks do things is square one. We have The Church, and then we have The Black Church, or The Latino Church. Just about everything operates in that way. We “The” something with a capital T, which by default means largely a white mainstream, or a white-dominated group of people. Everything else is a

kind of fear and anxiety as the larger society. We need to begin to really get into this at a deep level.

BOB AGOLIA: As long as people see and feel signs that communicate “this is not for me, not about me,” they will feel that this supposed place of refuge is just like all the rest of the world that they have to negotiate and be constantly on alert within—hardly a place of rest and refuge.

We have feedback from people of color focus groups that members of our board have conducted. People tell us that IMS teachers are predominantly white and the sangha is predominantly white and the location is predominantly white. It all boils down to “I don’t see people like me here and therefore I don’t feel safe here. This is not a place that I would choose to come. It doesn’t hold the potential for a transformative experience.” As angel said, it’s the same form of structural racism that people are living with day and night. Fundamental changes are required to address this.

ANGEL KYODO WILLIAMS: Buddhism presents itself in the way that Amanda spoke of earlier, as something that is full of potential, that affirms each person’s capability for liberation. So, when people get to a retreat center and find that it’s more of the same, it’s a devastating revelation: this too? People come with a hopefulness and expectation that it’s going to be different, because we present it that way. That adds a whole other layer of resistance and people can become entrenched in that, which becomes even more challenging to undo.

AMANDA RIVERA: To undo these really complex habits and outcomes requires courageous conversation. We need courageous conversations on the part of the leaders within our organizations. We need to model what it is that we desire of our membership. We also need ongoing education. There was a time in our organization when we did some diversity training, starting with the leadership first. That helped us see what was right in front of us. It does not matter who you are, or how long you have practiced, you still have your biases, and discriminatory beliefs and ways that you may not always be conscious of.

BUDDHADHARMA: People within a given cultural milieu or neighborhood are going to feel very comfortable within that culture. What I’m hearing is that the predominantly white Buddhist communities default to the in-culture they have. To undo that, are we talking about creating a kind of multicultural space?

LARRY YANG: At Spirit Rock, which started as a predominantly white mainstream cultural organization, we started people of color retreats. To do so, we had to begin to change the structure. We had to do pre-retreat training and post-retreat debriefing with the staff. We had to create a culture even if it was just for that moment in time, and that could begin to ripple out and affect the institution on an ongoing basis. This is happening at IMS too. For organizations that are already in place, the challenge is to retrofit a multicultural pattern into a cultural pattern that has been going on for a while.

The other way is to start from ground up and see whether you can create a different structure. We’ve tried to do that at East Bay Meditation Center by reorganizing the registration process so that even demographically we’ve changed the experience for people. When you walk into an event at East Bay, we pretty much have 50 percent communities of color and 50 percent European Americans. That demographic reorientation is an awareness practice. When people walk into the room, it’s a different experience for everybody.

I’m not saying that none of the oppressive patterns, unconscious privilege, or entitlements come up, but there’s an opportunity to use the awareness practice and expand from that place. We’re expanding the personal mindfulness practice into a collective experience. If we can attract people through the door, the next level of challenge is giving skills to people in order to live together. Just because diverse communities congregate doesn’t mean that they’ll necessarily get along, so we have a class on unlearning racism called *Interconnected: Being Mindful and White in a Multicultural World*. That ties the practice into unlearning these structural patterns we’ve created.

BUDDHADHARMA: angel, at the New Dharma Center, are you trying to create a multicultural space, or are you starting from a different approach?

ANGEL KYODO WILLIAMS: Ours is a small residential community, so we live in a multicultural context. We try not to throw up barriers to people being completely who they are, as they are, when they enter into our spaces. For instance, we don’t any longer hold any kind of people-of-color anything. What we’re really trying to do is to encourage a full on, show up as you are, be who you are and bring your whole self space. It’s not your job to come to the community and try to figure out how you can fit in. It’s the community’s job to figure out how we can stretch the community into the so-called margins to broaden its understanding and the ability to be inclusive. Our sense of inclusivity is not how do we make you a part of what we are but how do we become more of what you are. And extend ourselves out toward you.

