

## **Racial Equity Session – Deer Park Monastery – October 31, 2015**

*“Given the tragic events in Baltimore, New York, Charleston, Ferguson and elsewhere in the USA, the time is now to look deeply and act compassionately to address our country’s deep-rooted habit of structural racism.”*

*about 85 people present at an optional session*

*Lyn – Introduction – intention, sentence*

*In groups of twos – “What brought you here?” 2 minutes each person*

*3 questions were raised by the community, including, “As white people, how can we help?”*

### **Sr Peace**

How wonderfully potent and nourishing it is to see so many here because it says a lot about what has been in the news this past year, but we all know it's been happening for a lot longer. There is so much care. I feel like we're, hopefully, approaching the precipice where I don't see us falling down over in any negative place but actually taking a quantum leap, though that will be in tiny steps. I'm grateful to be here and grateful to be part of this gathering and to be here, to listen and to learn.

### **Moderator – Lyn Fine**

We'll keep to 20 minutes for this sharing. I invite the panelists to introduce themselves.

*(bell)*

### **Antoinette**

Dear Thay, Dear Sangha,

My name is Antoinette and I live in Fresno, in the Central Valley of Central California. I'm going to bring a little piece into this conversation about the Central Valley. It is the butt of all jokes by Californians and it is also the fruit- and bread-basket of the nation. In a conversation that I was passing by, someone commented about the pain that they experienced while chopping squash; so I told her that I would hold her that evening and enjoy thinking of her as I ate the squash. And then it occurred to me at the next meal that I also want to think of all the hands that are involved in producing all of our meals at such cheap prices, also offering a prayer that may those hands have food to eat and may those hands also nourish their children and their families. Food disparity is an issue in Fresno, amidst the abundance. Who are we talking about? It's no mystery. We're talking about Latinos and immigrants. That's what popped into my head at this moment. We're coming here live with nothing pre-planned. We're having a conversation with each other and hoping to offer what a conversation could look like with mindfulness, as we're discussing some painful subjects. One or each of us may have difficult times and maybe I'll have a *stinky* moment and it's really a trigger that I can't work through, or maybe I'm not even aware of it and I'm just exuding stink. And that happens. And so to offer love and learning in this conversation.

*(bell)*

### **Victoria**

My name is Victoria and I live in the Oakland area. I've been a part of the Community of Mindful Living for a number of years. This topic is very near and dear to my heart, being that the Sanghas that I have participated in are predominantly white and I'm often maybe one of two people of color in the room. I do sit with the Hella Just Sangha in Oakland which is a People of Color Sangha. So when

Charleston hit, I was so devastated and knowing that Thay teaches that Sangha is a refuge, while I know I have my Dharma brothers and sisters of color where I can take refuge, I was just filled with despair and sadness and grief that I could not feel that same level (with my white sangha brothers and sisters.) Knowing that this is the Beloved Community that Thay has really set in motion and the same with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., I recognized that we need to start asking questions and deeply looking at why I could not feel like I could rely on my sangha. I mean the larger Sangha that I'm talking about. So that is what motivated me most recently and I'll say one more thing. Since I've started to look more deeply at this myself and working with others who are interested in this, I want to be very honest with us. I think that we need to be honest. We need to use the practices that we are learning and use the to really look and to deeply listen. The two questions that I hear the most are, "How can I help?" from predominantly white Sanghas and to my Dharma brothers and sisters, and to myself, I'm going to be completely honest. Knowing that there is love, deep love, under any kind of triggers, questions, etc... There is deep love inside of me and inside of all of you. That said, my answer is, "I am tired of educating. I am tired. Why does this question still come up? Why are we asking this question? For myself, we live this every single day of our lives for centuries. So my noticing is that if that is true for me, then what even deeper looking, deeper listening, needs to happen, with others? Not so much to look to me and say, "What can I do?" but rather utilizing the practices that we heard about on this retreat. Deeply listening to ourselves and pulling together whatever groups you feel comfortable in to look more deeply and still more deeply. I know it's hard. I know it's uncomfortable because that's what I hear. But that's what it's been for people of color. I hear, "It's so hard. Why do I have to be so PC around you?" And I say, "Yes, it is hard. If you look more deeply with the mind of love, perhaps there will be more that you will find."

