



# UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK  
Spirituality · Community · Justice

## **Love, Rage, & Radical Dharma:**

The Intersection of Buddhism & Radical Black Thought—or,  
Dismantling White Supremacy Culture in Western Buddhism

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In early January I received a call from Frederick Community College. They had a 15-week undergraduate World Religions course starting in a little more than three weeks that needed an instructor. I said yes both because I have most of what I'll need to facilitate each class session from various sermons and courses I've offered previously and because it's exciting to have the opportunity to accompany students in an exploration of the world's religions.

Our first live Zoom class session was this past Wednesday, and our focal question was **“What is religion?”** I also added two crucial follow-up questions: **“Who benefits?”** and **“Who decides?”** You get very different answers to the question, “What is religion,” depending on whether you ask, for example, a fundamentalist Christian, a Wiccan (from the Pagan tradition), or a member of an Ethical Humanist congregation. A fundamentalist Christian might tell you that religion is primarily about *believing* the right thing about Jesus. A pagan, however, might tell you that religion is more about *performing a ritual correctly*. Different still, an Ethical Culturist might tell you that religion is about taking the *next right action*.

If we seek to develop a definition of religion that accounts for all of these world views and more, we begin to realize that it really matters who is in the room. As the saying goes, **“If you aren't at the table, you might be on the menu.”** Along these lines, I would like to invite us to spend a few minutes reflecting on this truth from the

perspective of the Buddhist tradition. Similar to “What is religion?” generally, you can get very different answers to “What is Buddhism?” depending on whether you ask, for example, a conservative Asian monastic, a secular Western mindfulness teacher, or a New Age mystic.

This dynamic has also been on my mind because this month I started a two-year Meditation Teacher Training through Buddhist Geeks. Similar to Unitarian Universalism, Buddhist Geeks takes what could be called an integral approach to the Buddhist tradition: seeking to integrate wisdom from many diverse sources from the past, letting go of that which no longer seems helpful in today’s world, and being open to the best of modern science and all that we are still coming to know in our globalized, pluralistic, postmodern world.

The closer we look at the world’s religions, the clearer it seems that reality is so much more complex than any one monolithic tradition could ever cover. And we are usually on more accurate ground to speak in the *plural* instead of the singular—so **Buddhisms rather than Buddhism, Christianities, Judaisms, Islams, Paganisms**. While there are still times when it’s simpler to use religion singular as an umbrella term, using the plural periodically is a good reminder that each of the world’s religions contains a wide host of diverse traditions, practices, and beliefs—regardless of the fundamentalists who will try and tell you that their way is the only one right way.

Buddhism has grown and changed over the course of centuries—and we could trace similar evolutions for each of the world’s religions. Even at Buddhism’s beginning —2,500 years ago when Siddhartha Gautama (the historical Buddha) sat down under a Bodhi Tree in Bodh Gaya, India—he was not in a vacuum, and in many ways what we now think of as the Buddhist tradition began as a reform movement within the much older milieu of the Hindu traditions. And although there are strong family resemblances between various strands of Buddhism, there are also real differences from the ways Buddhist dharma has evolved and adapted within various cultures.

Consider that the centrality of advanced concentration states (or *jhānas*) in the **Theravādan Thai Forest Tradition** has a whole different set of social points and aesthetics compared to the “just sitting” approach of **Japanese Zen** known as *Shikantaza*, And **Tibetan Vajrayāna** with its mantras, mandalas, and visualizations of

deities is different still. Likewise, we could add into the mix the stripped down, **secular Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction movement found here in the West**. There are many more Buddhisms than these four examples, but you can already begin to notice the contours of the significant similarities and differences. I should also add that the situation is often less a matter of different Buddhisms being better or worse and more a matter of **each tradition having its various strengths and weaknesses**. And there are some real advantages to going deep into one or more traditions, as well as to being conversant with many lineages.

Part of why I'm bringing this up is that in recent years I have been grateful to notice the increasingly prominent influence within Western Buddhism of teachers from multicultural backgrounds. As we've been exploring, it makes a difference who is in the room, who is doing the teaching, and the content that is being taught.

The book that first challenged me to think more deeply about the perspectives of dismantling White Supremacy Culture in Western Buddhism is **Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation** which was published in 2016 by three Black meditation teachers:

- **Rev. angel Kyodo williams**, the second of only three black women Zen Senseis, and author of the book *Being Black: Zen and the Art of Living with Fearlessness* (2002).
- **Lama Rod Owens**, who writes powerfully and compellingly about the intersections of his experiences as a Black American, a gay man, and a Buddhist Lama, who has completed a traditional three-year retreat in Tibetan Buddhism, and
- **Jasmine Syedullah**, a long-time meditator who is a professor of Africana Studies at Vassar College (209-210).

