

'Reflecting on diversity in Bhante's New Society'

A talk from Vimalasara, give at the International Order Convention in 2016

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Dharmacharinis and Dharmacharis, with loyalty to my teachers, the Buddhas, Bhante, Padmasuri, and Ratnavandana, I present this talk.

For me, as I look in this direction, I just am so moved to just see that perhaps a fifth or a quarter of this room is populated by people of color. Some of you will know that when I was ordained, eleven and a half years ago, my mission was to have conventions in India. And I wanted conventions in India because I didn't want to be in the minority. And it happened. And now, we have 70 Indian Order Members here with us today. When they go home, I will be one of four people of color in North America.

Twenty-seven years ago, I walked through the doors of an FWBO Center, and I was aware that there were two African descent order members, Muditasri and Jayadevi. Twenty-seven years later, I am one of perhaps 6 women of African descent, one of 8, or 10 people of African descent. In this order. Today, I am filled with The Three Jewels. And with this faith, I'm asking that you join me, and sit beneath a metaphorical Bodhi tree and turn towards the unpleasant and the pleasant. This is what Prince Siddhartha did. He stepped out of the God realm and into the human realm and sat beneath the Bodhi tree and turned towards his mental states. And when he did this, he studied the self and let go of the self.

In my early 20s, I was inspired by a writer called Pat Parker. An American African Lesbian activist. And she said, "First, you remember, I'm black. And second, you forget I'm black." And then I came across the words of the great Zen teacher Dogan, who said, "To study the Buddha Way, you must study the self. To study the self, you must let go of the self. To let go of the self, you must be illuminated by a myriad of things. And when you are actualized by myriad of things, the mind and the body will drop away."

Blackness is a concept that was created by the colonizers. Greg Snyder says that, "Whiteness is an identity defined against other identities and experienced as separate." So in the spirit of Dr. Ambedkar, I want to say that all color is, skin color is, is a state of mind. And what we need is a religion to emancipate the mind and those of us here, we have it. We have the Dharma.

So, I'm going to study an aspect of myself. A few days ago, or a few weeks ago, Amaragita said to me, "non-action is a near enemy of compassion." And I realized I had been guilty of that. I had turned away from the terrorism that has been happening due to countries like England and America meddling in places like Syria and Afghanistan. I had turned away from the police killing black people and some black people killing the police. I had turned away from this because my cultural bias had developed like this.

[I was] 14 years of age on an anti-Nazi march surrounded by other white people, carrying placards. The police singled me out. I was mouthy in those days, some things haven't changed. I said, "Why me?" Before I could get much more out, I was handcuffed, thrown into a police van, taken to a police station, strip searched, and had a police woman shove her hand up me to see if

I had dangerous weapons. That's how my cultural bias developed. *How did your cultural bias develop?*

I want to talk about my white privilege. Like many of you here, you were raised by white people. I was raised by white people, and I also had access to a grammar school education, and to go to university. I'm born in the 60s. The majority of black people born in the 60s in this country did not have access to the Eleven plus. And if they went to university, they did it in later life, in their 30s and 40s. This privilege set me apart from my Black community. I was called white-minded. I was a coconut. Black, outside white on the inside. I also had a distrust of my race. I thought reggae music was aggressive. I actually felt more comfortable in a room full of white people. *Who do you feel more comfortable in a room with, when you are part of a minority, or part of a majority?*

The upside of my white privilege was that I could pass as white. Yes, as black as I am, I could pass as white. I could understand the English white cultural norms. I could even tone myself to fit into the way of conducting myself. The white community told me I was different. I wasn't like the rest. I had created my own God realm to deal with the racism I experienced as a youth. And my white privilege karma began running out when I went to school in London at the age of 11. And I was angry, because why did I have to begin thinking about race?

Can you imagine when I was 16, I learned that actually the tripartite system that I went through (secondary modern, technical, grammar) was founded upon the fabricated results of Cyril Burt, who fabricated the twin studies? Because, as far as he was concerned, and others were concerned, intelligence was innate and Black people were 15 to 20 IQ points inferior to white people. And so therefore, you needed schools that would cater to the different intelligences. That's what I was taught. *What was you taught? How did that form your opinions and your ideas?*

Today, I have a white partner. Some doors open to me, some doors close to her. When I'm in a big city taxis, don't stop for me. But if I have my white partner, taxis will stop for me. When we travel across the border in a car, my white partner is asked, did you meet her in prison? If she had a white partner, she would regain some of her white privilege. If I have a black partner, I will lose some of my white privilege.

Some of you may be experiencing resentment, confusion, about why do we have to think about race at this convention. Resentment and confusion are aspects of avidya. Ignorance is the root of our suffering. Turning away from sensation in the body is a breeding bed for Mara.

Some of you have told me over the years that you were politically active in racism awareness groups, and it was painful. There was a lot of anger and a lot of hatred. I know. I was there in the 80s and 90s. You found the Dharma and things changed, and that anger and hatred went away. I found the Dharma, [and] the anger and hatred towards my race has not gone away. When I left Canada a week ago, a black person had been killed by the police. When I landed in England, a black person had been killed by the police.

Racism does not magically disappear in our spiritual community. We have to know it to let go of it. I have been told in the Sangha: "I have nothing in common with you: you're black and you're a lesbian." But yet, we're told what we have in common is the centrality of Going for

Refuge. When I bring up the issue of diversity, I'm often told "we're all human beings." Yes, we are all human beings. But my experience in this form, is different from many of yours.

Raise your hands if you have been stopped at customs and questioned and searched more than two times? Keep your hand up, if you have been stopped at customs entering back into your own country, more than 10 times. My hand is still raised. As I entered the country last week, I was asked how long was I staying in England? And I have a British passport. And I'm a citizen. How many of you have to listen to people telling you that in their country, the right thing to do is to give the lighter skin person the money? That's just what we do. How many of you have been told "You are so beautiful, but [for] your skin color"? *How many of you have been asked, "What is it like to be white in the Order?"*

Some of you will go away saying she is "charismatic," perhaps "intimidating," perhaps "angry." I'm none of these labels. Once upon a time [I was], perhaps because when we're in the minority, the conditions make a minority charismatic or perhaps intimidating. But today I'm none of these things. These labels are a way of turning away from the discomfort of this conversation.

As Dharma practitioners, we are practicing at a time when war on many levels, is coming to our doorstep in the West. We have had the comfort of our Prime Ministers and our Presidents going to war, going to war in the name of Christianity. Our good karma is running out. Terrorism is coming to our doorstep and it's time that we turn towards this and begin to reflect and ask on our suffering and wake up to reality.

So, I'm going to finish with two things. I used to think that this Sangha would never have a lot of black people in it, but then the Nichiren moved next door to me in London. And I saw how many black people flocked to that Buddhist tradition.

What can we do? One thing that my community, the Triratna community, does well is loving kindness. My appeal is that every retreat center that we have give up seven or ten days to run a retreat on "Loving Kindness to Change Your Life." And that this be done on a dana basis, just like Goenka does it. There's a group of us that come together. We put a formula together, and that's the retreat we run. And [for] the people who lead that retreat, we look at diversity: diversity of age, disability, gender, sexuality, and race. This, I believe, can be a doorway of making our form of Dharma accessible to those people at the moment who are not coming through our doors. "Change Your Life with Loving Kindness", 10 days. It's what the world needs right now, with the polarization of race and hatred.

Thank you.