



The Alliance for Buddhist Ethics

Promoting non-harming for a safe, just and compassionate world

Recognizing the interdependent nature of reality, *The Alliance for Buddhist Ethics* is committed to advancing the principles of diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion (DEAI) in all our work.

People of Color

“[I]n any of the categories where we are dominant... we have the potential to be remarkably powerful agents of change as allies.” ~Andrea Ayvazian

With the Black Lives Matter protests going global, we all probably have read bits and pieces regarding racial issues. Some may begin to wonder if they have inadvertently contributed to structural problems, and others may wonder what they can do to make their sanghas more diverse.



I saw this wonderful meme that says “Treat racism like COVID-19.” The first step is to “assume you have it.” If you assume you don’t have COVID-19, you are less likely to listen to experts, it is possible that you are spreading it without knowing, and you would be unwilling to change your life to end it.

Same with racism. One of the things that deeply frustrate people of color is that, when the issue of racism is raised, some white people immediately get defensive: “Not all white people!” “I am not racist”... And all of a sudden the focus is on how they feel hurt for being wrongly accused, and not about the many ways in which the system crushes people of color or makes life difficult for them.

So, first step, assume you have it. Not that anyone is specifically accusing you of having it. However, insofar as racism is biases institutionalized, it is like those droplets containing the coronavirus that can suspend in the air and linger on the surface of things—likely you have breathed in and touched it while thinking everything is “normal.” *Likely the way you conduct business in your sangha has an exclusionary effect, if it is not outright discriminatory.* Also, of course people of color know it is “not all white people.” If they really think all white people are racist, they would not try to communicate with you in the first place.

How can we improve the situation, then? Psychologically, it is easier to move toward something than to avoid something: If I tell you, “Don’t think of a white elephant,” all you can think of is a white elephant; however, if I say, “Think of green grass,” it would be unusual if you think of a white elephant. That is, instead of thinking, “What do I/we do to avoid being accused of racism?” try to figure out “How can we make our sangha more affirming and welcoming of people of color?”

Now, if your sangha is located in an area where there are just not that many non-white people, you cannot force diversity. Maybe once in a blue moon a person of color would visit your sangha. There are quite a few stories about teachers/leaders of sanghas denying that they need to do work regarding ethnic diversity, “There are just not many of them who come here. And they don’t come back.” Why don’t they come back, though?

The reason could be entirely personal, but chances are those personal reasons are bundled up with socio-economic and cultural reasons. A person who doesn’t attend meditation retreats may really not like sitting meditation, but it could also be because meditation retreats typically are rather costly. Offer a sliding scale.



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Or, in the case of some Asians with Buddhist heritage (not all Asians have Buddhist heritage), they may find it strange that meditation is presented as *the* Buddhist practice, rather than just one of the many Buddhist practices. Reach out to find out, but don't ask the person to speak for their whole ethnic group. Refrain from blanket statements in general—just like you may say, “Not all white people,” they are also persons who may or may not share whatever you presume to be the traits of their groups. Most minorities have gotten used to being the minority, and so being the sole person of color in the sangha is not in and of itself a problem even though it is definitely not very comfortable. They just need to know that when you see them, you see them as a person, with possibly some individual and socio-cultural differences, not as a whole group.

Pay attention to the kind of questions they ask. People with less social power are more likely to express their discomfort in the form of questions. Make room for them to ask questions, without deliberately singling them out in a group setting. If English is not their first language, it may take longer for them to speak, if at all; give them time. Reach out to them individually if they look like they wanted to say something but eventually did not.

More important, understand that you “have the potential to be remarkably powerful,” both in inflicting harm and in alleviating suffering. You can't force diversity if the area you live in is homogenous. However, you can pave the way to make your sangha affirming and welcoming to diverse others when they come by. Educate yourself and educate each other. Do community outreach to educate kids. Organize trips (when travel is safe again) to “ethnic” Buddhist communities to learn about each other. Collaborate with diverse sanghas to hold events. Like meditation or other Buddhist practices, we get more comfortable with diversity through practice.

— Hsiao-Lan Hu