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Week 1, *Real Refuge: Building Inclusive and Welcoming sanghas*

Seeing the Unseen

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Mushim Ikeda: Hello, and welcome to week one of our Tricycle retreat, *Real Refuge, Building Inclusive and Welcoming sanghas*. I'm Mushim Ikeda here at East Bay Meditation Center in downtown Oakland, and today, week one, we're going to be exploring the practice of seeing the unseen. So, I hope I've got your attention there.

Just to say a few words about East Bay Meditation Center here in Oakland, we've been described as not just a meditation center, but as a movement. We have a mission that is diversity and social justice-centered. Over the seven years that we've been open we've really seen phenomenal growth in our programs, which are primarily aimed at people in underrepresented communities. This has been just a dharma treasure, and has been a joy for me to be a part of.

The establishment of the East Bay Meditation Center has also helped the building of a remarkable and diverse sangha, or spiritual community. So, as in any movement I'm not alone; you're seeing only me right now, but I'm part of a collective, I'm part of a community. I'm part of a series of interconnecting communities. There are many people—teachers, students of the dharma, social change workers—who are contributing to teaching, learning, and building, the community that we have developed here.

I want to be clear that what I'm expressing is mine alone; I'm not speaking for anyone else. That having been said, I know that the work we're doing here and the work I've been doing has been formed by our location in Oakland, California, the diversity and the vibrant urban community that we're part of here, and all of my experience having lived in Oakland for 22 years.

Speaking of friends who are contributing, I'd like to introduce you, just briefly, to my friend and the videographer today, John Ellis. And he's also my co-teacher here at EBMC. So, John, if you can, say "hi" as part of the sangha.

John Ellis: Hello. Thanks for having me.

Mushim Ikeda: Thank you very much. Thanks for doing the video.

John Ellis: My pleasure.

Mushim Ikeda: Okay. So there we brought John in. He was outside of the frame. He was outside of the frame of this video, normally unseen, yet absolutely essential to the process of this retreat. There, we've had our first example in our practice of seeing the unseen. Not so hard, yet it takes that extra dimension of awareness of how what I am looking at now, how is my experience now, being created, being informed, being produced, by folks who are contributing, whom we may not know, whom we may not see, and yet we can have an awareness that they are there. That's so important.

Today we're going to be looking at how we can gain some super-powers through our dharma practice. Namely, how can we see that which is unseen. Another way of saying that is "how do we make the invisible visible?" I was part of a team that in 2000 put together, initially, a pamphlet called "Making the Invisible Visible: Healing Racism in our sanghas, in our Buddhist Communities." This pamphlet became a book, which is available still. Some parts are outdated, but the firsthand accounts by Buddhist practitioners of color in United States, and in the UK, and our white allies, have traveled so far. I can't even tell you how many groups have formed because of it, how much feedback we've gotten over the years, and it's still available at spritwalk.org in their diversity tab. It's always available for free and I'd love for you to take a look at it if you have time.

I'd also like to mention briefly a book called [*Dharma Color and Culture*](#), edited by Hilda Gutierrez Baldoquin and published by Parallax Press. The subtitle is "New Voices in Western Buddhist." This is a collection of essays by writers who are all Buddhist and people of color in the United States—an excellent collection. It can give you a fresh perspective into the larger movement that I'm talking about, looking at diversity issues in the U.S. sangha.

So, we're doing all of this toward the goal of building more welcoming and more inclusive sanghas. I hope that you'll get interested in this question and, if you have a sangha or a spiritual community that you're part of, that you'll work to make it welcoming to everyone who wants to come—a refuge for people who are seeking everything from stress relief all the way up, to complete liberation in the sense that the Buddha taught. I'm hoping to inspire you in four weeks to ask yourself, "How do I become a good spiritual friend, a *kalyanamitra* or *kalyanamitta*, to others, both seen and unseen?"

How can we see the unseen? We could get fancy and I could give it a name, this is a practice of seeing with the great wisdom I practice of liberty compassion. In plainer

language, in diversity and inclusion work, it's sometimes called looking around the room and seeing who's here and who *isn't* here. For example, in the Zen temple in Michigan where I started training in 1982, we were located in an old house, which we were renovating. There were steps that came up from the street level—the ground level up to a porch—a narrow doorway with a threshold that you had to step over, and then you came into an entryway area that took you up to the meditation hall and other parts of the temple. There was no wheelchair ramp. Therefore, by definition, we never had any people coming to meditate with us or practice with us in wheelchairs or who had severe mobility limitations. We never *saw* them in the meditation hall. Was it because there were people in that city in wheelchairs who didn't want to come? We didn't know, and we didn't find out at that point. I really want to assure you that, since that time, a ramp has been built, and it has become a diverse and thriving sangha. Sometimes it takes time, and we'll never get to our goals unless we have in mind that we want to become more inclusive. So, that's one example.

