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Week 2, *Real Refuge: Building Inclusive and Welcoming sanghas*  
“Our Stories Do Matter”  
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**Mushim:** Hello and welcome to Week 2 of our Tricycles Retreat, *Real Refuge: Building Inclusive and Welcoming Sanghas*. Once again, I’m Mushim Ikeda here in downtown Oakland at East Bay Meditation Center and today we’ll be continuing our journey, our adventure, and our practice of inclusivity community.

Let’s begin today by going for refuge. Those of you who are Buddhists have probably done this practice and you can do this anytime and anywhere. I go for refuge to Buddha. I go for refuge to Dharma. I go for refuge to Sangha. For the second time, I go for refuge to Buddha. I go for refuge to Dharma. I go for refuge to Sangha. For the third time, I go for refuge to Buddha. I go for refuge to Dharma. I go for refuge to Sangha. As many of you know, Buddha, Dharma and Sangha are also called the Three Jewels or the Triple Gem and with these Three Jewels, we can practice continually polishing them. We’re polishing them through our dharma practice so that they shine brightly, and of course, this sounds really fabulous and spiritual.

You may have heard the teaching that being in the Third Jewel, the sangha or Spiritual Community, traditionally is compared to being a potato. So we’re a potato dug up from a muddy field. In the old-school method of washing potatoes, what they do is they pull all these potatoes up out from the Earth and put them in a big basin, pour some water in, then take a big stick and just agitate it around like crazy—really agitate it. Those potatoes would rub against one another until all of the mud and the rough spots on the skin came off, and then you had beautiful clean potatoes ready to cook. So they’re rubbing off the mud by friction, by bumping against one another.

Now spiritual community life, whether in a remote monastery—and I have done monastic practice both in North America and in South Korea where I began my practice—or here in downtown Oakland, was *never* designed to be some other worldly serene, soft-focus, sort-of-dream, with people gliding silently about dressed in clean clothing and bowing to one another and never disagreeing or butting heads. In fact, my personal experience in a real sangha or a dharmic community, has over time revealed that we each have to show who we really are in that moment. The good, the bad, the sad, the ugly and stupid parts of ourselves; I know this from personal experience. It isn’t really possible, in the long run, to play it safe if we want to make spiritual progress. We cannot just play it safe, because practice is life and life is practice; real life doesn’t allow us to hide out.

One has one's plans laid out nicely. We do have to plan, and then there is illness or death or some great and unanticipated change or challenge. Of course, great and unanticipated change or challenge isn't always something that's necessarily grievous or that we find negative. It could also be something joyful and positive that stresses us because suddenly we have to move all of our plans aside and move into high gear in some way that we never thought we had to step into that opportunity. So face it, we just can't look cool all the time! Some of these things, which mess up our plans aren't always big things either, like huge losses or giant changes. They could be a day that goes wrong in every way we could think of. There could be a wardrobe malfunction. There could be lots of small irritations, and we all know from personal experience how that goes.

So we can't look cool all the time, simply impossible. Real sangha is where we show up and we look deeply at ourselves and at what is arising for us in that moment. Referring to the homework from last week in which we began our practice of seeing the unseen. We now might have some better ideas having done the homework of who the unseen or the invisible or the sangha members that we just haven't even thought of before, the potential sangha members might be and depending where we're located perhaps these invisible potential dharma-friends might be people of color or people of various ethnicities or folks from the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, questioning and same gender loving community. Or people who don't have cars and can't get to our sanghas meeting place, or veterans of the war, or people with chronic illnesses, or those with young children who can't afford a babysitter or daycare and our meditation center doesn't provide daycare. All of these are folks who potentially might want to come and be with us in sangha, yet access hasn't been provided culturally or in terms of various equipment that's needed or various services. Perhaps you've begun already to see their faces or hear their names or just begin to feel their presence. This is a function of mindfulness and it's a very important practice of mindful awareness.

