

# On Editorial Policy, 'Identity Politics' and the Dharma: Race and Diversity

Dear Friends,

Thanks for sending on your concerns about editorial process arising from our publication of Viveka's post reflecting on racism and James Baldwin.

## Reflecting on Racism with James Baldwin

I've already referred your complaints to our editorial kula for discussion, and will report back any findings.

I expect you're not alone in wondering why we decided to invite reflection on what – I think it's fair to say – are global considerations and questionings around racism and its effect on our societies. Here are some thoughts, which I'm sure are debatable! I'd be happy, in fact, if our involvement online provokes and promotes constructive conversation around the issues it relates to. That would be a start perhaps towards positive change in our own community with regards to diversity of various kinds, the promotion of which is a current adopted strategic priority of the [European Chairs' Assembly](#), as it has been in recent years at the [Triratna International Council](#).

As a starting point, I'll touch on general editorial principles and process on the site.

### Editorial process

As an editorial team we try to ensure in our public posts that the primary focus of any piece firmly roots the issues being discussed in the context of the Dharma – rather than just in a particular political stance – since that is the basis for our community. Indeed, our coverage often references events and discussion within Triratna looking at the Dharmic implications of, and possible responses to, any area that is of widespread concern to many people in our community. The most generally contentious of these in recent years would probably be Triratna's past and Sangharakshita's sexual history; climate change; sexual identity ("Pride" and gender diversity); and race. The fact that we have such contention is in itself, I think, worth talking about.

How do we know something is of concern? Well, first we pay attention a lot to the great stream of content from friends, Mitras and Order members on the web generally, where active concern about racism and genuine diversity in our community features as a regular topic of interest. Given the times on both sides of the Atlantic, that should hardly be a surprise today, whatever one's views are about it!

Most importantly however, the team at The Buddhist Centre Online attends an annual cycle of local, regional, national and international gatherings within Triratna (eg. the European Chairs' Assembly, Order Conventions around the world, and the International Council) designed to help promote a joined-up sense of who we are as a global community. We also organise and take part in weekly and monthly conversations online amongst teams of folk who work for various Triratna institutions (from individual Buddhist Centres to funding bodies to the College of Public Preceptors).

We do all this precisely to make sure that, as far as possible, the content on The Buddhist Centre Online reflects areas of consistent focussed interest across the Order and community, and adequately attends to our collective culture and the shared priorities that arise within it (insofar

as that is actually possible in such a broad community). We have an editorial board (looking at the level of editorial principle) and a working kula (looking at day to day issues that arise) to help us out when needed. The team here also has a set of trustees standing with us; and a wide range of other relationships with members of the Order whose work and practice informs what kind of content finds a home on the site.

It's abundantly clear from our participation in these events, gatherings and meetings that societal-level concern about racial – and other forms of – diversity is a strong focus within Triratna, as one might expect. Therefore, we make sure it's covered in our own work, and that people and institutions focussing on this area have the space and support they need to address it online.

I'd argue strongly that Viveka's article - explicitly framed as a personal, reflective piece - meets all the criteria to be considered valid here and is consistent with Dharma tradition. She gives clear voice to the issues of suffering as she sees them and asks for an empathetic response that leads to action, whatever that looks like for us. It's a good question to be asked: where does our energy go in response?

I did a thought experiment myself when I read it, trying to assess with an editorial eye whether it was good to post. I replaced every instance of "black", "black people", "black lives", etc. with "Dalit", "Ex-Untouchables", "Indian Buddhists". I also substituted references to "race" and "racism" with references to "caste" and "caste discrimination". And reference to "America" with "India". My own conclusion was that if this piece was about our Indian sangha's ongoing struggle in the context of caste and active oppression in their country, people wouldn't bat an eyelid! It would be **a normalised part of our internal discourse**, and there is no history in Triratna of Order members publicly challenging the validity of public discourse about the experience of suffering attested to by our Dalit friends. The fact that this isn't so well established in Triratna around discourse about the experience of race and racism when it comes to non-Indian people of colour is, to say the least, of note.

We are very happy to facilitate a site where harmonious disagreement can also find a place as part of the broad exemplification of community online; but we don't have the resources to represent every point of view with equal attention, nor do we feel that would even be appropriate. This is not to say we'd never consider a piece that represents a controversial dissenting point of view about diversity or anything else; but we're not primarily interested in controversy itself, so it being dissenting, contrary or provocative wouldn't be a good enough reason on its own to commission a story.

We'd encourage anyone who wants to make a different case from the one advanced in any piece they read from us online to get involved with their local/regional/national/international Dharma contexts and see if their perspective and experience is shared widely enough to indicate a need for more focussed attention within our community; and from our team when we are thinking about what content best represents Triratna to the world.

