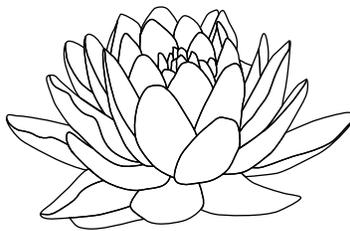


**MULTICULTURALISM IN
INSIGHT MEDITATION SANGHAS**

AUGUST 2012

AN INFORMATION GUIDE FROM THE BUDDHIST INSIGHT NETWORK



Introduction

As Buddhism develops in the West, many groups and individuals are finding ways to include people from all ethnicities and cultures. This requires active effort as well as ongoing encouragement and support.

The intention of this publication is to provide an informational overview of what is currently occurring to support diversity in the realm of race/ethnicity in Insight Meditation Sanghas in the United States. Of course "diversity" is a very broad topic, including many other dimensions also (a few of which are socioeconomic status, gender, sexual and gender orientation, age, ability, size, etc). We have chosen just one dimension in order to have a focus in this publication.

We are focusing specifically on existing and deliberate activities related to ethnic diversity, but do also provide a short section on more informal preliminary and past efforts.

Through direct communication and website research, we investigated the activities of more than three dozen sanghas. It is possible that we have missed some existing activities. A future electronic version of this publication could include more information, so we appreciate hearing of other existing activities.

This compilation is offered freely to the participants in the 2012 InterSangha meeting. It includes the following sections:

1. Deliberately Diverse Sanghas

- East Bay Meditation Center
- Flowering Lotus Meditation and Retreat Center
- New York Insight People of Color and Allies Sangha (Harlem and Brooklyn)
- People of Color and Allies Sangha (Albuquerque and Seattle)

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- Cambridge Insight Meditation Center
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- New York Insight Meditation Center
- Seattle Insight Meditation Society

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E. DIVERSITY PROGRAMS AND COMMITTEE WORK AT INSIGHT SANGHAS

- Cambridge Insight Meditation Center
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- Dharma and Native Teachings

4. Conclusion and Resources

1. Deliberately Diverse Sanghas

Some sanghas were established to be explicitly multicultural from the outset.

EAST BAY MEDITATION CENTER

www.eastbaymeditation.org

Founded in a celebration of diversity, the East Bay Meditation Center welcomes everyone seeking to end suffering and cultivate happiness. Our mission is to foster liberation, personal and interpersonal healing, social action, and inclusive community building. We offer mindfulness practices and teachings on wisdom and compassion from Buddhist and other spiritual traditions. Rooted in our commitment to diversity, we operate with transparent democratic governance, generosity-based economics, and environmental sustainability.

The People of Color sitting group has been practicing since October 2006. Practitioners of color, both new and experienced, are invited to join a weekly sitting group to learn to cultivate love and freedom in the present moment through the practice of mindfulness meditation. The ultimate aim of the practice of meditation is the ending of suffering and the opening to joy and freedom. The group includes periods of reflection and silence as well as group discussion, talks on relevant themes and opportunities for celebration and community building. We have a Google Group at

<http://www.eastbaymeditation.org/poc/?short=poc>.

FLOWERING LOTUS MEDITATION AND RETREAT CENTER

www.floweringlotusmeditation.org

Flowering Lotus was founded in June 2010 by Dolores Watson, an African American. The center's vision is to: "Provide an environment and a variety of opportunities for meditation, spiritual practice, and fellowship in order to nurture peace, healing, diversity, understanding and connection for individuals, their families and the greater society. Our practice follows the teachings of the historical Buddha including the insight that all beings have the potential for awakening. We welcome people of all backgrounds and spiritual paths to practice with us in the pursuit of peace and healing." Bhante Buddhakkhita, a Theravadan Buddhist monk born in Uganda, is the spiritual advisor to Flowering Lotus. Since its opening, Flowering Lotus has attracted a very diverse population of retreatants in terms of ethnic background and age. Twenty to sixty percent of retreatants have been African American with age ranges from 12-85. There is an associated weekly sitting group that meets in New Orleans.