*(bell)*

### **Steve**

My name is Steve. I'm from Washington DC and this is the first time that I'm in the Sangha. So if I don't bow the right way and sit the right way, please cut me a little slack. (laughter) So I appreciate the questions from the sister, "As a white ally, what can I do to help?" I've been here a few days and it is apparent that in order to become a monastic, it takes a lot of training. It takes a lot of listening. It takes a lot of learning. I imagine that it takes a lot of study. My observation is that to be white ally, it takes a lot of listening. It takes a lot of asking questions and it takes a lot of learning. I do work in education where the people we serve are all poor black families. The people leading are overwhelmingly white and they don't know the communities that they are trying to save. And I don't see a lot of emphasis on learning. Like, do you know what Mumbo sauce is? Do you know who Chuck Brown is? Have you ever sat in a church on Good Hope Road? If the answer to all of that is no then you have a lot of work to do to be an ally.

Sister Peace and I are from the same neighborhood in DC and I want to tell a story about what it was like, for me, growing up in our neighborhood. There was a street not far from where we lived called Sixteenth Street. On the west side of Sixteenth Street, there were big houses, nice lawns, restaurants, parks, and everything good seemed to be on the west side of Sixteenth Street. On the east side of Sixteenth Street there were public housing projects, row houses chopped up into blocks of units and there were people engaging in prostitution, drugs and violence. It seemed like everything bad was on the east side of Sixteenth Street. I swore to myself when I was a kid that I was going to get to the west side of Sixteenth Street. That's where I am now. I live on the west side of Sixteenth Street. About a year ago, my wife and I were at dinner and we got a text from our son. He said, "Mom and dad, there are a lot of police outside and I want you to be careful because I don't want you to end up like Michael Brown."

*(bell)*

So my wife and I have talked about that a lot. It felt like a real defeat for us because we felt like we had done everything right. Our kids are in good schools, living in a safe neighborhood in a big house. What we thought was that that was the moment when our son realized that he was black. And we realized that we couldn't protect him *from being black*. That is what we live with. It's difficult. It's difficult.

(bell)

### **Matt**

My name is Matt and in a way I guess I'm here because I've never had to spend a single day giving this a second thought. I am the ultimate beneficiary of institutional racism. As a white person, more so even as a white male, again, as a straight white male, I get up every day completely comfortable in the world that I live in, in my surroundings, my skin. I don't have to give it a second thought. I am here also because I spent much of my life not giving it a second thought. But this path and this practice has been a beautiful teacher for me and for many of us. I am also just incredibly inspired by the room being full here – so many people coming to us with these questions into the room. These same questions arose for our Sangha over the last year and a half as what has been unfolding in this country, in communities of color, primarily, where privilege is not the foundation or the grounding. We've been seeing what's been arising and what's been caught on video and in all of the places mentioned. When Charleston happened this year, we didn't know how to respond as a Sangha. We didn't have the tools or the understanding. When we reached out to the AME church in Denver through one of our Sangha sisters but we really didn't have the tools to respond. Or I should say, the awareness to respond. The tools were there but the awareness was not. I had the great blessing to attend an international Dharma teacher's conference, a multi-tradition conference in June, where there was a panel and discussion on diversity. Rev. angel Kyodo Williams was one of the speakers, Dawa Tarchin Phillips was there and the whole group of organizers was a very diverse group that was hosting it and putting it on for us. I came back from that very inspired by their sharing, being the same thing that Victoria shared, that the community of color is just tired of trying to educate white America on their experience and that we really need to take that responsibility on ourselves. We need to educate ourselves. If this is going to change, if we're going to move from inequity and injustice towards equity and justice, we have to engage. I used to think that the most radical thing that I was doing was holding Sangha space for people to come and to open and to become more aware but it's really not enough. So I'll try to share briefly that in our Sangha, we spent the two months of August and September looking at white privilege. We're a primarily white Sangha. We're very international and quite diverse from an LGBT perspective, but not so much in color. We spent two months looking at white privilege through the *Anapanasati Sutta* (the Discourse on the Full Awareness of Breathing), in our body, in our feelings, in our mental formations and recognized how incredibly broad the spectrum of awareness was for our Sangha from none whatsoever to okay. That experience was bumpy. We weren't very skillful about it and in that process we decided that we needed to take a year to look at this more deeply. We've adapted the *White Awake* six-month curriculum to a year-long program and are spending two months on each segment. We'll be meeting for three hours, once a month, and doing reading and studying in between. I'm happy to share more about that process afterward for those who are interested.

(bell)

### **Lyn**

Please take a moment to breathe and hear what the body is saying, what the mind is saying. Take two more breaths.