Each were inspired to have a series of public conversations about the **intersections between Radical Black Thought and Buddhist traditions** in the wake of the #BlackLivesMatter movement (107-108). In addition, I should mention another important trailblazing book that came out the year before from the Zen tradition: Zenju Earthly Manuel's *The Way of Tenderness: Awakening through Race, Sexuality, and Gender*.

To say more about what Radical Dharma means, I'll start with dharma. It's an important word with a lot of nuances that make it difficult to render into English in a simple way. But two common translations often used in the Buddhist tradition are "truth" or "reality." Now, some of you may be thinking, "Aren't truth and reality the same regardless of who is teaching," and that is the case to a certain extent. As Philip K. Dick used to say, **"Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away."**

At the same time, quantum physics is one among many scientific insights which has shown us that *subjectivity* matters too. As with the glistening facets of jewels strung in a web—jewels that illuminate differently depending on the light and angle from which you are looking—it is often the case that **different angles and facets of the dharma (of truth and reality) are revealed, depending on who is in the room doing the teaching and learning.**

For anyone wondering, there is, of course, real benefit that can come from engaging with the Buddhist tradition for one's own personal benefit, freedom, and liberation. But there is also so much more that is possible. To that larger aspiration for the collective liberation for all sentient beings—in which we all get free—let me add a little more about Radical Dharma.

Sensei angel Kyodo Williams explains that Radical Dharma is *radical* for at least two reasons. First, etymologically, **radical is derived from the Latin word *radix*, which means *root***, so Radical Dharma is about weeding out the *root*—the source—of problems (xvii). And that word *root* has a particular resonance in the Buddhist tradition in regard to the three *kleshas*, known as the **three "poisonous roots": ignorance, hatred, and greed.** The good news is that there are also three **corresponding antidotes of wisdom, compassion, and generosity.**

Second, Radical Dharma is radical in the sense of being part of the Black Radical Tradition, which emphasizes that the liberation of Black people is one major key to collective freedom in which we all get free (xvii). The logic is that if we really do change the systems and structures of society so that Black people are free, then very likely those changes to the systems and structures will be of wide benefit to all. As the

saying goes from the Indigenous Rights Movement, **“If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”**

Using the lens of the three poisonous roots, we can now begin to better understand that subtitle of the book *Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation*—the call to raise awareness about;

- the ignorance of racism - racism is a social construct, not a biological reality; all humans are 99.9% the same at the DNA level
- the persistence of racialized hatred - both individual bias and systemic racism and
- the motivating role of racialized greed (the long history of enslaving and exploiting black bodies for capitalist profit).

Then, weaving in the antidotes can point us toward more hopeful ways forward through:

- wisdom - diversity, equity, and inclusion training
- compassion - opening our hearts in widening circles across difference, and
- generosity - noticing such truths as: “The loss of privilege is not reverse discrimination.”

Lama Rod Owen has written further about five main principles of practicing Radical Dharma:

- **Contemplative** - slowed down and not caught up (or hooked) on habitual patterns.
- **Embodied** - not just “neck up” in your mind or head
- **Liberatory** - about freedom, choice, and self-determination
- **Collective** - about more than just the individual.
- **Prophetic** - about truth-telling in the sense of a “Truth and Reconciliation” process (5).

These five points are beautiful examples of what we can learn from the Buddhist tradition when it is taught from the particular perspective of the Black Radical Tradition.

One reason that I scheduled this topic for this Sunday is that starting this Tuesday at 7:00 p.m.—and continuing for the next eleven weeks—our Intern Minister Jen and I will be co-leading a chapter-by-chapter study of the recent report released by

the Unitarian Universalist Association's "Commission on Institutional Change" titled Widening the Circle of Concern.

Many of you will recall that in 2017, Rev. Peter Morales, the first Latino president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, resigned in the wake of a hiring controversy about a pattern of apparent bias that over time tended to favor white male ministers for UUA positions and pass over people with historically marginalized identities.

Institutional bias is about much more than individual prejudice (or lack thereof). It's also not necessarily about the *conscious*, intentional, aspirational White Supremacist attitudes of people carrying Confederate flags while storming the U.S. Capital Building on January 6. Instead, very often, many instances of bias and racism are about the much more **insidious, subtle, *unconscious* bias arising in White Supremacy Culture**.

In practice, if historically white institutions don't *intentionally* take steps to change their systems and structures to be more welcoming, diverse, and multicultural, then the tendency will be that cultures and institutions will *unintentionally* revert back to practices that support historically privileged individuals and groups. Our UU 8th Principle targets precisely this tendency by calling us to **"actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions."**

Many of you likely know the saying that one definition of insanity is "doing the same thing and expecting a different result." And it's important to remember that in the history of our Unitarian Universalist movement, we've made major commitments to Anti-Racism, Anti-Oppression, and Multiculturalism in the past that have not resulted in the diverse beloved community we dream about. If you are curious about the details, there is an excellent record in a book titled **The Arc of the Universe Is Long: Unitarian Universalists, Anti-Racism, and the Journey from Calgary**, which traces our history from a major commitment to Anti-Racism in 1992 at a UU General Assembly in Calgary, Canada, through 2006.

