Directing the Mind towards Practices in Diversity

By Larry Yang

Oppression is a difficult concept to embrace, and it is a difficult experience to explain. Oppression is an intense form of suffering that often elicits seemingly immediate reactions from individuals, whether they be the target of oppression or the instigators of oppression. For people who are directly wounded by the violence of racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, or other forms of oppression, the pain may be so great that it is difficult to examine on the moment to moment basis that Dharma practice asks of us. For people who perpetrate oppression or who are not the direct targets of oppression, the pain may not be acknowledged, seen, or even understood.

And yet, it exists. And it separates us from each other—in ways that harm the quality of life of all beings. So, what to do? How do we consciously move towards the suffering, from wherever we are at, with the awareness and intention and compassion that the Dharma has taught us?

The intention in developing these trainings is to break down the concept and experience of oppression into some salient components. The invitation offered is to begin by transforming a piece of oppression, rather than being intimidated by the vastness of its suffering. Dharma practice is often presented as an incremental and cumulative process. The practice of diversity is also such a process. The hope is that this process can invite us into taking these important steps to transforming our experience with oppression in deep and meaningful ways.

The practice of these trainings is an opportunity to begin the journey towards narrowing the experience of separation. As humans, we all partic-
ipate in the harmful behaviors that these trainings are addressing. We all have been the perpetrator and victim, at one time or another. These trainings are for all of us, not just for any particular group or community. And in our conjoint practice is the vision, hope, and possibility of both cultivating non-perpetration of oppression and increasing the compassion in how we live our lives and understand each other.

Entering into the trainings can be done many different ways. They can be used in contemplative meditation practice and as themes for inquiry in individual practice. If used in a Sangha, they can serve as guided meditations and intentions, or the beginning of mindful conversations. Related to this is the possibility to use one or more of these trainings as guiding principles during critical discussion, conflict resolution, mediation, or other sacred dialogue.

Thich Nhat Hanh's Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings of the Order of Interbeing were an invaluable inspiration and nourishment of these trainings in diversity. The First Mind Training in Diversity is a variation of Thich Nhat Hanh's Third Mindfulness Training about freedom of thought. Since culture and identity are often made up of beliefs and views, this felt like the best place to begin the trainings. Thây has written: "Many of today's problems did not exist at the time of the Buddha. Therefore, we have to look deeply together in order to develop the insights that will help us and our children find better ways to live wholesome, happy, and healing lives." This encouragement and suggestion for our Dharma practice becomes especially important with issues of diversity.

**Trainings of the Mind in Diversity**

1) Aware of the suffering caused by imposing one's own opinions or cultural beliefs upon another human being, I undertake the training to refrain from forcing others, in any way—through authority, threat, financial incentive, or indoctrination—to adopt my own belief system. I commit to respecting every human being's right to be different, while working towards the elimination of suffering of all beings.
2) Aware of the suffering caused by invalidating or denying another person's experience, I undertake the training to refrain from making assumptions or judging harshly any beliefs and attitudes that are different or not understandable from my own. I commit to being open-minded and accepting of other points of view, and I commit to meeting each perceived difference in another person with kindness, respect, and a willingness to learn more about their worldview.

3) Aware of the suffering caused by the violence of treating someone as inferior or superior to one's own self, I undertake the training to refrain from diminishing or idealizing the worth, integrity, and happiness of any human being. Recognizing that my true nature is not separate from others, I commit to treating each person that comes into my consciousness with the same loving kindness, care, and equanimity that I would bestow upon a beloved benefactor or dear friend.

4) Aware of the suffering caused by intentional and unintentional acts of rejection, exclusion, avoidance, or indifference towards people who are culturally, physically, sexually, or economically different from me, I undertake the training to refrain from isolating myself to people of similar backgrounds as myself and from being only with people who make me feel comfortable. I commit to searching out ways to diversify my relationships and increase my sensitivity towards people of different cultures, ethnicities, sexual orientations, ages, physical abilities, genders, and economic means.

5) Aware of the suffering caused by the often unseen nature of privilege, and the ability of privilege to benefit a select population over others, I undertake the training to refrain from exploiting any person or group, including economically, sexually, intellectually, or culturally. I commit to examine with wisdom and clear comprehension the ways that I have privilege in order to determine skillful ways of using privilege for the benefit of all beings, and I commit to the practice of generosity in all aspects of my
life and towards all human beings, regardless of cultural, ethnic, racial, sexual, age, physical, or economic differences.