NEW YORK INSIGHT PEOPLE OF COLOR AND ALLIES SANGHAS – HARLEM AND BROOKLYN

www.nyimc.org

Beginning in summer 2011, these sanghas grew out of the New York Insight People of Color Sangha. They are led by (soon-to-be) CDL graduates and provide community-based opportunities for practice and discussion. For more information about groups formed around POC and associated Allies, see below.

PEOPLE OF COLOR AND ALLIES SANGHA – ALBUQUERQUE AND SEATTLE

POCDharma-L@list.unm.edu (Albuquerque group)

www.nativesangha.org/seattle.shtml (Seattle group)

The Buddha taught that there were only four requisites for Dharma practice: food, clothing, shelter and medicine. These four things allow monastic practitioners enough safety, support and protection to practice the Dharma well. In our current historical time, a fifth requisite, cultural safety, is useful as a condition of practice for People of Color and other marginalized groups, especially for beginning meditators.

Two groups called the People of Color and Allies Sangha (POCAS) have formed around this theme in Albuquerque and Seattle. All People of Color interested in meditation and Buddhism are invited to attend. Allies must be sponsored by a person of color and current member that can vouch for their level of understanding of POC issues beyond a Racism 101 level.

Albuquerque group: We have been meeting since 1997. The format of the group includes a 40-minute sit followed by a group Talking Circle, or various readings and discussion. We recruit visiting teachers to share the Dharma with our sangha.

Seattle group: Our Seattle People of Color and Allies Sangha (POCAS) is a Buddhist-inspired, peer-led mindfulness group that began more than 10 years ago. The format of the group includes learning about fundamental Buddhist principles as well as

more advanced readings and discussions suitable for senior practitioners. Meetings may consist of a discussion relating to being a person of color in the US, an exploration of one of Buddha's "lists," or a discussion led by a sangha member on a topic of his/her choosing. These can be in the form of a "Talking Circle" where each member puts their voice in the circle or a Dharma talk with Q & A. We also recruit visiting Dharma teachers to come to our sangha. We practice meditation (Sati-patthana) in the tradition of IMS and Spirit Rock.

2. Programs within Insight Sanghas

A. PEOPLE OF COLOR GROUPS AND CLASSES

Some Insight sanghas include groups or programs for People of Color to explore the Dharma in a space that feels safe.

AGAINST THE STREAM BUDDHIST MEDITATION CENTER

www.againstthestream.org

Name of diversity group: People of Color Group

When it began: 2009

Website of diversity group: www.againstthestream.org/community/people-of-color-group

This is a group to support and address the issues that People of Color may be struggling with in the American Buddhist traditions. The intention is not to divide, but rather to explore feelings of separateness and disconnectedness, cultivate connections independent of external conditions, and find true freedom in a way that does not ignore difficult social realities. The group meets twice a month and includes a practice period, check-ins, and discussion.

CAMBRIDGE INSIGHT MEDITATION CENTER

www.cimc.info

Name of diversity group: First Friday Evening Practice for People of Color

This monthly group is led by a community Practice Leader.

INSIGHT MEDITATION COMMUNITY OF WASHINGTON

www.imcw.org

Name of diversity group: People of Color Sangha

When it began: April 2005

Website of diversity group: www.imcw.org/Community/AffinityGroups.aspx

Aspirations of the group:

- To explore our identity as People of Color in the light of the dharma, across multiple and intersecting lines of difference that include, but are not limited to: race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, socio-economic class, age, and dis/abilities.
- To provide a safe and intimate space where People of Color can deepen the practice of meditation and mindful dialogue.
- To study the dharma from diverse perspectives and to inspire insightful discussions.
- To study the dharma from diverse perspectives and to inspire insightful discussions.
- To cultivate a sense of belonging and community both within the People of Color sangha and the larger IMCW sangha.

NEW YORK INSIGHT MEDITATION CENTER

www.nyimc.org

Name of diversity group: People of Color Sangha

When it began: Fall 2005

Website of diversity group: www.nyimc.org/index.php/site/sitting_people_of_color/

The NYI People of Color Sangha is the largest sitting group at NYI and averages 50 people per sitting. Led by Gina Sharpe, the monthly group provides instruction in insight meditation and fosters mutual support and understanding among the growing community of people of color who find nourishment and inspiration in the practice. The NYI POC Sangha has an active list-serv connecting people for sharing of resources and support of practice. The Harlem and Brooklyn POC & Allies Sanghas (see above) grew out of the POC Sangha.