Over that almost 15-year period, it became clear that the hoped for changes had not come to fruition. The primary reason is that we collectively failed to make the needed institutional changes and to put different systemic supports in place, so we

*unintentionally* drifted back more toward a white monoculture instead of forward toward a multicultural beloved community.

Keeping in mind what we just learned about that failed 15-year period of 1992 to 2006, let us fast forward another ten years to 2017 and you get another decade of pent-up frustration. When you then add in the heightened attention to racial justice from #BlackLivesMatter starting in 2013, one result was the explosive criticism leading to the resignation of President Morales in 2017.

So even though we elected Bill Sinkford as the first Black president of the UUA (2001-2009) and Peter Morales as the first Latino president of the UUA (2009-2017), neither of those elections were sufficient to address wider systemic problems—just as electing Barack Obama as the first Black President of the United States clearly did not end systematic racism in the U.S.

Not surprisingly, we can similarly trace these same dynamics playing out in Western Buddhism. If you want to dive into the full details, I highly recommend Ann Gleig’s invaluable book [American Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Modernism](#). For our purposes, I’ll limit myself to one case study of the influential two-year Community Dharma Leaders training program at Spirit Rock, a widely regarded retreat center just north of the Bay Area in California. In the first decades of the twenty-first century, the first two cohorts in the Community Dharma Leaders training program—CDL2 (2004-2006) and CDL3 (2007-2009)—included an average of 6% people of color. **When they made some institutional changes to intentionally recruit and support people of color, their diversity numbers multiplied sixfold:**

- CDL4 (2010-2012): 37% BIPOC (“Black, Indigenous, People of Color”)
- CDL5 (2013-2015): 40% BIPOC (168).

Together with similar systemic changes at peer institutions, the result “will mean an extraordinary increase of 330% in the number of teachers of color in the Insight community” (171).

**Institutional changes included:**

- reserving spots for people of color,
- learning tools reflecting intercultural competencies (to create more inclusive and welcoming spaces for a wider diversity of people),

- funding scholarships specifically for people of color (223-233).

If you are curious to learn more, there's a great ten-page appendix in Larry Yang's important book Awakening Together: The Spiritual Practice of Inclusivity and Community.

We're already seeing some similar progress in our own UU movement, particularly through the leadership of organizations like Black Lives of UU, and we also have much work to do to turn our dreams into deeds and build the world we dream about. If you would like to be part of the process, I encourage you to join me and Jen on as many of the upcoming Tuesday nights as is possible for you.

For those of you curious to learn more about Radical Dharma, let me recommend more books that are accessible places to start. One I mentioned earlier is Lama Rod Owens' new book **Love and Rage; The Path of Liberation through Anger**. There is often a misunderstanding that spirituality and anger don't mix. In contrast, Lama Rod powerfully reminds us that it is right to be angry at injustice. Anger can be a clue that our individual or societal boundaries have been violated, and that emotional power can fuel our work for justice. Especially when channeled through love, anger can point us toward the truth of Dr. Cornel West's words that, **"Tenderness is what love feels like in private, and justice is what love looks like in public."**

I also recommend Sebene Selassie's new book You Belong: A Call for Connection. Selassie describes herself as a "nerdy, Black, immigrant, tomboy, Buddhist weirdo." And related to our Seventh UU Principle about "the interdependent web of all existence," Selassie says that the subtitle of her book could be "A Call to Remember the Inherent Connection with Everything Within Which You Always Already Exist" (168). Her book is an invitation to cultivate a felt sense of interdependence in your direct experience.

Beyond books, for those of you who feel like you could use some support in starting, restarting, or catalyzing your meditation practice, I should also give a shout out to the Ten Percent Happier meditation app that regularly does a great job centering meditation teachers of color.



For now, I'll give the final word to Ruth King from her essay in the excellent new anthology **Black and Buddhist: What Buddhism Can Teach Us about Race,**

**Resilience, Transformation, and Freedom:**

My advice: Practice the dharma, then do your best. Grieve, rest, keep hate at bay, and join with others for contemplation and refuge. Don't get too far ahead of now. This moment is enough to digest. Sit, breathe, open. Don't be a stranger to moments of freedom that may be flirting with you. Allow distress to teach you how to be more human. Sit in the heat of it until your heart is both warmed and informed, then make a conscious choice to be a light. (174)