

Lama Rod Owens  
Week Four, *Compassion, Love, and Healing in Times of War*  
July 25, 2016  
“Embodying Radical Presence”



Hi, this is Lama Rod, and this is the fourth and final session in my series of dharma talks with *Tricycle*.

As usual, we will begin with going for refuge, in whatever manner is appropriate for you in your practice. We begin by bringing to mind our teachers, our gurus, the Buddha, our ancestors, our elders: we think about their examples and how we rely on their examples in our lives. Then we turn our minds to the dharma, to the teachings, the wisdom itself. We bring to mind our aspirations to embody more deeply this wisdom, to liberate ourselves and others from ignorance and suffering.

Lastly we think about our community: our sangha, our congregations, our groups, wherever feels like home, wherever we feel protected, guided, watched over, and also challenged. Whatever this community is for us, we give rise to thinking about those communities, or that one particular community. These are the precious, rare gems, the jewels that are so very hard to come by, and sometimes so very easy to lose.

Then we turn our minds to the three roots: the guru, the root of blessing and grace; the yidam or deity, the root of accomplishment and realization; and the dharma protector, those beings, circumstances, and energies that help to create a conducive practice, ensuring that we have everything that we need to practice with.

We make offerings to all six sources of refuge, visualized in any way that is appropriate in our minds, in front of us. We make offerings—of any materials, any substances, anything that is exciting for us, anything that we’re attached to—to those sources of refuge. We give rise to a sense of gratitude. In many ways we would not be alive, if not for the blessings of these sources of refuge.

Thank you for your practice.

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In this session, we will explore the idea of what I call “radical presence.” You may or may not be familiar with this. I’m the coauthor of *Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation*, with Rev. angel Kyodo williams Sensei. In the book, I introduce the practice of radical presence, an idea that I was trying to conceptualize and articulate from my own experiences of being in this particular body, along with the particular identities I embrace. [These] affect my being and functioning as a dharma teacher and Buddhist lama. I wanted to describe how important it is for me to remember that I am of many different identities, not just Buddhist. Many other parts of my identity have been very formative and shaping, positively but also negatively, in deeply impactful, cutting ways.

I wanted to articulate a principle that could encompass that. One of the most important terms in my writing and reflection is [the term] *intersectionality*. Intersectionality is becoming much more part of our vernacular [in relationship to] the work of diversity, inclusivity, antiracism and anti-oppression. This is work that I’m very invested in.

[An intersectional perspective draws from] the fields of psychology, sociology, and anthropology. It says that [individuals] are each a community of different identities, and each identity possesses specific characteristics and attributes that impact how we are in the world. I often say that intersectionality informs how I “show up.” This means that intersectionality explains and describes why I am here and why I am doing what I’m doing. It explains why I talk the way that I talk, why I teach the way that I teach, and the syntax and descriptive language that I use in my teaching.

Intersectionality informs many, if not all, of the ways in which we show up in the world and interact with others. For me, and for all of us, intersectionality includes gender, sexuality, race, culture, ethnicity, class, religion, and so on. All these identities inform our uniqueness in the world.



Different parts of our identities may have privilege associated with them, and others may not be so privileged. It's important to understand this and be aware of all the parts [that contribute to our identities] because they impact our practice of the dharma.

I identify as a cisgender male. [Cisgender] means that the sex I was assigned at birth (male) is the sex that I feel most comfortable with. I am also a queer male, which means that I am not only attracted to other cisgender men but to also to other gendered bodies as well. I am a person of mixed class, meaning that I grew up lower middle class, but also had experiences that exposed me to the resources of more affluent classes. I am of course a black person—I come out of the African diaspora and I am descended from African slaves in the rural South in Georgia. That has been a very important aspect of my identity. I am also a Tibetan Buddhist teacher, and have had exposure to Tibetan communities, so the practice of tantra deeply impacts the way that I “show up.”

All this and more contribute to how I practice the dharma. One important practice for us is to consider intersectionality as it relates to how we [identify]. We use mindfulness practice to look at the different ways that we identify ourselves—as men or women, as cis or trans, as straight or queer or bisexual or pansexual—whichever are most appropriate for you to identify with. Just connect to that and develop a sense of how these identities influence your practice and how you react to your own practice and your sanghas.

It's also important to look at the power and privilege associated with these identities. Because of our dharma practice, we know that identity, based around ego, is all just an illusion, just emptiness. Ultimately, that is the truth, but relatively, these identities are very important for us. In our practice, we try to have an idea of the ultimate, but we also try to embrace and move through the relative. When we try to skip over an affinity to an identity, we create violence for both ourselves and others: no matter [which identity] we try to skip over, we're still being identified as certain things. We're operating unconsciously out of how these identities position us in social hierarchies.



The most privileged identity that I occupy is that of a man. Manhood is integrated with patriarchy, and patriarchy is a system of dominance, strength, and power over female bodies. We equate the female body with weakness. Patriarchy is the system that integrates masculinity into manhood, so that it is very difficult to separate the two. Much of my dharma practice has been to discern and kill these issues of power and dominance, because I identify as a man.