BUDDHADHARMA: The distinction is clear. You assume a pre-existing undivided space and operate from there. Nevertheless, do you think the people of color retreats have been—or are—valuable?

ANGEL KYODO WILLIAMS: There was a period of time in which they were enormously important and there are some ways in which they still can be quite effective and powerful. For me, though, at a certain point, the focus on people of color retreats became a distraction. There was more conversation and more focus on what was happening and not happening in terms of race and being people of color, so that the actual core practice was being relegated to a secondary concern. If I’m in the business of cultural confidence or creating multicultural



Soka Gakkai International gathering in Washington, D.C.

One of the things that makes Soka Gakkai International unique is its diversity. When I look around I can see an African American, an Asian, a lesbian, gay, or transgender person, a young person, an elderly person, a Hispanic person, and more. —Amanda Rivera

awareness that may be fine, but if I'm in the business of teaching and creating opportunities for people to experience deep practice in the dharma, that's not fine. It didn't work for me any longer, so with New Dharma we took a different tack to make sure that practice remained in the forefront. That's true across the board, not only in terms of our diversity but politics and everything else that could start to usurp our attention.

BOB AGOGLIA: As I look at where our society stands with respect to issues of race and racism, it seems we have a long, long way to go before the wounds and the suffering caused by

racism will heal. It seems that overall, in the U.S. at least, white people are mostly unwilling or unable to address the depth of this, yet it is something that white people *have* to confront, understand, and unlearn. We are a long way from that happening on a large scale. I can't foresee a time, then, when a place like IMS would not need to offer a people of color retreat. Retreats for groups who are oppressed by the dominant culture in the society may be what will make it possible for these people to experience transformative retreat practice at IMS.

LARRY YANG: Identity-based retreats are such a gateway into practice for people, especially for people who are relatively unfamiliar both culturally and spiritually with what the dharma has to offer. From there, they can go into other mainstream retreats and begin to practice beyond the identity-based form. At the last dharma talk of each of these retreats, I usually say that these retreats are precious dharma gates into your spiritual life. The invitation is not to attach to the door itself, but to walk through that door—one of the 84,000 gates into the dharma.

AMANDA RIVERA: Obviously this is a really complex issue, and even though I think we're doing pretty well at SGI in terms of

being able to attract a more diverse community, it's still quite a challenge. In trying to meet the needs of different subgroups you create other obstacles. As I've said, we have Spanish-language members, for example, and to support them we've created language-based meetings and language-based publications. While this is helpful to them, it kind of enables people to stay segregated and maybe even marginalized.

Our ongoing challenge, then, is: How do we respect the need of these groups to engage in meaningful exchange and dialogue about Buddhism in a language and culture they feel comfortable in, while at the same time keeping them connected to the broader organization?

LARRY YANG: Ironically, identity-based retreats were long in the making because when the teachers of the European-American mainstream sangha came back from Asia to teach, they didn't go to the existing Asian temples or venues that were already in North America. They started the mainstream centers we know today because they didn't see themselves reflected in these Asian temples. They didn't hear their life stories, they didn't hear the relevance to how these teachings actually dissolved their particular suffering in their particular life. This is the exact same reason that the identity retreats have been formed. Even in our expression of difference, we're the same. There is something that still completely connects us. The point of these retreats is to garner a strength of practice to enable us to see beyond the differences.

BUDDHADHARMA: For our readers who might be interested in attending an identity-based retreat, or even starting one, what elements make them work well?

BOB AGOLIA: angel made reference to too much discussion. At IMS, the retreats are held in silence, with people living together in open dormitories with shared bathrooms. Day in and day out, you sit and walk, sit and walk in silence. There are dharma talks, and there are meetings that teachers have with the yogis throughout the retreat, but otherwise it's predominantly in silence. In this respect we are providing the same kind of experience as in all our other retreats, in an environment where people of color feel safe.

