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Week 4, *Real Refuge: Building Inclusive and Welcoming sanghas*
“Real Refuge”
August 26th, 2013
www.tricycle.com/retreats

Welcome to week four, the final week of our Tricycle Online Retreat, *Real Refuge, Building Inclusive and Welcoming Sanghas*. I’m Mushim Ikeda, here in downtown Oakland at the East Bay Meditation Center. In the previous weeks we’ve practiced seeing the unseen and hearing the unheard, not as abstract or philosophical spiritual exercises but toward the goal of asking ourselves some questions, good and big questions that can—to use the words of Shantideva in the way of the bodhisattva, “Be a boat, a bridge, a passage to the shore of non-suffering.” Having myself been originally a student of Zen Buddhism, I love compelling questions that can help me to deepen my practice. Questions that can help me to grow in ways that I could never have imagined, even if I never find the answers, even if in asking them I feel helpless, unknowing and unknown. It is in the asking of these questions that we can often find our way. I love questions; so I’d like to share these with you apropos of our month together in this retreat and to hopefully inspire you to come up with your own questions as well.

Here are some questions: What will it take? What will it take for our beloved refuge of sangha, the third jewel, the community of mindful practice of the Buddhist teachings, to become a place of wide-open doors and culturally sensitive hearts, to become a place where no one feels the need to hide parts of themselves, in order to feel accepted. A place where no one feels, “I’m the only one.” “I’m the only person of color.” “I’m the only person with a visible disability.” “I’m the only person who might be an undocumented immigrant.” “I’m the only same gender-loving person.” We should try to be aware of what’s visible in our spiritual community as examples of people in leadership, of people who seem to be well liked, well respected and well accepted. As we study and practice the Brahma Viharas, those four immeasurables, how big can we and our sanghas or communities actually be and how much can we include? Where we look around at those with whom we practice and study Dharma and ask ourselves, who is in the room and who isn’t? The practice of seeing the unseen and hearing the unheard.

Even though that might sound a little nonsensical or mystical when we first hear it, it’s actually quite doable. It’s a lens through which we learn to look at every situation in which people are present and ask ourselves, “Who’s in the room and who isn’t?” with a totally wide-open, spacious, and compassionate mind. When our teachers include contemporary anecdotes and quotations in their Dharma talks who’s represented? Who isn’t? Who are the figures appearing in those Dharma anecdotes, those teaching stories, and in the quotations? Where do the quotations come from? How much diversity is there? What is our capacity to be inspired, enriched and spiritually motivated by encounters with what we don’t understand—and may even fear—in addition to experiences of intimacy and connective openness. Can we truly take in the joy of others whom we

feel are almost totally different than we are? That's one of the Brahma Viharas. That's mudita, joy or sympathetic joy; it means even if we can't identify with someone's joy we can still take joy in an activity that is not our thing. We may even actively dislike it or find it repugnant. Can we find that mudita within ourselves? It doesn't mean that we have to adopt their point of view. It does mean that we grow. We grow by being receptive of someone else's different life experience.

This brings us to the homework question from last week, what's our relationship to unconditional lovingkindness, the ultimate state of nondiscrimination, non-hate, and non-fear? I'm talking about whether we can embody it in everyday and imperfect ways. Can we embody it—not just imagine it in some theoretical way—how we start to embody metta, unconditional loving friendliness. For those of us for whom Buddhist meditation is important, what is the relationship between stillness in solitude and the constantly rubbing shoulders of collective social existence, the myriad ways in which we usually unintentionally misunderstand, invalidate and injure one another because of differences in power and unearned privilege? And if the sangha really is a bunch of muddy potatoes being swirled in a tub, where's the enlightenment?

Before we get discouraged or freak out I'd like to share a passage with you from one of my favorite books. It's called *Natural Wakefulness: Discovering the Wisdom We Were Born With*, by Gaylon Ferguson. *Natural Wakefulness: Discovering the Wisdom We Were Born With*, by Gaylon Ferguson is published by Shambhala. Meditation is not the central practice for all of us Buddhists, but I hope that there will be something here for all Buddhist practitioners and all spiritual practitioners to benefit from. Acknowledging the benefits of retreat, meditation retreat in this case, and solitude, Gaylon Ferguson points out that retreat practice and extended meditation is not the be-all-end-all of spiritual life. I should mention here that my own practice—since 1982—has been both monastic and lay. I put in a lot of time on the meditation cushion and in retreat. Then I spent the last 24 years raising a kid and being active in the Oakland community, including volunteering in the public schools. So in “Chapter Two: Natural Training” of Gaylon Ferguson's *Natural Wakefulness: Discovering the Wisdom We Were Born With*, Ferguson says that,

“The downside of retreats is the subtle implication that meditation and spirituality are special activities set apart from deadlines and dirty dishes, removed from freeways and year-end fiscal reports.”

He goes on to say,

“If meditation is truly the expression of our original nature... then that nature can be expressed wherever we are at any moment, at home with family, at work, in a movie theater or listening to music. Wakefulness is there, and this wakefulness is the way.”

Ferguson is not saying that anything goes, that whatever we're doing is all practice. He's saying that it *can* be. It can be practice. It can be our spiritual practice if wakefulness is there, and this wakefulness is the way.

“The way of natural wakefulness finds spiritual nourishment in being with others. It experiences of living and working in community, our neighborhoods, online chat groups and wikis, the people we work with and relax with in play and in sports.”

Here I think again of our indigenous word “Aloha.” Ferguson says,

“Our original nature is a fundamental human heartedness, the empathy of our basic humanity. There is something in us that deeply appreciates and enjoys friendship, companions, family connections; therefore, natural wakefulness flowers as the experience of being in community.”

Natural wakefulness flowers as the experience of being in community. Thus, we are back in community, in our true home, in our refuge, in our original nature, in the warmth and light of joyful friendship and spiritual family. This is what I wish for myself and for you and for all beings. May you always feel welcomed, seen, heard, and included. May you always find real and true refuge!