(bell)

Let's bow to each other, and bow to ourselves. Bowing is called "inclining with reverence" in Spanish. (BOWING)

Generally after sharings like this, a lot of feelings come up and a lot of wishes to speak and to speak immediately. Sometimes that is beneficial. Sometimes it's actually non-beneficial for the people who have spoken. So we want to suggest that first, before speaking, we invite you again to go into twos and threes, to share what's happening in your mind and body, and use the mindfulness practice of not just responding or reacting to the content of what's said. Looking in the *Mindfulness Bell*, Joanne Friday has an article on Deep Listening practice, where the people are invited, in responses, to just say, "Oh. I felt really sad." Or "I felt really angry." without naming what triggered it. It doesn't have to be exactly that formalized in your twos and threes but we would like to invite you to share with each other to get a sense of 1) – What's going on in the body-mind at this point, from your life and from what you heard, and 2) – What's your next step, either in yourself or in your Sangha.

This can feel a little over-controlling but we have a very limited amount of time so I would invite you please to find a partner and we'll take about 3 minutes to share.

(bell)

Thank you, dear friends. I realized a few days ago as I was practicing walking meditation that the discipline of stopping with the sound of the bell is the discipline, the training, for a non-violent army with a collective discipline, not just an individual discipline. I'm guessing that there were many people who could have continued.. But the folks here on the panel would like to continue in this conversation if you all would be interested in listening. Yes? Okay.

We also want to share that we have resource sheets available so that if anybody wants to start with looking at white privilege, wants to start looking more deeply at the experience of different communities, those are there for reference, including the video of Sister Peace and others (*Where Spirit and Action Meet*). The catalyst for this gathering was that Victoria was invited to speak at the Northern California facilitators' gathering. She was the final person to speak on a three-person panel on "How can our Sanghas contribute to Social Justice Work?" The talk that she gave from both personal experience and practice, was so moving that she was invited to write it out and we've decided to re-print it here. I would encourage you to read it out loud to one other person and to your Sangha. That one piece, plus the articles in the latest *Mindfulness Bell*, are more than enough to get us started.

Let's take a breath. Now I invite our wonderful speakers to continue their sharing.

### **Antoinette**

Dear Thay, dear beautiful Sangha,

Thank you for being here. I also want to note that today the Peace and Justice Award was given to Thay for his work. What we're talking about *is* his work, *is* his continuation. So thank you.

In continuing the conversation, we are not just one thing and are more than our racial identity. Being a Latina is intertwined with many identities that I carry. Being a woman, coming from a working class family, being a gay woman, and now looking masculine (patting her shaved head). Gender identity with no hair has brought things up in the last few months. It's also about the work that I do – immigration status. When I come into spaces, those things are what I come with. While you'll see my skin color or my physical appearance, we are complex beings with many ancestors, many stories, many pains, many griefs. There is a fullness in all of you, like all of us, and an experience. One thing that

I'm working with is anger. When I first came into awareness of who I am, I was quite angry. I had no patience whatsoever. I see this work as a life-long work. But I knew that anger is not lifelong. I cannot do angry as a movement, as a way to engage. It's not encouraging. So what I want to leave you with is that we all come with things to work with, and to pay attention to them. For me, I also want to move the conversation around racial inequality, not just from a place of anger and frustration but also from a place of healing and engaging. And I'm also quite aware that it takes time. If you're in that space and you've done your work, you can shift. If you haven't, give it time.

(bell)

### **Victoria**

One of my observations in beginning this work is a tendency to maybe move too quickly to find an answer. What I'm noticing from my white friends is jumping too quickly. There was an article in Time about Black Live Matter. At the end of the article, Hillary Clinton asked Black Lives Matter, "Give us your agenda." And what I recall is that the person who raised it just wanted to be heard. What's coming up for me is that it's really hard to get to those feelings that may come from many, many centuries ago. It's the feelings and emotions that we have to work with that is a piece of solving the problem. If we move too quickly to find an answer then we may bypass some of the deeper work that took centuries to build. Now a part of me can go to the thought, "This is going to take a long, long, long time!" which I recognize because it took a long time to get here. But what gives me a full heart is just telling myself and encouraging you all that we have to start somewhere, breath by breath, step by step. It is continuing the work of Beloved Community. Some of it will take a while. As Matt described as he looked deeper seeing that it would take a year – yeah. That's one example. One year – four centuries, okay. So it's an invitation to all of us to do what we need to do, step by step and breath by breath. And I feel so deeply in my heart that the practices that we are learning of interbeing – we are all in each other if you look deeply enough. The interbeing in all of that, that is our path.