LARRY YANG: We all have a lot of defenses, especially if our identities have been oppressed in any way by the mainstream dominant culture. In a culturally specific environment, you're able to loosen those defenses a little bit, and allow the practice to relax you. You become vulnerable and in that vulnerability you can really begin to deepen your experience of asking "who am I?" One of the experiences that connects us all regardless of the venue we choose is that we look for the safety we need to explore deeply.

There are practitioners who have gone through the people of color retreats that never need to return because they've gotten a sense of the practice that they can internalize. They can bring it wherever they go in their lives or create new communities that go beyond the split that happens in the mainstream



Sister Jewel, Ven. Pannavati Karuna, Jan Willis, and Myokei Caine-Barrett at the Buddhist Teachers Council at Garrison Institute

One of the largest obstacles we face is structural racism. We have not had the kind of sophisticated, deep conversation about this in our dharma communities that we need to have. —angel Kyodo williams

culture. It's a matter of skillful means, which always emerges from timing and context.

AMANDA RIVERA: We also have a series of what I guess you could call retreats. We call them conferences. We have one for Buddhists of African descent. We have one for the greater South Asian community, which might include members that are of Pakistani, Sri Lankan, or Nepali origin. We have conferences for members of various professions— law, academia, education, the healing arts. We spend a lot of time in dialogue, and at times, we talk about how the things that define us can also be the things that might limit us. We talk about the challenges we have within a given subcommunity or profession. People always leave a conference feeling transformed and refreshed. It deepens their understanding of the power of their practice and how they can use what they've learned to deal with the challenges of daily life.

ANGEL KYODO WILLIAMS: As Larry was saying, timing and context are key. Each of our communities finds itself in different contexts and we will have different approaches as a result. At New Dharma, we live in a certain kind of privilege of its own to be able to discard people of color retreats. We just don't have the same need.

We all have to examine the conditions we find ourselves in. Where diversity of mainstream communities is concerned, most of the work is for white folks to attend to. The dominant

group is actually suffering because it is not dealing with something that is present. The structures may make it such that they don't have to, but that doesn't take away from the fact that they *are* suffering. Any time we're part of a system that perpetuates oppression, ultimately we're suffering in keeping that system going. In American Buddhism these kinds of changes don't need to come because we need to do people of color a favor, or we need to make space for the gender variant people. We have to get clear that an essential aspect of our practice is to shift these things internally for ourselves, because our personal liberation, the very thing we come to the dharma for, is completely bound up in making these kinds of changes. It's not a superficial concern.

BUDDHADHARMA: What specifically do you recommend? Where do the courageous conversations Amanda was talking about need to take place?

ANGEL KYODO WILLIAMS: There is a lot that people can do within their own communities and the programs that have been created are admirable first steps, but I also think folks need to reach out and make use of the many different resources available in the broader society and become full participants in the larger societal conversation about oppression. The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond in New Orleans does phenomenal work, for example. They have Undoing Racism courses. After I got out of their training, I wanted to do ten thousand prostrations. White folks were able to leave three days of training with a clear sense of their participation in a system that has a mandate to continue cultural domination. They were able to have this conversation and leave, not feeling guilty and debilitated, but enlivened and empowered. They were inspired to begin to examine things in their lives and make a shift. I would love to see the dharma community reach out to some of those resources while continuing to do the things that address the particular needs of our community. There are some really smart solutions out there and we are not doing enough to tap in to them.

