

Breathing Through History

A Dark Reflection on Zen

by Michelle T. Clinton

In the depth of vulnerability that sitting evokes in me, I am embarrassed and sad that I find it difficult to trust middle-class white people.

I sit. And then I seek the rhythm of the breath. And then I try not to seek. And then I try not to try. And then I'm just like sitting. And then everything is bothering me: my back is strained by this, you know, maybe I should be in another chair. I have to scratch; if I scratch I will prove myself as a weak, jive Buddhist, but if I don't scratch some weird toxin will take hold of my nose and make me sick, I'm sure of that, and I shouldn't be thinking about being a Buddhist, I should just be a Buddhist, Zen and all that, and I shouldn't be thinking because thinking is the delusion that makes the angst Buddhism is against, but Buddhism isn't against anything except....

OK, I sit. Breathing happens. And again the breathing is happening. I sit. I give myself to breathing, sitting, the silence that is sound, and the rhythm of the body of breath. From this daily action I take my identity as a Buddhist.

I am not meditating here. I want to have this conversation via word, paper, and language with you about my sitting and my body, an African American body, a body and consciousness taken by the causes of social justice. I want you to know I am a jive Buddhist, a simple lay Buddhist with no authority and minimum training: three days at Zen Mountain Center in Los Angeles (ironically during the summer of the Rodney King riots), a few books, one graduate class, no current sangha, and a few conversations seeking the Dharma with some "heavyweight" Buddhist teachers, monks, and friends. On the other hand, I sit regularly. I hold a lifelong commitment to sitting (including lapses) and I reflect daily on the Dharma.

I think the voice of the layperson is important: how the Dharma is held and practiced with the unschooled, how the Dharma evolves and travels through the solitary practitioner, how it mutates and spawns new meanings even at this far distance from the originator and communities of authority. I am saying this as way of apology to you: forgive my ignorance, forgive my misinterpretation of the teachings. I hope these words are useful to you.

I will start with the bad news. Why I have no sangha has everything to do with my race, my style of communication, and my social needs. In the depth of vulnerability that sitting evokes in me, I am embarrassed and sad that I find it difficult to trust middle-class white people (class is inextricably linked to race).

I can like them, enjoy their company, learn from them, and teach them, but very rarely can I manifest the relaxation necessary for spiritual growth in their presence. I hate that this is true—is hate too strong an emotion, even for a jive Buddhist?

I believe that this inability to relax is rooted in two causes. The first is my inability to fully recover from the wounds inflicted upon myself and my family in the name of middle- and upper-class white people. For my failure in this realm, I reach into the Dharma, into the breath, into the unity of emptiness, for relief and acceptance. Some wounds are generational and require more than one lifetime, more than one rung on the family tree, to heal.

Second, there is the talk in Buddhist groups dominated by middle-class white people. I am perpetually asked to discuss the dynamics of race/culture/class, conversations that are paradoxically necessary and unsettling. It makes me nervous to be asked to heal so much guilt, to be given so much responsibility. It makes me tired to be asked to articulate the subtle (and often subconscious) dynamic of race and racism. It restresses the first level of balance given to me by my practice.

Relative to white middle-class American culture, or Asian and Asian American culture, I am loud. I wear bright colors and laugh up through my neck and whole face. I talk with my hands and my hips. If I see a friend across the room, I am likely to yell, "Hey! 'S'up? What it be like?" I love urban, Southern African American vernacular so I use "ain't" and any new word I have scrounged from my family, hip-hop, rap, or some badly conceived bougie* black movie about advertising executives and lawyers in doomed love triangles (I can only resist so much pop culture). For Asians and Asian Americans, being black is fine in that they expect me to be black. For white Americans (again, from the middle and upper classes), being black triggers (sometimes unconscious) fear and guilt.

Of course, there are other issues. I am recovering from a chronic illness that limits my mobility a bit, and I don't really have the energy to seek a working-class, people-of-color sangha.

* *Bougie* (from "bourgeoisie"; the "g" is pronounced like the "j" in the French word *je*) is an African American term meant to critique the black middle-class lifestyle. Someone who is "bougie" is materialistic, with some money. The term is also associated with the word "uppity."

I don't know you and I don't know how you understand your/our history. I do know that mainstream secular American culture offers an immature view of history created by distortion, amnesia, denial, and no spiritual connection to the dead. Social justice work, on the other hand, demands an open embrace of the past. The question "How the hell did we get here?" promises some part of the answer to the question "What must we/I do to bring change and peace?"