SEATTLE INSIGHT MEDITATION SOCIETY

www.seattleinsight.org

Name of diversity group: Class for People of Color

When it began: September 2011

Website of diversity group: www.seattleinsight.org.dnnmax.com/Home/tabid/37/Default.aspx

We offer a 6-week beginner's class specifically for People of Color.

Class description: Insight meditation, also known as mindfulness or Vipassana meditation, comes from the Buddhist tradition. It aims to free the mind from the distortions of self-centeredness, negativity, and confusion. Seeing life as a constantly changing process, one begins to accept pleasure and pain, fear and joy, and all aspects of life with increasing balance and equanimity. This balanced awareness, grounded in the present moment, leads to stillness and a growing understanding of the nature of life. Out of this seeing emerges wisdom and compassion. It is a moment-to-moment investigation of the mind and body process. Our experience is explored from a balanced and spacious awareness which allows the heart to flower in love. During these six weeks there will be meditation instructions, talks about the philosophy of the practice, homework assignments, and time for discussion and questions. The class was recently described in an article in Northwest Dharma News: <http://northwestdharma.org/nw-dharma-news-wp/?p=28>.

B. SPANISH DHARMA GROUPS AND RESOURCES

Many Insight groups are located in communities with a significant Spanish-speaking population. The first Dharma programs completely in Spanish are starting to appear, along with a number of other resources for accessing Dharma teachings in Spanish.

EAST BAY MEDITATION CENTER

www.eastbaymeditation.org

Name of diversity group: La Casa del Corazón

When it began: June 2012

Website of diversity group: www.eastbaymeditation.org/index.php?s=93

We are creating a deep refuge group to come home to the heart of nuestra gente. Our intention is to provide a safe space for Native Spanish speakers to cultivate the diversity of our varied communities, accessible to all Spanish-language fluencies. We offer both informal and formal facilitation of different wisdom practices, and teachings from the Buddhist lineage, to cultivate personal and interpersonal healing. The weekly teachings are led by Susana Renaud, visiting teachers, experienced practitioners and community members.

INSIGHT MEDITATION CENTER

www.insightmeditationcenter.org

Name of diversity group: Dharma en Español

When it began: Oct 2011

IMC began a weekly Spanish Dharma group in October 2011, led by Andrea Castillo. The recorded talks are available at <http://www.audiodharma.org/talks/?search=language%3A+Spanish>. Many in the group are completely bilingual and yet are discovering how fascinating and promising it is to explore the Dharma directly in our language of origin, without having to go through the mind's rational filter of translation of language and culture. We are beginning to discover that we can express and share without losing the vitality and freshness of our experiences, and at the same time bring in the discerning wisdom of the Dharma. Choosing between the two languages can become one more area of mindfulness investigation, and we can learn to dance between the two languages, two cultures, and two worlds. In June 2012, IMC offered its first daylong in Spanish, on the topic of lovingkindness and joy.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

1. Amigos de la Meditacion: This Facebook page offers resources in Theravada Buddhism in Spanish. The page includes links to free Spanish book downloads, Dharma talks and meditation instructions, as well as links to retreats, meditation centers and teachers offering teachings in Spanish. <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Amigos-de-la-Meditacion/255601614460958>
2. Tara Brach's Spanish Dharma teachings: <http://www.tarabrach.com/audiodharma-Spanish.html>

3. Spanish Dharma retreat in Puerto Rico: Rebecca Bradshaw leads a retreat in Spanish. Information is available from Karen Weyland at vipasssanapuertorico@gmail.com.

C. WHITE ALLY AND RACISM EXPLORATION GROUPS

A few Insight groups have created ways for white people to explore their race, ethnic relationships, and often unconscious views/assumptions in a space that feels safe. We only list the formal programs here, but other sanghas have participated in white awareness workshops that are offered by Insight teachers.

