

Mushim (Patricia) Ikeda

Week 3, *Real Refuge: Building Inclusive and Welcoming sanghas*

“Bias and Privilege”

August 19th, 2013

www.tricycle.com/retreats

Hi, and welcome back to Week 3 of our Tricycle Retreat, on Real Refuge, Building Inclusive, Welcoming Sanghas. I’m Mushim Ikeda here in downtown Oakland at the East Bay Meditation Center, where I am a core teacher. Our mission celebrates diversity, social justice, and mindfulness meditation practices. You can check us out on our website.

Thus far in our retreat, we started in on two profound spiritual practices, the first is seeing the unseen; or "Who isn't in the room?" And hearing the unheard, our own untold stories. And I hope that means more of others’ untold stories, their heart stories, their cultural stories. The second practice is doing all of this, seeing and hearing with that mind state of “aloha”. And it's an indigenous Hawaiian word that means, "Deep kindness, warm caring, and realization of interdependence that can illuminate our life in community, or communing with ourselves, and with others." For me, Aloha spirit and striving to build more inclusive sanghas strikes a deep chord in me as a Buddhist practitioner, as a mother, and as a Diversity Consultant.

Let us then consider this passage from the Karaṇīyamettā Sutra, the Buddha's words on loving-kindness. Also translated as, "Universal Friendliness, Loving Friendliness." So this translation is by the Amravati Sangha, and you can access it for free at www.accesstoinsight.org. This is an excerpt from the Karaṇīyamettā Suta:

"This is what should be done by one who is skilled in goodness, and who knows the path of peace. So this is our practice, wishing in gladness and in safety, may all beings be at ease. Whatever living beings there may be, whether they are weak or strong, omitting none." And I want to underline that, "omitting none." "The great or the mighty, medium, short or small. The seen and the unseen." So there we have that again. "Those living near and far away. Those born and to be born. May all beings be at ease."

So we can notice here that the Buddha said we wish safety, health, joy and ease to every living being! Omitting none, including the seen and the unseen, and those born, and to be born. So I don't know about you, but unconditional loving-kindness, universal friendliness, is something that I find to be a pretty tall order. When I seriously consider the possibility of becoming more loving to other people, and other beings, and I hear the

words, "omitting none," so that means no-- none. It doesn't mean one percent, it doesn't mean .01 percent, it means none, omitting none. So when I hear that, I instantly start to protest inside my brain. And I start looking for loopholes. So like, "No, no! What about this person? And what about creatures, like venomous snakes and spiders? Well, certainly we can't be expected to extend Mettā or universal loving-kindness towards people that we would consider evil and who have done really, really terrible things. Or to harmful creatures." Thanissaro Bhikkhu, who led the online retreat before this one, has, I believe, said it's okay when practicing Mettā, to say about venomous beings, "May you be happy, and may you go far away."

So we can try that. But really, in the practice of taking refuge in our third jewel sangha, we find out at some point that maybe we can't go far away from one another. And maybe we shouldn't. Because what can we learn when we actually draw nearer? And try to understand and support one another, even when we don't understand one another very well, and when it's so hard to support someone that we don't understand. The truth is, if we want to build truly diverse, and welcoming spiritual community, we need to go deep. "Deep into what?" we may ask. Well each need to look at our own conditioning, the unconscious and unexamined assumptions and biases and stereotypes we may be holding. And we need to look deeply at our different levels of status, power, and unearned privilege, due to the societal group we were born into, or because of our physical or cognitive ability, or because of our age, either young or old, and many other factors as well. Being willing to examine these power differentials, which means, "Who holds power, and who an advantage? Who doesn't in any given situation?"

And doing that within our sanghas is even more important, when we consider the many heartbreaking abuses of power within United States and North American Buddhist communities. Misconduct on the part of powerful and often charismatic teachers who are thought to be quote/unquote "enlightened" by their students, and who betrayed the sacred trust placed in them. We need to be careful, intelligent and caring. Careful and caring. Because when we start to look deeply, we begin to see multi-generational trauma, and profound effects in the United States and worldwide, resulting from the abuse of power, and from fear and greed. And when considering the many ways in which we're different, we begin to see the legacy of slavery—again I'm talking about the United States, because I'm a citizen of the United States. The legacy of slavery. The genocide of indigenous peoples, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, the denial of human and civil rights, economic exploitation, and much more. With so much suffering, can we really bring up these topics in our sanghas and hold them in the steady gaze of compassion? And can we learn to be together in a new way? Hearing and seeing the other person as that person wishes to be seen and heard. Not as we see, as we hear, really trying to inquire, to ask, to go through a learning process. How is it that you wish to be respected? How is it that you wish to be seen? How is it that you wish to be heard? And accepting that as our practice. And can we make the changes that may be needed in how the dharma is presented, to be

culturally appropriate for many different communities, without losing the essence, and the radical liberation of what the Buddha taught?

I wrote about some of this in the Spring 2001 issue of "Inquiring Mind." And the essay I wrote was titled, "Stories We Have Yet to Hear." So stories we have yet to hear, the path to healing racism in American sanghas. And in this essay I wrote, "Many people of color in the United States feel that as long as some American Buddhist communities and groups of teachers remain predominantly white, the Buddhism they teach will lack credibility. And dharma talks that employ words such as oneness of all beings, profound liberation and acceptance, spiritual acceptance, will be regarded with anything from mild suspicion to active scorn. So how do we forge a new language? What will help open the doors of our meditation halls and Buddha centers to all?" "I suspect that what is needed," I wrote, "At this point is to make our meditation halls and dharma halls serve as listening rooms on a regular basis. As listening rooms. Buddhists of color, myself included, have stories we need to tell about how racism impacts our everyday realities." So that's the end of the quote from the essay I wrote for "Inquiring Mind." And of course, all of this would hold true for creating safe and mindful spaces, to hear the voices of everyone who has been targeted for discrimination, because of how they self-identify, or because of how they look or seem to be different in the eyes of the majority.

How deeply we can listen is, I think, related to how deep our practice is, our spiritual practice is, how deep we are. And to what extent we can develop compassion, and loving-kindness, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. The brahmavihāras, also called "The Four Immeasurables." I've just touched on the brahmavihāras, of which Mettā, or loving-kindness is one of the four. And since next week is the fourth and last week of our retreat, the homework is this, to please find a text of one of the versions of the Mettā Sutra, the Buddha's discourse on loving-kindness, and you can try www.accesstoinight.org, accesstoinight, one word. And spend some time with it. The question we're asking is what does unconditional loving-kindness—so remember, no loopholes—unconditional loving-kindness look like and feel like? Or what would it look like and feel like in my own life? Thank you. And next week we'll spend some time exploring the brahmavihāras, or "Divine Abodes," in relationship to creating real refuge, diverse and inclusive sanghas.