

Waking Up from Our Separation

By Sister Ocean (Chan Trang Hai An)

There is a strange tendency in spiritual communities to believe in a trickle-down type of awakening. The thinking seems to follow that if we do enough sitting meditation and go on enough retreats and get a good dose of therapy, then our degree of spiritual awakening will be equally distributed across the individual and interpersonal spheres. It's a great theory. It sounds plausible and it's easy enough to follow. But I haven't found it to be true.

This is why my own path is dependent upon actively exploring and practicing with the many layers of the self—individual, interpersonal, social, and cosmic. It's true that in the ultimate dimension, there is no separate self, so all of these layers are in-substantial. Yet in the historical dimension, these aspects of self have real impact that perpetuates freedom or suffering for the world and myself. This is why it's essential to practice intentionally with our layers and to not hope for awakening to trickle down or up.

If we've been applying the Plum Village practices, then we know we do not exist as separate selves. Rather, we exist in infinite connectedness to all phenomena throughout space and time. We know the Buddha only taught us to understand suffering to end suffering. Therefore understanding and ending social, or collective, suffering is clearly part of our spiritual practice. Today, as in the past, racism is one of the deepest forms of collective suffering that is calling out to be ended. Even in our Dharma communities, where we express the intention to be inclusive, it is apparent by who attends our Sanghas and retreats we rarely realize this ideal.

So when AJ Johnston invited me last summer to co-facilitate an online course on Dharma and anti-racism for white people, I was excited. This is work I've held close to my heart for a long time and learning to express it through the lens of our practice, with compassion and courage, has been a dream for me. Yet I felt scared because I didn't feel experienced or knowledgeable enough to do something like this. Fortunately, AJ had run the course several times, so I could take refuge in her experience and I jumped in.

What Does It Mean to Be White?

The class worked with the question, "What does it mean to be white in America today?" Some people asked why we did this

only with white people. Don't we all need to come together and figure out how to heal the wounds of racism? Eventually, yes. But the simplest answer I have for now is generally speaking, white people have much catching up to do with the rest of the world when it comes to understanding racism, white supremacy, and internalized oppression. Before we have some basic racial awareness and vocabulary, we're likely to cause more harm than healing in "mixed" spaces.

Others said, "Yes, anti-racism work is important but don't do it in the Sangha. I just want to focus on the Dharma." I've always been confused by this line of reasoning. Taking time to relearn history in a way that includes the experience of the majority, not just the elites, is a step towards seeing things as they are. Noticing our implicit biases is a way to lessen our wrong perceptions. Learning to feel and release the shame many of us experience around our white privilege is ancestor-healing work.

Recognizing racism isn't about those "bad" racist people over there but rather upheld by the subtle ways we all tolerate and enforce oppressive systems is *maya prajnaparamita*, the great perfection of wisdom. Learning the nuances of how the separate self manifests in our daily lives brings us closer to realizing the reality of interbeing, here and now. Taking time to look into collective suffering so as to be part of its transformation is compassion in action; it's the path of a *bodhisattva*. Nothing about it isn't dharmic.

Cleaning Up Our Toxic Mess

We shaped the class around our practices, beginning with meditation and ending with a reflection. We used the bell and took time to breathe between sharings. When we reviewed educational materials, we shared about the learning experience in groups. We touched the earth, and we built Sangha. This is Dharma.

When I reflect on the class, I feel content because everyone engaged wholeheartedly in the course. We connected and planted many seeds. Yet I also feel disappointed because I still have so far to go in my own journey. I see the racist parts of my consciousness more clearly; they are necessary and still uncomfortable. There is