INSIGHT MEDITATION COMMUNITY OF WASHINGTON

www.imcw.org

Name of diversity group: White Awake

When it began: September 2009

White Awake is an IMCW program to build awareness of white privilege in our communities. The sangha was formed in September of 2009 to provide a forum for self-identified white practitioners to understand white privilege (what it is, where it comes from, how it manifests), explore our individual and collective experience of white privilege, and support each other in actively dissolving racism in our meditation communities and other venues. We hold seasonal meetings and host workshops such as the upcoming daylong to be taught by Arinna Weisman on "Uncovering Our Hearts: Healing the Suffering of Privilege."

NEW YORK INSIGHT MEDITATION CENTER

www.nyimc.org

New York Insight has offered ongoing training for white sangha members on white privilege (particularly geared towards teachers, board members, and volunteers). Arinna Weisman has led two weekend workshops (in 2010 and 2012) exploring the "Dukkha of White Privilege." These explorations are ongoing and are mirrored by regular workshops led by Gina Sharpe called "Free at Last" for people of color exploring diversity and suffering.

D. DIVERSITY PROGRAMS AT THE MAJOR INSIGHT RETREAT CENTERS

Some programs are broader than the specific categories mentioned above. The two major Insight retreat centers in the United States have an expressed commitment to racial and ethnic diversity as part of an overall diversity program.

INSIGHT MEDITATION SOCIETY

www.dharma.org

Name of diversity program: Commitment to Diversity

When it began: 2008

Website of diversity program: www.dharma.org/about-us/diversity

IMS is actively engaged in an organization-wide process, led by its Board of Directors, to deepen sensitivity to issues of diversity so that we can provide an ever more welcoming and respectful retreat environment. It includes recruiting board members of color, undergoing trainings, connecting with participants and teachers of the People of Color retreat to hone the program, and expanding the center's offerings in the realm of diversity.

Our vision statement is: "In offering a spiritual refuge for awakening, IMS is committed to cultivating a community that reflects the diversity of our society and our world. We believe that all members of our community benefit from diversity, recognizing that a wide range of human experiences and viewpoints broadens and enriches the understanding of all. We seek to promote the inclusion and participation of people of diverse social identities including those of all races, ethnicities, cultures, sexual orientations, gender identities, classes, religions, abilities, and ages, so that all may feel welcome, safe and respected within this community."

IMS is celebrating the 10th year of its annual People of Color retreat.

SPIRIT ROCK MEDITATION CENTER

www.spiritrock.org

Name of diversity program: Spirit Rock Diversity Program

When it began: 2001

Website of diversity program: www.spiritrock.org/page.aspx?pid=545

Spirit Rock has a full diversity program, in which race/ethnicity is a major component.

Our purpose is to ensure that Spirit Rock is accessible and welcoming to all people who wish to participate in the sangha regardless of ethnic origin, race, cultural background, socio-economic class, age, gender, sexual orientation, or physical ability. Our purpose is to awaken and sustain an engaged exploration into the many levels of seen and unseen separation among the Spirit Rock community using the fundamental grounding of our Dharma practice.

Separation occurs in innumerable forms, however in North American society a most difficult and deeply profound wound is that of race. We have embraced the following priorities: (1) to address the separation in regards to race with compassionate honesty and diligent effort and (2) to cultivate attitudes, processes, and methods by which to develop freedom and healing from the dukkha of racism and oppression.

Jack Kornfield taught the first People of Color retreat at Vallecitos Mountain Ranch in 1997, and such retreats have been held at Spirit Rock since 1999.

E. DIVERSITY PROGRAMS AND COMMITTEE WORK AT INSIGHT SANGHAS

Quite a few Insight sanghas also have an overall commitment to diversity that includes racial/ethnic diversity. This section notes two well-developed programs at larger groups, as well as an ongoing survey and focus group work at another large sangha. It also cites many groups with new programs or an interest in further development.

CAMBRIDGE INSIGHT MEDITATION CENTER

www.cimc.info/diversities.html

CIMC conducted a Diversity and Inclusion Survey on paper and online from mid-April to mid-July 2009 and continues to hold annual focus groups. One result of this ongoing effort toward inclusion is the creation of the First Friday Evening Practice for People of Color (see above).