### **Taking part in marking conversations about racism and positive diversity online**

In my consistent experience as an Order member, issues around community representation and diversity are often in the air: both around my work as Director of The Buddhist Centre Online, and as someone who helps run a Buddhist Center in my home town. I have felt critical in the past of how the discussion around race and diversity has been handled in some Buddhist contexts (especially when I've perceived a lack of any explicitly acknowledged, shared Dharmic perspective). Then again, we have to start the conversations somehow, and those conversations don't need to be perfect. It still seems abundantly clear to me that this is something that needs to be addressed within Triratna internationally.

In fact, it comes up regularly as a big talking point at the the International Council and The European Chairs' Assembly – how exactly can we (as a Movement) help address the fact that in general (with notable exceptions) Triratna in the West has a poor record when it comes to participation from non-white communities and (in most cases) wider LBGTQI communities? Over 50 years into our history, we are still a predominantly middle class, white sangha. And despite years of sincere attempts to understand and address this, not much general progress has been made; certainly nothing comparable to that made around attracting young people to engage with our community (a previously identified strategic priority across most of our institutions).

This is a serious cultural issue for us, I think, and one it seems (from discussions online this past week) most Buddhist communities are also facing in line with the rest of Western society. It actively diminishes our potential to make a positive impact in the world. We don't seem like a viable alternative context for far too many people. In that light, and in line with the strategic priority adopted by Triratna institutions, starting with [Buddhist Action Month](#) we are intending to continue addressing the current awareness of issues around race in a more focussed way over the next weeks and months.

One of the common criticisms of content around contentious issues on The Buddhist Centre Online is that by being "political" we are taking part in a partial exemplification of the Order itself. This is, from a certain point of view, ungainsayable! By definition we cannot offer a public platform to every Order member, every variation on view, or every dissenting voice on a given matter (see above for how we try our best to do a good job nonetheless of reflecting a broad community).

A more serious, and I think valid, question is whether engaging with politically relevant issues is evidence that at the heart of our editorial perspective there is simply an unconscious, undigested adoption of what are usually characterized as "liberal, left-leaning views". And whether this, in turn, means an undermining of the whole basis of Buddhist practice, which is the cultivation of '[Right View](#)'. As the editor of a small platform with a wide reach in our community, and to a lesser degree beyond, I take that point seriously.

In this case, I don't think it's accurate to characterize Viveka's reflections as merely "political" in a pejorative sense. Unless by "political" you mean genuinely 'of the *polis*', i.e. *people organised in communities*: involved with the welfare of those people and, all too often, the suffering of those people. In that sense it could be spoken of as political only in the way [the Buddha's discourses on the society of his day](#) might be said to have been. I accept there are perfectly valid differing views possible around how careful we need to be here; but the idea that we shouldn't engage at all with the political in the best sense, strikes me as anathema to the Dharma itself. If we want to be relevant at all in people's lives, we should go and meet them where they are – *in their lives*, struggling, suffering, seeking new perspectives on how they experience the oppressions of *samsara*. To do so is not to surrender to the extremes of any discourse we bump up against; nor to indicate all Order members agree around these things; nor to cede the ground of '[Right View](#)' itself.

As a parallel, when discriminatory laws around LBGTQI issues were being challenged and eventually changed in some countries (only a few short years ago!), we started marking [Pride](#) annually on The Buddhist Centre Online. This was initially to show support of the movement to legalise gay marriage. At the time, we received expressed concerns, similar to your own today, about the appropriateness of this on a Buddhist website. Our point then was that such laws fundamentally reduce one class of human beings to an "interest group", whose welfare and rights are subject to the whims of the dominant classes in the society in which all take part. As the site editor, I stand by that assessment in the current context too.

I'd argue that to deny this is to be blind both to history and to easily verifiable evidence about how human societies still tend to work. Power and its application is an underlying problem. Any change that meets this problem in a spirit of genuine love is at least not part of the problem (long term solutions is another matter, perhaps). Abuse of power of the sort exemplified by homophobia or racism is, as I suggest above, no different from the caste system in India, and as such seems grossly unfair by any reasonable ethical standard. I suspect that basic sense of injustice is why so many people in Triratna (in the Order, in our institutions, and in the wider community) cared about the issue of gay marriage, even while marriage is not one of our Buddhist ideals or institutions. And why I think most people would recognise the need to speak up in some way about racism now at a moment when there is widespread heightened awareness of the issue.

To be clear, removing this kind of content and discussion from Triratna's website would not be neutral. Remaining silent would not be neutral (or be likely to be perceived as empathetic by others). Any principled refusal to acknowledge our implicit relationship with the rest of the world – with the culture we take part in and are seeking to influence with the Dharma – would not be neutral. And in witnessing expressed experiences of suffering from within our own community, setting aside the opportunity to speak clearly and meaningfully in response is definitely not neutral. Viveka's piece does not need to meet everyone's sense of values to have value of its own.