(bell)

### **Matt**

What's coming up for me around your sharing, Victoria, is that this is really deeply entrenched difficulty that we're dealing with here and it's not going to happen overnight. And it's not going to be easy in the Sangha either. We've gone through our fair share of bumps in the road in Colorado but one thing that we've experienced is that going through these things and into the really muddy, stinky stuff is where the real growth happened and we see that on-going. I don't know what our path will be like and we've already made some mistakes in the process of how we've started this. I know that we'll make more mistakes as we go along but we have some amazing people that are willing to make space for this exploration. We'll find a way through and we're very happy. One of our hopes from this is that it will turn into a larger Sangha of like-minded people who will want to move in this direction and be able to share resources and experiences. We're planning on doing that ourselves as a small *Sanghita* and continue to practice together. We'll make mistakes and we'll have to have struggles and it will be a difficult subject to touch as it's hard for people to look into.

(bell)

### **Steve**

I was talking about how my wife and I were trying out how to protect our sons and one of the things that we started to do was that we've started to tell stories. I like story-telling, I like listening to my grandparents tell stories, and a story that I tell to my sons, which is one of the happiest days of my life, was in November of 2008. Our family had just moved to Los Angeles and we were watching the news

as the vote count came in, when California came in and the CNN scroll flashed, “Barak Obama, 44<sup>th</sup> president of the United States of America.” We kind of knew that it was going to happen. We had been reading the polls, but we were dumbfounded. I went out to my next-door neighbour and said, “Where are the black people?” And he said, “The Merck Park. Jump on in.” So I got into his car and we were going down Cranshaw Boulevard and for miles it's crammed with people and everybody's happy and joyous. We got to the Merck Park and people were singing and hugging. There were guys with gold teeth and pigtails with *I voted* stickers on their shirts. So this car came into the middle of the park and it was a young kid's car. He played a hip-hop song and it said something like, “My president's black, my rims are blue”, something like that and having a good time. And then they put on *Signed, sealed, delivered* which was the song that Barack Obama was using in his campaign. Then people got quiet. There were thousands of people in the park and the crowd just split and there was a huge young man, and there was an old black woman on his arm. Now when you see an old black person, you know they've been through something. You know they have a story to tell. In our community we respect our elders. So he walks her to the top of the car and she starts singing *We shall overcome*. It was amazing. So when we get down in our family about all this stuff, which isn't new, I think it's important for us to come back to stories and the signs that things are shifting and that good things happen too. It's not all bad.

(bell)

### **Lyn**

Breathing in, with awareness of what's going on in the body and mind. Breathing out, what's been said and what hasn't been said.

Breathing in, with the awareness of the suffering of being caught in a system that pits one group of people against another through conditions and oppressive categorizations. Breathing out, what will be of benefit?

Breathing in, being aware of the wonderful capacity and seeds that are in us. Breathing out, with a commitment to nourish those seeds so the beloved community can continue to be built, to manifest.

One more breath in silence.

(bell, bell, bell)

Take just another moment to look within yourself and to see, is there anyone you've spoken to today, at this retreat, in your Sangha or in your friendship circle that you can choose to be an accountability partner for this practice, even informally. You can say to them, “I just went to a really interesting session at the retreat I was at.” and then check-in with them every day or every week, however you want to set it up.

Secondly, what will be your next step? Telling yourself the story of your life through this lens, telling somebody else the story. Getting together with 2 other people in a cultural sanctuary of your choice, or looking at a movie like *Cracking the Codes* or *Mirrors of Privilege*. Who's your accountability partner and what's your next step? Write it down.

*There are resources available – listed at <http://www.bluecliffmonastery.org/racial-justice/>*

For a very specific response to “what can white people do to help?” We have to look at ourselves and see what arises out of that. We have a grand vision, we ground in the practice and then all that we need

to know is the next step. Accountability partner, personal commitment, and next step.