The survey committee consisted of a mixture of CIMC staff, board members, teachers, and CIMC yogis, for a total of about 10 committee members. The committee met over a period of six years, the last few years with Boston-based diversity consultants Donna Bivens and Paul Marcus. Our consultants facilitated a process to help the survey committee become aware of unconscious racism and discrimination that may be at work in our society, in organizations, and in many — if not all — of us, as individuals. The survey committee met to work on improving its own awareness about attitudes and ways in which we might unwittingly participate in discrimination. A core mission of the survey group was to construct a survey that would allow CIMC to understand its community needs around diversity and inclusion. The 270 CIMC survey respondents overwhelmingly indicated that it is very important to do everything we can to make CIMC a welcoming place for all.

The 2010 survey results are available at <http://www.cimc.info/PDF/SurveySummary04142010POC.pdf>.

INSIGHT MEDITATION CENTER OF PIONEER VALLEY

www.insightpv.org

Name of diversity program: Multicultural Affairs Committee

When it began: 2010

Website of diversity program: www.insightpv.org/accessibility

The MCA is a working committee that helps to support the center in becoming more welcoming and inclusive of people of color. The MCA is open to all members of the Sangha although at this time it happens to be made of white people only. We are hoping that eventually POC will join our committee as we consider their presence and perspective to be essential in doing this work. Toward that end we are seeking consultation with POC for the work that we do.

One of our projects has been to propose and help the Board to organize a retreat for white sangha members to raise their awareness of white privilege and to interrupt racism. The MCA also provided each of the Center's teachers and practice leaders a copy of the anthology *Making the Invisible Visible: Healing Racism in Our Buddhist Communities*. Additional projects include initiating a Multicultural Affairs section of the Center's library and having the Center's diversity statement printed, framed, and posted on the door to the Center as a visible sign of welcoming. Our current project is organizing a retreat for people of color for spring/summer 2013.

NEW YORK INSIGHT MEDITATION CENTER

www.nyimc.org

Name of diversity program: Diversity Committee / Sangha Builders

When it began: 2007/2011

The Diversity Committee at NYI has an ad-hoc offshoot called Sangha Builders that is made up of 16 sangha members (teachers, Practice Leaders, board, and members). We are looking at building diversity by building sangha. We are designing a course on Dharma and diversity with these objectives:

1. To explore and celebrate our differences and similarities
2. To practice mindful and compassionate inquiry in support of understanding our conditioned views and how these give rise to reactivity
3. To promote greater understanding of ourselves and each other as a result of authentic interaction
4. To become a part of a vibrant, honest, engaged sangha
5. To discover how the Dharma can assist us in creating a loving community that is a refuge for all

We also have overall objectives for the sangha:

To nurture an inclusive sangha at NYI by:

1. Designing a repeating & evolving relational series to explore and celebrate, in the context of the Dharma, the relative reality of socially constructed differences and the absolute reality of our complete interdependence.
2. Collectively creating ongoing opportunities for us to explore, express and share the fullness and complexities of our authentic selves so that we may all feel welcome, accepted and accepting.
3. Supporting a vibrant, engaged, interconnected community that honors honesty, transparency, input, and communication.

NEW PROGRAMS AND OTHER WORK

Naturally, many sanghas we contacted did not neatly fit into the concept of a having a formal and established diversity program or committee. Although the intention of this document is to recognize substantial programs, it would be remiss not to mention these other activities. The groups mentioned here are not exhaustive.

NEW PROGRAMS

Some sanghas have just begun program or committee work. A few specific examples are recognized here, and there are likely many similar ones.

COMMON GROUND MEDITATION CENTER:

The Inclusivity and Diversity Circle began in March 2012 and is an ongoing group that discusses issues of diversity and inclusivity at the center and in our hearts and practice. Meetings will be scheduled every few months. All are welcome. This circle is intended to lay the groundwork for Larry Yang's visit in April 2013 when he will offer a facilitated workshop around these issues.

