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Lifting a Corner

Three Western Buddhist practitioners share their stories. Meara Claire Hayden, Mushim Ikeda, and Maude Wolfe



Not What I Thought

By Patricia Mushim Ikeda

We were silent. I concentrated on driving the unfamiliar streets of Chicago. Besides, it wasn't my place to initiate conversation. We had just left the Thai Buddhist temple we'd visited all afternoon. The main shrine room of the former church still had wooden pews, which now faced a gigantic gold Buddha figure flanked by two tree-like candles of similarly impressive proportion, in gold candle holders. The small group of resident bhikkhus had been warm and hospitable, had served us tea, given us a tour, and shown us the printing press on which they were printing inexpensive copies of Buddhist tracts. In time, they said they were going to meditate, and they invited my teacher, a Korean Zen monk, to join them. Although I was wearing grey Korean Buddhist clothing, was a temple-dwelling renunciant with hair cut short, and had logged plenty of hours in our own meditation hall, the bhikkhus declined to invite me to meditate with them because I was a woman. I was completely new to their traditional way, and I was completely shocked. There was absolutely no unfriendliness on the part of our hosts; they were simply following the rules. My teacher politely declined the invitation. He later explained that he did so

because, if I couldn't join the meditation session, then he didn't want to do so either.

The silence in the car was broken when my teacher remarked, "Those candles looked like big phallic symbols."

No kidding, I thought to myself.

"Frankly," he continued, "they were the only thing I could relate to there."

He sighed, opened a bag of snacks that Mrs. Kim, a laywoman devotee had given to us, offered me something to eat, cautioning me to keep both hands on the wheel, which meant I couldn't actually eat anything, then closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep, while I drove back to our center in Michigan.

That particular little pilgrimage to Buddhist centers in Chicago took place in the mid-eighties. Observing the emergence of North American Buddhism was one of my teacher's main interests, and through accompanying him as an attendant on a number of journeys, I picked up the interest as well. I was never able to form a stereotype of what "a North American Buddhist" looked like, because wherever I went my preconceptions went down the drain. This included the idea that Buddhist practitioners might, in general, be more kind, quiet, and ethical than other people who didn't do what we Zen students called, as though it were both self-evidently important and slightly esoteric, *the practice*. My education in disillusionment continued as I was exposed to an ever-wider variety of North American Buddhist communities that, in part, catapulted me across the ocean to an eight-month stint in monasteries in South Korea. There, a large and intimidating American nun told me brusquely that the monastery was no place for wimps.

"Some Koreans can be abusive, to one another as well as to foreigners, and the monastic sangha is full of all kinds of people, good and bad, honest and dishonest, enlightened and unenlightened, smart and stupid," she said.

"Surely that can't be true!" I remember thinking. But it was. This whole Buddhist thing, which had started out being about my becoming calm and wise and perhaps even fully awakened (whatever that meant) for the benefit of all sentient beings (whoever they were) wasn't what I had initially thought. As it turned out, none of it was what I had thought. And that has kind of become the point.

Now that I myself do Buddhist teaching, mainly at the East Bay Meditation Center in Oakland, California, I sometimes say to dharma students, "It's a big, bad Buddhist world 'out there,' with a lot of wonderful adventures to be had in it." My students come primarily from communities with deep wounds and histories of exclusion and oppression. I myself am a Japanese American woman, and partly because of experiences stemming from that, I've been very concerned with issues of diversity and inclusiveness in North American Buddhism. In 2001, in an essay in *Inquiring Mind* entitled "Stories We Have Yet to Hear: The Path to Healing Racism in American Sanghas," I wrote:

One of the ways that access to Buddhist practice and community has been constricted for [U.S.] people of color is that a dharma language has not yet been developed that speaks to issues of privilege, power, race and ethnicity. I've heard these questions asked: "Are different forms of language and teaching needed in order to acknowledge the experiences that people of color bring to Buddhist communities? Do we need new forms of skillful means (upaya) in order to welcome and empower people of color in dharma halls and centers?"

My answer, based on recent experience, is yes. In the past few years I have noticed that dharma teachings that often go over fairly well in a white middle-class audience are met with dissatisfaction and distrust, or even active resistance, by people of color.

So this brings us to a point of both potential disappointment and potential excitement. What, after all, happened to oneness? If we point out and even deeply investigate the ways in which our human experience, our culture, our beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, and views are not the same, are in fact shockingly different and multiple—if we plunge our hands and faces into this incredibly uncomfortable mass of sheer difference, not knowing what is going on, not understanding what people are saying, reducing ourself to an ant gazing up speechlessly at the Tower of Babel, what then?

Maybe it's not such a bad place to start. We *are* different—and the profound listening, the careful observation, the patient "being with" that is so needed to penetrate another's experience instead of standing outside and judging that experience as "other," are all things that do not come easily to most of us. They cost us time and attention, and even more than that, they may place our cherished image of our cherished self in jeopardy. Being with someone whose experience has been very different from my own can be scary. Can it *really* be that this is how you see me, that this is what you think of me, that this is how you judge me, based on your past experiences or your projections of people who look like me? The risk of connection can carry this price tag: I may have to change in ways that I hadn't counted on when I first decided to try hanging out with someone from another Buddhist lineage, or someone whose teacher I don't respect, or someone whose experience of the world is shaped by very different social factors than those that shape my own. E. M. Forster's famous injunction "Only connect" sounds like a good idea, until I feel my worldview begin to quiver just a little, like a mountain range viewed through the heat of a great desert.

Still, as a consequence of my practice, I feel pretty connected most of the time, to myself and to others. I feel connected to things that are natural and unnatural, good and bad. I am quite often joyful. As a student of the dharma, I believe that what we call difference in the negative sense of the word is only a perceived lack of connection, and that difference offers the potential to create or manifest connection in a new and fulfilling way. The farther I need to reach to make a connection, the more I grow.

Tricycle magazine, Winter 2011