6) Aware of the suffering caused to myself and others by fear and anger during conflict or disagreement, I undertake the training to refrain from reacting defensively, using harmful speech because I feel injured, or using language or cognitive argument to justify my sense of rightness. I commit to communicate and express myself mindfully, speaking truthfully from my heart with patience and compassion. I commit to practice genuine and deep listening to all sides of a dispute, and to remain in contact with my highest intentions of recognizing Buddha nature within all beings.

7) Aware of the suffering caused by the ignorance of misinformation and the lack of information that aggravate fixed views, stereotypes, the stigmatizing of a human being as "other," and the marginalization of cultural groups, I undertake the training to educate myself about other cultural attitudes, worldviews, ethnic traditions, and life experiences outside of my own. I commit to be curious with humility and openness, to recognize with compassion the experience of suffering in all beings, and to practice sympathetic joy when encountering the many different cultural expressions of happiness and celebration around the world.

"Metta as Diversity Practice," developed by Larry Yang, can be found in Appendix II.
Metta as Diversity Practice

Beginning with self:

May I be happy
— to learn, experience, share, and celebrate the life experiences of those who come from different backgrounds than I do
May I be free
— of any act of injury, offense, anger, stress, or indifference caused by myself or others
May I live with ease and well-being
— guided by patience, generosity, forgiveness, and understanding towards the conditioned experiences of all beings, with a heightened awareness of those who are different from me
May I be free
— to discover and experience the Buddha nature in all beings [with the openness of a newborn child towards his or her parents]

Continuing with the community with whom I most identify:

May we be happy
— to learn, experience, share, and celebrate the life experiences of those who come from different backgrounds than we do
May we be free
— from any act of injury, offense, anger, stress, or indifference caused by ourselves or others
May we live with ease and well-being
— guided by patience, generosity, forgiveness, and understanding towards the conditioned experiences of all beings, with a heightened awareness of those who are different from ourselves
May we be free

— to discover and experience the Buddha nature in all beings [with the openness of a newborn child towards his or her parents]

Continuing with a benefactor or dear friend:

May you be happy

— to learn, experience, share, and celebrate the life experiences of those who come from different backgrounds than you do

May you be free

— from any act of injury, offense, anger, stress, or indifference caused by yourself or others

May you live with ease and well-being

— guided by patience, generosity, forgiveness, and understanding towards the conditioned experiences of all beings, with a heightened awareness of those who are different from yourself

May you be free

— to discover and experience the Buddha nature in all beings [with the openness of a newborn child towards his or her parents]

Continuing with a neutral person with whom you may or may not share the same cultural, ethnic, sexual, or economic background or physical abilities:

May you be happy

— to learn, experience, share, and celebrate the life experiences of those who come from different backgrounds than you do

May you be free

— from any act of injury, offense, anger, stress, or indifference caused by yourself or others

May you live with ease and well-being

— guided by patience, generosity, forgiveness, and understanding towards the conditioned experiences of all beings, with a heightened awareness of those who are different from yourself

May you be free

— to discover and experience the Buddha nature in all beings [with the openness of a newborn child towards his or her parents]
Continuing with a person with whom you have had difficult inter-cultural experiences (starting by choosing a person who has not caused you the deepest harm):

May you and I be happy
— to learn, experience, share, and celebrate the life experiences of those who come from different backgrounds than we do

May you and I be free
— from any act of injury, offense, anger, stress, or indifference caused by ourselves or others

May you and I live with ease and well-being
— guided by patience, generosity, forgiveness, and understanding towards the conditioned experiences of all beings, with a heightened awareness of those who are different from ourselves

May you and I be free
— to discover and experience the Buddha nature in all beings [with the openness of a newborn child towards his or her parents]

Continuing with a community or cultural group that has been difficult (again, starting by choosing a group who has not caused you the deepest harm):

May all of us be happy
— to learn, experience, share, and celebrate the life experiences of those who come from different backgrounds than we do

May all of us be free from the pain and suffering
— of any act of injury, offense, anger, stress, or indifference caused by ourselves or others

May all of us live with ease and well-being
— guided by patience, generosity, forgiveness, and understanding towards the conditioned experiences of all beings, with a heightened awareness of those who are different from ourselves

May all of us be free
— to discover and experience the Buddha nature in all beings [with the openness of a newborn child towards his or her parents]
Returning to traditional Metta practice:
May all beings be happy
May all beings be free from pain and suffering
May all beings live with ease and well-being
May all beings be free

Dedication:
May the awareness of the needs of diverse communities continue
to be recognized and to grow in all Sanghas
May all Sanghas, to the best of their abilities, take actions towards
the elimination of cultural, racial, ethnic, sexual, physical, and
economic barriers to practice
May this work on issues of diversity and oppression heal the experiences
of separation and show us all, the commonality of our nature, for
the benefit of all beings everywhere, in all directions