Try to be me for a moment. Reflect on my sense of this history of tragedy. I see family roots that go into the North American earth—my family's ancestry, as is true for many African Americans, is mixed with the ancestry of Native American people. I see a lot of blood and illness. I remember the betrayed heart. In the slave narratives, I hear the excruciating suffering and humiliation of millions. And Africa, the massive mother of all origin, beyond the water—I see her. I see the hunt, the capture, the branding, and the rapes.

Imagine filling these horrors with your mother's sadness, your grandmother's weeping, your great-grandmother's fear, your great-great-grandmother's terror. I understand these images of collective history as embedded in and defining my small, singular consciousness (but is any consciousness small or singular?). I understand these experiences as shaping the very dynamic of my family, including some of our contemporary dysfunction. It is quite a lot to bear.

And yet there is more. This grief expands because, sadly, the details of suffering are not widely known. There are insufficient museums, films, books, and rituals to grieve those African and Native Americans who suffered.

So, as I turn my mind's eye toward the past, I feel alone. I feel isolated by American history education. I fear I am carrying this by myself. How I make peace and move into the strength necessary to do social justice work has everything to do with Zen practice and Buddhist sensibility.

To bear the meaning of history requires fortitude. Without the fortitude of will, mind, and body, one collapses from despair or burnout when trying to hold the gaze of history. In my experience of Buddhist practice, everything eventually rises to consciousness. In time, all of your shit, all of your memories, thoughts, dreams, even a connection to collective consciousness, rise to the video screen of your mind. Zen practice, sitting and breathing before the stream of history, builds strength into the spine and breath that makes holding this difficult gaze possible.

There are elements of the consciousness that are resistant to will, reason, or knowledge. Even though I know that Africa(ns) survived and Native American culture persists, this knowledge offers little relief. My

thinking is drawn obsessively into images of tragedy. The knowledge of survival has little or no impact on my ability to create peace within my consciousness. It is the practice of meditation, sitting, breathing that alters the consciousness so that a different aspect of reality can manifest.

New, balancing thoughts enter my thinking: alongside the tragedies, there is endurance, survival, even thriving. There is music, love, birth. There is the planting of seeds; there is persistent creativity, the invention of new ideas. There is community and respect, there is vast spiritual energy. The shifting of the quality of the mind created by Zen practice makes the integration of this side of history possible.

This gaze into history can block our experience of peace and joy. Social justice work requires regular sources of peace and joy for renewal, for creativity, for sheer endurance. Without happiness, without stillness, activists and cultural workers burn out fast and retreat into a destructive cynicism. I retrieve much of my ability to experience peace and joy from Buddhist folklore and practice.

I remember the story of the mustard seed, a story about the Buddha's teachings on death. I am not sure that the translation is correct and I don't care. I forego the academic rigors of exact teaching and receive the luscious sweetness of community, family, friends. In this story, a woman who was grieving the loss of her child comes to the Buddha for help. He tells her to return to him with a mustard seed from a household that has not been touched by death. Of course, there is no such household. The woman goes from home to home, speaking of her tremendous loss. In her journey, she finds solace and comfort from others, and she gives solace and comfort to others who have suffered similar loss.

From this story, I receive another brilliant, loving improvement on my historical framework: my people are among All People who have suffered innumerable oppressions and wars. To broaden one's sense of history beyond the bloodline into the human line requires a wide view, a perspective of humanity that includes and transcends clan identification.

This relieves me of the very limiting black-white American dualism. I remember the presence and importance of Asians/Asian Americans, Latina/os, Jews, and many more. I remember those who are bi- and polyracial and have deep connection to more than one cultural identity. I think of all the cultures and classes compressed into the word "white" and how unfair and limiting that is to people who bear that identification.

In this regrounding Buddhist practice, I can participate in my simple humanness while holding the harsh gaze of history. In the center of the ever-returning

breath, I am able to remember our many mis-uses of power. In the simplicity of the mustard seed, I remember we all face and know death, life, and rebirth. In sitting, I realize the ability to do the work to bring peace.

So I am a Buddhist. I sit. I breathe. When I am not sitting, sometimes I try to work through the problems of history and community. Folktales and teachings, however sparse and naive, help bring buoyancy and joy into my mind. From these thoughts and practices I receive the energy and hope necessary to be responsible as a cultural activist in our troubled world. For this I am grateful. ❖

Michelle T. Clinton is a poet living in Richmond, California. Good Sense & the Faithless, from West End Press, is her most recent book of poetry. She is currently working on a book on spiritual health for the chronically ill.