Usually when we ask who isn't here, someone is quite confused and says, “How can I see who isn't in the room?” And we can extend “the room” to all the places we go on a regular basis, on vacations, and special trips, as well. We can look around any time and ask ourselves how many people here appear to be, and I want to emphasize *appear*. We can't always know, but being humans we do look around, even if we're not aware of it, we're constantly making these assessments.

How many people here appear to be people of color, younger, older, in wheelchairs or scooters? How many people here appear to me to be women, men, or I can't tell what their sex is, or how they may self-identify in terms of gender. How many people here are of various body shapes and sizes? Or who appear to me to be low, medium, or higher, income? I want to stop and emphasize that we're invoking a mind state—and this is important as we're beginning to ask these questions—that is spacious, gentle, compassionate, and contains friendliness and loving kindness. What will happen is as we begin to do this practice of seeing the unseen, the great wisdom I practice, we're going to be getting peeks into what Buddhist meditators might be familiar with, and I've been meditating for quite a long time so I'm familiar with this.

There are two things: number one, a sense of how much we don't know; this can be unsettling, or irritating, or just plain scary. Number two, the surfacing of our unconscious assumptions, thoughts we're thinking that we don't know we're thinking, beliefs that we have held our entire lives. Beliefs that we've never examined because they seem so core to who we think we are and how we've been raised—how we've been conditioned. We need to invoke a mind state that's an antidote to whatever anxiety may arise, an attitude of gentleness, of kindness, of openness, curiosity, and interest. If any of you have kids or work with kids, you know that it's natural to human beings when we're younger to be

curious about so many things. We can practice *metta*, or loving-kindness, for ourselves; may I be safe, healthy, happy, peaceful, joyous, and at ease. Then we can proceed on as though we're contemplating this *kalan*. We're talking about building inclusive sanghas—and as we know the sangha, is the third of what's called the Three Jewels; Buddha, dharma, and sangha. We go to sangha for refuge, we go to Buddha for refuge, we go to dharma for refuge. So how is it that we can create sanghas that are true refuges, a harbor in the storm, a safe and welcoming space of healing and renewal of spirit, in the samsaric world?

We ask ourselves this, "Hm. How?" Not demanding an answer that's going to come quickly, but going deeply into the question. So, there are the Three Refuges; Buddha, dharma, sangha. We go to each of them for refuge. And of the three I'd say that sangha is the most difficult. It presents the most problems—not that we don't wrestle with Buddha and dharma, but the sangha is made up of real people. They're our communities. They're our friends. They become our spiritual family. And that's really, I feel, where in a lot of our practice the rubber meets the road. It's hard to be serene and spiritually wonderful when people we find annoying, or difficult, or who we feel just aren't harmonious with our group for whatever reason show up. In fact, it may be people whom we feel are just so different than whoever we are that we really start to struggle with feeling, "That's my sangha member." At that point we need to step back and take a look and ask ourselves, "What is my dharma practice about really?" Many of us will say I want to become a calm, centered, wise, compassionate, person, but there's another way of looking at this as well.

In 1985 I was on pilgrimage with my original Zen teacher and we were passing through San Francisco. Along the way on this pilgrimage—which went from Mexico City all the way up through Texas, the west coast, across the Rockies, through Colorado, and then back to the Midwest. We visited as many Buddhist groups of every sect and every lineage that we could find. We used the Yellow Pages in those days. So, at a Chinese temple in Chinatown in San Francisco we met a Chinese monk who only spoke a limited amount of English. I remember distinctly that he said, "I became a monk because I wanted to learn about the world. I wanted to learn about the world." We need to ask how reflective our sanghas, or spiritual communities, are of the entire world? How can we learn? How can we see more deeply, and grow spiritually more and more? Very simply, how can we learn about the world?

The homework, if you'd like to do it, for week two of this retreat is to gain your super-power and be able to increasingly see the unseen. What I'd like to suggest is that, if you're not familiar with it, search on the internet for Loden's Wheel of Diversity. There you'll see some ways in which, as humans, we group ourselves and others in terms of difference or perceived difference. Next, spend some time thinking and maybe journaling

about *who* you see in your workplace, your school, your spiritual center or sangha, and who you don't see. In other words, who's in the room, and who's not in the room.

Thank you for accompanying me on this dharma exploration, this adventure. Next week in this retreat we're going to take a quick trip to Hawaii. So, I hope that you'll join me in week two of *Real Refuge, Building Inclusive, Welcoming sanghas*.