BOB AGOLIA: Several board members and staff from IMS attended their Undoing Racism program recently in New York City, and we've arranged for one of their senior trainers to come to Barre. I really endorse what angel is saying, because we've had a couple of different groups work with us to facilitate these conversations. And over the last four years we have really made a very intentional outreach to increase the diversity of our board—now five of our eighteen members are people of color. It has changed the conversation in the room, especially for those of us who are white. While the racial diversity programs were fantastic and we need to keep doing them, when we have board meetings with a diverse group of people, it changes my understanding of what it means to be mindfully white—I love that phrase, Larry—and what it means to be a person looking at the dominant culture from the outside in.



East Bay Meditation Center dharma study group

LARRY YANG: We have a lot more to do but I have to say that when I first got into practice twenty years ago, things looked completely different than they do today in terms of cultural and multicultural issues. This work takes so much longer than we would like, and cultivating patience has also become part of my personal practice. How do I recognize, acknowledge, and appreciate the things that have progressed so that when we go through more setbacks and suffering, I am sustained. To get to more moments of insight and freedom you usually go through more suffering.

BUDDHADHARMA: Everyone seems to agree that a certain amount of progress has been made but that there's much more to be done. Would it be fair to say that the next wave of diversity has less to do with adjustments, moving the furniture, than with uprooting deep preexisting patterns within the communities themselves? Blow them up in some sense and start from a fresh place?

ANGEL KYODO WILLIAMS: I think so. There was one moment in my path when I was frustrated by moving the furniture around and I was talking to Alice Walker and she said, "You know, as long as they started the thing, they will own it." A little bomb went off for me. I think Larry is probably much more patient than I am. I felt my attention and energy got pulled and drained, so my response was to explode it, as you say, and start something from scratch, on new ground. Rather than be in a place where people of color tried to fight their way into getting white folks to pay attention and do their homework, I wanted to invite white folks and everyone else into a shared space. That's my approach now, but I'm probably a little more out there than a lot of folks.



New York Insight Meditation Center

At East Bay Meditation Center we pretty much have 50 percent communities of color and 50 percent European Americans at our events. That demographic reorientation is an awareness practice. When people walk into the room, it's a different experience for everybody.

—Larry Yang



Participants in Spirit Rock's Community Dharma Leaders Program at Garrison Institute

BUDDHADHARMA: I would imagine there are elements of that in the East Bay case, Larry?

LARRY YANG: Sure. We've tried to really create a different infrastructure. It has been challenging letting go of how things have been done traditionally. We have no idea where we're going to end up. We just know that at the moment there are multiple needs that are being served, and given the way we operate, the community will hopefully guide the process. We're in a process of hierarchical reorientation, so that we really will be run by the community's vision as it deepens its collective practice. It may have been started by a few people, but certainly the community is starting to take real ownership. It's going beyond being a meditation center that is imposing a

set of teachings because we think they're liberating to being a community that is liberating itself and whoever comes into its sphere.

AMANDA RIVERA: One of the things we try to do is focus on individual human beings, their buddhanature, not necessarily their identity. We focus on their sanity, who they are essentially. All these other things, white or black or Hispanic or gay or Asian, just happen to be a part of who they are. They are ongoing challenges for us individually and collectively, but what's most important is that we're able to use the teachings to help us challenge those aspects of our lives and to create opportunity and unity in our common goal of individual happiness as well as world peace. Nichiren Daishonin talked about the Buddhist principle of *itai doshin*, "Many in body, one in mind." This reminds us that we are very diverse as people but what's most important is maintaining our unity, one mind. It's most important that we attain individual and collective happiness and world peace and live a very spiritually and fulfilling existence, regardless of what language we speak or culture we belong to.

LARRY YANG: Elevating our collective awareness and consciousness and intention for this kind of social transformation is about so much more than just one person or one center or one community. We need to bring together many perspectives, as we have in this conversation.

ANGEL KYODO WILLIAMS: There are many facets and layers to this challenge. The more we're willing to come to the table and have conversations outside our own circles, the more we will learn. I would echo what Larry said about being able to see the changes that are occurring. That is certainly gratifying and provides motivational fuel for continuing to do all the work we need to do. **BD**