### **On "identity"**

There is much can be said about the dangers – from a Buddhist perspective – of too much emphasis on "identity politics" (on *identity* in general!). And I would agree with anyone holding to a clear principle that the emphasis for Triratna online remains focussed as much as possible on the Buddha's teaching. I'd say even a cursory glance at the wealth of public-facing Dharma on The Buddhist Centre Online indicates we aren't in any danger at present of losing touch with that when it comes to assessing what appropriate emphasis looks like. (If you are logged in, open a private or incognito window and reload the [Community page](#) to see only public-facing content. Scroll back a month or two to get a broad sampling.)

It can also be the case that in only emphasising the "ideal" when it comes to assessing what is and is not appropriate on a Buddhist site (or when considering issues around "identity") we can effectively stifle both helpful debate and recognition of our own weaknesses as a community. At the very least we risk dictating that people in an active experience of suffering are silenced because it does not suit our own sense of holding to the ideal. Then it is no longer about the mere abstract consideration of principles: when deciding how we conceive of Buddhist practice, it represents a moral issue in itself.

It's unsurprising, I think, that the change of view represented by the present awareness around systemic racism – and by subsequent calls to action of body, heart and mind – might cause waves of discomfort. Many kinds of institutions in society are only just starting to grapple with these same issues. It will take time, for sure. As I said, in Triratna we have done much to address participation of young people within our sangha, but I'd say still relatively little to address explicitly other areas concerning diversity, particularly racial diversity. That is surely a great opportunity for us as we look to encourage an ever-widening circle of people to engage with the Dharma – whoever they are, however they choose to love, whatever they happen to look like.

More pragmatically, last month over 70,000 users visited The Buddhist Centre Online and our attendant social media spaces. They are, by definition, mostly not Triratna Buddhists, nor are they probably Buddhist at all. But they *are* interested – both in what the Dharma is and in who we

are as a community. Featuring Viveka's article is a small but unambiguous and immediate expression of solidarity with a large group in society who have been, and still are, discriminated against around the world. In that sense you could argue it's in some relationship to a radical tradition in contemporary Buddhism where silence in the face of worldly oppressions is neither neutral, nor an effective expression of our ideals as Buddhists. Since Buddhism came to the West, there are many who have (like the Buddha, like Sangharakshita) more often than not questioned the status quo in society. Was Sangharakshita being political, partisan, too liberal, or illiberal **when he challenged the validity of nuclear weapons** and their general acceptance as a condition for stable society?

Of course, merely including pieces like Viveka's does not make us diverse, nor does my response obviate the dangers of a too-worldly discourse, which latter concern perhaps prompted your criticisms. However, anyone visiting the site and our social media spaces this week will at least correctly assume that as a community we aspire to welcome unambiguously people of all races (which is still pretty unusual as religious organisations go), and that the Dharma makes no doctrinal case for discrimination.

That much may well be obvious to people inside our community and seem like it doesn't need saying. I'd argue that our public face has to be *much more* explicit about it wherever possible. From this basis we can then, I hope, go on to explore issues in Triratna around diversity, identity, and received culture – and look at how the Dharma commends the spiritual virtue of seeking to move beyond such things as a reliable refuge.

I'll let my friend Suddhayu (Chair here at our little Center in Portsmouth, New Hampshire) round off this reply. He wrote this (specifically addressing the question of gay marriage and Buddhism) on our Center's Facebook page a couple of years ago when the law (finally) changed here in America to allow gay people to wed:

*"One of the conditions for effective Dharma practice is a stable and supportive society. Although laws do not end discrimination and violence in the minds and actions of all individuals, they do offer social protection and the possibility of justice to those who would be discriminated against. Although from a Buddhist perspective, marriage is not the most profound union, we recognize its importance in the structure of the society we live in. More importantly, we recognize the value and potential in every individual to become kinder, more mindful, and wiser. Marriage equality is an indication of positive social change, and of greater empathy, that will benefit us all."*

I'd argue that facing up to structural and systemic racism in the ways we organise our societies as human beings would also be such a supportive condition for the arising of "greater empathy". It's in this kind of accepting, open, practical, inquiring, compassionate, idealistic and kindly spirit that we choose to signal our alliance with black people – with all people concerned about justice – on Triratna's website this month and, I hope, every month. Standing with those suffering is perhaps the greatest encouragement of all, even when we can't and don't know how to fix it. Everyone should see us and know at a glance that in our community they might find meaningful friendship and care.

With metta,

Candradasa

*Director, The Buddhist Centre Online*