We also look at the identities that lack privilege. One of my oppressed identities is being racialized as a black person. Growing up within the racist white supremacist system has deeply brutalized my spiritual, mental, and physical well-being, and has been coupled with my identification as a queer person, which carries sexually based traumas comparable to the racially based traumas that I’ve had to work with in my practice. Being of mixed class—but mostly poor—has also affected the self-esteem that I have struggled with in my practice and my attempts to make meaning of suffering and to liberate myself from suffering.

All of these identities come together and create different expressions for us. I encourage you and challenge you to look [at the intersectional nature of your identity] to explore the ways in which power and privilege operate and manifest in your relationship to yourself and with those around you.

In my training and work with communities and individuals, I play the “name game.” We go through, discuss, and name our different identity locations. In Tibetan Buddhism, we say that our consciousness enters into the wombs of our mothers while we’re being conceived. Even at that point, as soon as we know—or rather as soon as our parents know that conception has happened—we begin to be gendered. Our parents wonder if we will be a boy or a girl. Once they find out, they begin gendering us further, naming us, collecting gendered clothes and toys for us, and so forth.



I say “identity locations,” because even in the womb we’re being put into certain identities. Before birth we’re put into gendered identities, and after we’re born we’re put further into that gender identities, into class, racial, religious, cultural, ethnic, and regional identities. We’re put in these identities, and eventually we reach a point where, hopefully, we’re able to be more aware of where we’ve been put, and how we can best liberate ourselves.

In this name game, we talk about how we’ve been put in certain places by our identities. We use our relationship with the dharma to explore how we can liberate ourselves from the places we’ve been put into. This is incredibly important because it helps us to understand how we impact those around us. We are in a day and age where we recognize systems of racialization—especially white supremacy—as failing to recognize, understand, and interrogate notions of race and race identity, because it’s so difficult to name and to see because it is so normalized.

Normalization is a tricky aspect in our practice, tricky to bring awareness to. Normalization happens when we view the world through our identity locations. One normalization that I struggle with is that I am normalized as a cisgender man. As a cis man, I view the world through the lens of dualities—I am placed in a position where I am comfortable because I am “correct” or “normal” because I am at home in my assigned gender and my assigned body. To work with that, I bring awareness to the whole situation and ask myself, “Are other people having an experience similar to mine? Are other people as comfortable in their bodies and in their genders?”

Through these questions, I wonder if I am centering my experience of gender—just as many white people center their experiences of racialization and whiteness—as the privilege of correctness and normalcy. I wonder if I can step out of the center in order to open up space for other experiences to enter into my reflection. Can I say that my experience is not the central experience, but that my experience is just one within this plethora of experiences that are happening around me in my community and in my sangha?



This is the value of [an intersectional perspective] and the name game. Radical presence is about being firmly seated in awareness of our intersectionality, actively and directly interrogating the ways in which systems of power encourage us to dominate other persons, other communities, or aspects of our own experiences.

Radical presence is about being authentic—being authentically in my body, with no intention to be correct, to dominate others, or to change something. Just being at home in my body, being okay with my body, and being in a place where I’m simply interacting with others around me as clearly and directly as possible. This is possible by becoming more aware of the ways in which I created violence for others, through my unawareness of the interplay of power and privilege in my intersectional identities. That is the essence of radical dharma. Radical dharma is radical presence.

As we move now to close our series, I want to thank you for joining us in these teachings and for allowing me to have space to be here in this capacity with you. It’s incredibly meaningful for me to be able to have this space, and to occupy my own intersectionality. It’s important for me to be able to discuss the difficulty many of us face by being in the world, and to discuss the practices most meaningful to me, like Tara and Medicine Buddha. These practices have been so important in helping me to develop a sense of confidence, courage, stability, and vulnerability in this world. I am grateful to be able to share these profound practices with hope, and I hope that you receive some benefit, some blessing from these practices.

Lastly, it’s important for me to share my own work around anti-oppression, antiracism, and intersectionality, especially in the form of radical dharma and radical presence. The insights of these teachings are crucial if we want to see inclusive sanghas in our country and in our world. The only way the Buddha’s teachings of community, love, and compassion are to be realized is if we realize these teachings for ourselves within our own experiences. In doing so, we’re able to manifest lovingkindness and compassion for all those around us.

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As we approach the end, we begin to make more aspirations or continue the aspirations created in the previous three sessions. Again, we begin by praying for the deep well-being, happiness, liberation, joy of all beings—that all beings have exactly what they need, and that all beings have an awareness of who and what they are, their imminent, innate, intuitive buddhanature.

We pray that all beings are held, loved, and seen, and that all beings are able to be fierce and fabulous, centered within their own intersectionality. We pray that they may be free from fear, and they may be free from alienation, free from marginalization—that all voices are able to be heard in the realm of dharma, that our teachers to continue to teach us, and that we continue to learn dharma.

We pray that our communities continue to be present for us, and that our gurus bless us, our yidams and deities guide us, and our dharma protectors create the causes and conditions for us to be here doing our practice. May we all be liberated. May we be free from any obstacle towards enlightenment. May we one day meet again, in this world or the world beyond this.

Thank you for your practice.