INSIGHT MEDITATION COMMUNITY OF COLORADO (DENVER AFFILIATE):

Earlier this year, as part of our Equanimity and Engagement series, we did presentations on diversity, and we have revised our sangha-descriptive materials to explicitly acknowledge our intentions with regard to encouraging both diversity and inclusiveness in our membership. These are only early steps, of course. We realize that this is a long and continuing journey.

INSIGHT MEDITATION COMMUNITY OF GEORGIA:

We have just started a group within our sangha called Protection Against "The Isms." The group explores how to utilize Buddhist practices and teachings to help transform negative mind states caused by ageism, classism, homophobia, patriarchy, matriarchy, racism, sexism and any other forms of collective ignorance and actions that create suffering.

OTHER WORK

Many other groups have done informal committee or other work around the idea of racial/ethnic diversity. Some have done short-term programs and workshops that include both people of color activities and white awareness activities. Without at-

tempting to compare the programs or groups, examples of this type of work are occurring at Albuquerque Vipassana Sangha, Insight Meditation Community of Berkeley, Sacramento Buddhist Meditation Group, and San Francisco Insight, as well as at a number of smaller sitting groups.

3. Other Cultural Connections

Insight meditation, as practiced by Westerners, also interacts with other spiritual traditions in America.

CONNECTION TO ASIAN BUDDHISTS

A less commonly acknowledged dimension of ethnic diversity that is relevant for Western Insight Meditation is the connection to Asian practitioners living in America. Asian Theravada Buddhists in America typically are part of an ethnic Buddhist community centered around a wat or monastery that resembles those in their home country, including having monastic teachers. The sanghas and practice centers created by Westerners are of a rather different character, with lay teachers. It has been said that a Western Vipassana practitioner would likely have more in common with a Western Zen practitioner than with an Asian Theravada practitioner.

Nonetheless, two sanghas mentioned having occasional contact with Asian Buddhists in their communities – Portland Friends of the Dharma and Sacramento Buddhist Meditation Group.

DHARMA AND NATIVE TEACHINGS

In addition, there are some eclectic Insight groups with primarily ethnic practitioners. This one is mentioned because the leader has completed Spirit Rock's Community Dharma Leader program: The Center for Native American Integrative Healing (CNAIH; www.CNA-IntegrativeHealing.com) in Santa Fe began the "Dharma meets Native Teachings" program in July 2012. Native healers, a Native CDL teacher, and peer mindfulness practitioners lead the sittings. The format for the bi-weekly group is 40 minutes of Vipassana sitting meditation, followed by a Talking Circle of insight and discussion of practice to enhance and support daily mindfulness.

4. Conclusion and Resources

In conclusion, it is clear that racial and ethnic diversity is a dynamic process in some segments of the Insight Meditation movement. It has support from the leading retreat centers, and was a major focus of Spirit Rock's CDL-4 program from 2010 to 2012. This points toward the possibility of even more activity in the future.

While this guide is primarily informational and not intended to provide detailed resources about creating a diversity program in the area of race/ethnicity (or other dimensions), we would like to offer a top-level resource to help interested groups get started.

Making the Invisible Visible: Healing Racism in Our Buddhist Communities

<http://72.5.49.29/document.doc?id=9>.

Excerpt from the Introduction to the first edition:

For many years there has been a movement to shine the light of awareness on the difficulties encountered by people of color as they try to participate in our Western Buddhist Sanghas. In many ways and with varying degrees of success People of Color and their European American allies have been trying to get the attention of the teachers and sangha members in order to face the underlying racism in our society at large and its manifestation within our Sanghas. This booklet, being offered to the "Buddhist Teachers in the West" conference from June 20- 24, 2000, is another step in that ongoing process.

This booklet is a compilation of stories, thoughts, resources, and articles that are meant to be a glimpse into the personal experiences of some Buddhist practitioners of color and their allies. The voices you will read come from a wide range of cultural and ethnic origins, practicing in a great many of the lineages being represented at this conference. These voices come from your sanghas. You may be surprised by them; you may not agree with everything you read. But, please, understand that these voices and stories come from people who are already practicing in our sanghas.