*Real Refuge* is asking us is to begin, collectively and individually, to look deeply at ways in which our sangha's culture might present unconscious and unintentional or unintended barriers to people who are interested in the Buddha dharma but who aren't in the room with us for various reasons. I'm remembering that lovely Chinese monk I met in San Francisco—whom I told you about in Week 1 of this retreat—and how we can commit to learning more about the world. As you recall, that was a Chinese monk in San Francisco's Chinatown. He spoke a little bit of English, and when we were on a pilgrimage and visited his temple, he said I became a monk, a Bhikkhu, because I wanted to learn about the world. Remembering back, his temple was almost windowless. The ceiling was low and it was lit by harsh florescent lights. It was a very poor place by some people's standards. He wasn't a famous teacher and yet, I remember it after all these years—that was 1985—because his spirit lit up that dingy place with warmth, and openness, and curiosity. I'd like to be more like that in my own practice.

He gave me a teaching that day. Now if you participated in Week 1 of our retreat, you may be thinking, 'but wait a minute, you promised us that this week we'd go to Hawaii.' That's why I'm wearing this shirt, which is of course an aloha shirt. My mom was born on the island of Oahu and my cousin, Reverend Jiko Nakade, is priest of Daifukuji Sōtō Zen Mission Temple on the Big Island of Hawaii in the Kona area. That's where I got this shirt, because I like to visit there from time to time; it's one of my spiritual homes.

What I'd like to propose is this. Let's increase the aloha spirit in our sanghas! If we want to increase the aloha spirit, we need to understand the real meaning of the word aloha. According to a Hawaiian quilting website, Hawaiian quilting is a traditional Hawaiian craft. The indigenous Hawaiian word *aloha* is much more than a word of greeting or farewell or a salutation—though of course it does include that. The website said, "Aloha means mutual regard and affection, and extends warmth in caring with no obligation in return." Warm in caring with no obligation in return. Aloha is the essence of relationships in which each person is important to every other person for collective existence. Aloha means to hear what is not said, to see what cannot be seen and to know the unknowable.

The famous American, or United Statesian to be more exact, writer Maya Angelou wrote, "There is no greater agony than burying an untold story inside you." We'll go back to this in a minute, but I want to take one step back and say that as a practice, I've been practicing saying *United Statesian* as an adjective because it has been pointed out by a lot of different folks that America, the word America, really does correctly apply to all the Americas and those Americas are much wider area of land and include many more nations and areas and cultures than the United States alone, instead of saying American meaning something pertaining to the United States. So I say that I am a United Statesian and that in this case, we're talking about a United Statesian writer, Maya Angelou.

Maya Angelou famously wrote, "There is no greater agony than burying an untold story inside you," and I want to make it clear because in so many of our Buddhist teachings there's a lot of talk about how we need to somehow watch out for the expression of ego in the negative sense, that negative assertion of the self and how we need to transcend our stories; there's a lot of truth in all of this when we understand it correctly. However, as we're moving towards building more diverse, more multicultural, and more inclusive sanghas, our stories do matter. The agony that results from the untold stories, not only of individuals but of their people, their ancestors, their descendants, their communities needs to be addressed to enrich everyone in the sangha and provide access into worlds which we cannot know. We haven't seen because none of us can know all of the many worlds.

When we build diverse sanghas, our stories do matter. The homework then—for Week 3, the next week of this retreat—is to ask you to spend some time with the quote from Maya Angelou, “There is no greater agony than burying an untold story inside you.” Contemplate that and then the invitation is to ask yourself, ‘are there any untold stories and untold stories of my ancestors inside of me that are causing me agony, stories that need to be told, that want to be told that have not been told, and please remember that these stories, which are untold, could be joyful?’ They’ve been unshared for various reasons. So it’s not always stories, which contain bitter or painful content. They’re just untold stories, and when we do this homework please remember to generate some aloha spirit, some warm breezes of kindness, and acceptance, and love, toward those stories, and write them down. Write at least one of your untold stories down or tell at least one to a good friend, and see what happens. So let’s check in next week when we continue our retreat on *Real Refuge: Building Inclusive Welcoming Sanghas*. Thanks for joining me.