I'll invite my dear sisters to have the last word about the Maha Sangha because part of the joy for me at this moment, having been part of the Plum Village community since a long time, is that the lay community has had enough time to mature so that we have all these people in the room. The monastic community has had enough time to mature so that we have a four-fold community here. It took a decade for each of those communities. So now, we're coming into a place where the four-fold Sangha is a true continuation of Thay. For me, as a person of European, white-skinned, Jewish roots, this work is the place of safety for my people. None of us are safe until all of us are safe. Perhaps the word is not exactly "safe," perhaps a better word is "protected." When the chips are down, we know that somebody will be there for us because they've done their work. And they are gonna welcome us. From my personal experience when I went to Germany, to the concentration camp at Dachau, and I called someone in Munich I knew of but had not met in person, a German non-Jewish woman. I called her and I said, "Do you have a few minutes of listening time? I'm Jewish, from New York and I've just come from a visit to Dachau." She said, "Of course." "But before we start, I just want to say to you-- As a German-- I welcome you, as a Jew, to Germany." She had done her work as a German-heritage woman. Immediately she knew what to say to contradict the effect of the historical trauma of the Jewish people and to open my capacity to be present and to heal.

So that's the work that all of us need to do across all of our intersectionalities. When I met with Sister Peace a couple of years ago after going to Auschwitz on a meditation retreat, I said, "I don't know what to do now. But I am thinking I would like to bring practitioners from the Thich Nhat Hanh community to Auschwitz." We talked about asking the ancestors--what are the ancestors are calling me to do? So this is part of the fruit of that conversation. We all have our different pieces of whiteness, our different pieces of so called "color" and our unique histories as people and we bring them all into the mix. We often need to start doing that work in cultural sanctuaries, like in POC Sanghas and retreats. We may need to have protected places at first. So that's what we're trying to do. Find 2 other people and tell stories. Find out where the triggers are. It doesn't have to be the whole Sangha. The whole Sangha may be dealing with their mom who is dying or their diagnosis of pancreatic cancer. It's fine. Not everybody can have this in the front burner at this moment in their lives. But for people who are coming into the Sangha for whom this is forefront, they should know that there's a space in the Plum Village-Thich Nhat Hanh communities where racial equity is being addressed. That is why we wanted it printed on the schedule, so that everybody can see that.

### **Sr Ocean**

Dear community, I want to express my deep gratitude for your willingness to be open and honest and loving in this space and in this community. And I know that this has already been touched upon but I'd like to add something. While the *work* is difficult, I also know that we wouldn't all be here if we hadn't come to a place in the practice that was difficult, and by continuing, we come to a place of more freedom and joy. So *this* is entirely our practice. It's not an application of our practice. This is our practice. We focus so much on healing our connections with our parents and our families. *This* is the same thing. It's our collective healing work. That's how I see it and I'm really grateful to be with you.

### **Sr Peace**

Well, I'll just tell a few stories. First, I'll never forget that in Plum Village, one of the Vietnamese sisters said to Thay one time, because we had the opportunity to have meals with Thay and Sr Chan Khong almost every day. She said that Thay would always ask us to say a blessing, but it was really the time to recite a *gatha* and she was a very clever young nun. She calls me *mother* and I call her *daughter*. She said, "This is a legendary moment." And that became a quite in demand calligraphy.

But I feel really proud that one of my children helped our teacher with that. The other thing that I want to say is that time and time again when we've had tours or been in Dharma Talks and on the spot, Thay will invite his children up and talk about something, or to even answer a question during Q&A. And they would answer so well and he would just smile and drink his tea. And I'm having that feeling right now with my siblings. So I offer you a smile and a bow. Thank you Steve for the story about Obama. I have an Obama story too. I wasn't here and I couldn't get to the 'hood to celebrate but the 'hood I was in is France and it's my tribe. I noticed that a lot of people were supporting and they had stickers in their cars all the way in France. The night that my brother so eloquently spoke about, we stayed up all night to see the acceptance speech. We were in the middle of a French Retreat so the dining hall was full and it was a mindful breakfast in Noble Silence. And I had to walk across the room as I tried to contain my excitement. But someone said to me, "Well? What happened?" And I said, "We won!" And the whole place erupted.

Before coming into monastic life I was in politics so I really wanted to be there but I couldn't. But I was there through the embrace of my French brothers and sisters who look a lot like you. They came up to me and they said, "You won." like I took on being Obama! I said, "Yeah, we did, didn't we." And that just bespeaks a moment in history where we all have the capacity to be in every moment in time. And this work is legendary and it's gonna take some time. Hopefully it won't take 400 years but it will take some. I promise to be here because I've been on tour and I see what is needed and what I feel I can do. I was sharing with someone about the linkages of Beloved Community because every community is a Beloved Community, even the worst. Just like I think there are many chambers in our hearts, there are many Beloved Communities. As we give space for each of these communities to find themselves and to look deeply, there will be a time when those many chambers become one. That's my hope and I'm really grateful to have the opportunity to share with you.

*(bell)*