

Black Lives Matter Our Commitment to Create an Anti-Racist Sangha

"You have gained the pivotal opportunity of human form. Do not pass your days and nights in vain. You are taking care of the essential activity of the Buddha Way. Who would take wasteful delight in the spark from a flintstone? Besides, form and substance are like the dew on the grass, the fortunes of life like a dart of lightning --emptied in an instant, vanished in a flash."

Zen Master Dogen

Dogen taught that human life is precious, even sacred. To fully embrace this lesson we must acknowledge that some lives, especially those of our Black neighbors, have been treated as less precious. All life, as Dogen says, passes "like a dart of lightning," but far too many people of color face systematic patterns of abuse. The deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Botham Sean, Atatiana Jefferson, Mike Brown, Eric Garner, and Trayvon Martin, among so many others, lead us to reflect deeply on Mr. Floyd's final words – "I can't breathe" -- and then to act. This is what it means, we believe, not to pass our "days and nights in vain."

Buddhist practice is intended for all people. Buddhism, after all, arose in India and spread through Asia. For most of its 2600-years history, then, it was practiced solely by people of color. Buddhism came to North America only in the last half of the 20th century and, ever since, followers of the Buddha Way have worked to meld centuries-old traditions with a response to the challenges of modern life. Crucial among these, of course, is the legacy of slavery and persistence of racism.

The historian Ibram X. Kendi writes that the world suffers from twin infections -- the metastatic cancer of racism and the tendency of many white people to deny the existence of race-based inequality. The operating premise of systemic racism is denial, Kendi argues. So, the heartbeat of anti-racism is found in rigorous examination of our own beliefs and behaviors. We have resolved to engage in deep reflection about racial discrimination and to do our part in dismantling structures that result in so much harm.

Our sangha creates space for this kind of reflection and study across lines of ethnicity, genders, socioeconomic backgrounds, abilities, and age. We gather each week to share diverse experiences of personhood. Every voice makes our practice more vibrant; each expression of wisdom makes this community more whole. To that end, we'll work to ensure our Sangha is a safe refuge for everyone in this shared journey towards awakening.

The change we call for, we know, requires change within ourselves. Among other things we intend to make certain no one who joins us carries the burden of feeling lesser, unnoticed, or less worthy. We commit to an ongoing examination not only of past injustices but also persistent patterns of inequality in the present, including all forms of privilege that flow to those of us who are white.

On Saturday, July 11th, we observe the traditional period of 49 days after a death to mark the murder of George Floyd with a public sitting in Humboldt Park. We do so in support of mass nonviolent protests led by Black Lives Matter. Here, we embrace a common purpose: No human being should ever again have to ask permission to breathe freely nor should anyone have their “spark from a flintstone” snuffed out.

In dharma talks, and meetings together, we’ll work in a sustained way towards becoming a robustly anti-racist sangha. For some of us, that means volunteering to work in or contribute to organizations on the front lines in Chicago. For others, it means looking for opportunities to partner with groups that are on the same path. For all of us, it means challenging one another in new ways and also holding ourselves to account. Each of us joins in a powerful chant from recent mass protests: “All Lives Won’t Matter Until Black Lives Matter.” This recognition lies at the heart of what Dogen called “*the essential activity of the Buddha Way.*”

The Chicago Zen Meditation Community