

## **Something Has to Change: Blacks in American Buddhism**

by Lawrence Pintak  
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Jan Willis was feeling euphoric. Sitting in the basement of a church in London's impoverished East End last summer, she looked around and realized that of the 40-odd people in the room, 31 were black.

"Black Buddhists!" she exclaims at the memory. "In 25 years in Buddhism, I had never been in such a sangha. I felt so high. It was great!"

For Willis and the handful of African-American Buddhist teachers now beginning to speak out, Buddhism in America has been a homogeneous world inhabited largely by upper-middle-class whites.

"There are a lot of black Buddhists who are in the closet. They just don't feel comfortable being part of the great white sangha," says Insight Meditation teacher Ralph Steele. "One of the most common phrases I hear from young black Buddhists when they do step out into the white Buddhist sangha is that they feel uncomfortable."

Through the eyes of African-American teachers like Shu Shin priest Joseph Jarman, white Buddhist America is largely blind to the existence of a black sangha. That was driven home to him at last year's Buddhism in America conference. "People there had never known there were African-American Buddhist priests and educators in this country; they just never appear," he recalls. "That was like opening another door."

For Willis, Steele and Jarman, their journeys as Buddhists have been part of a larger journey of emerging from the shadows of racial prejudice. They continue to deal with it, subtly and not so subtly, both in the greater society and within the American Buddhist world.

The world that Jan Willis experienced as a barefoot little girl playing in the dusty alleys of an Alabama mining camp in the mid-1950's was carefully divided into black and white. The border lay just a few blocks from where she lived, where the white cottages began. Forbidden territory. Stronghold of the Ku Klux Klan.

The Klan's shadow lay heavy over the hamlet where Willis was born and raised, a tangible presence even to a little girl. She saw firsthand the beatings and other punishments meted out to blacks who stepped out of line—those who committed transgressions like accidentally stepping on white-owned property while walking to school or the grocery store, with its "white" and "colored" water fountains. If she had any doubts about her place in the world, they were consumed in the flames of the cross the

Klan ignited on her front lawn one terrifying night, as Willis, her sister and her mother cowered in their home waiting to die.

The bomb they expected that night never came, but the Klan's constant threats and intimidation took their toll. "This unimaginable psychic terror crippled my self-esteem and the self-esteem of many black people," Willis would write years later in her book, *Dreaming Me: An African-American Woman's Spiritual Journey*. "I am witness to its scars."

In her search for healing, she would march with Martin Luther King Jr. in Birmingham, take part in the armed takeover of the Cornell student union building by militant blacks, and ultimately find her way to the hut of a gentle Tibetan monk in the hills outside Kathmandu. From a Buddhist perspective, it would be said that a combination of karma and auspicious coincidence brought Willis to the doorstep of Lama Yeshe Thubten, the teacher who would become her root guru. However, for most African-Americans, she believes, lack of money keeps the door to the dharma firmly shut.

"There are far too few people of color in Buddhist centers and retreats, in part because of the nature of where the retreats are and the fact that they cost money," says Willis, now one of the nation's leading Buddhist academics. "It's about class. Working class people can't take a month off to go on retreat.

"Buddhism is a commodity like everything else in the States," the Wesleyan University professor of religion adds. "Trungpa Rinpoche talked about 'spiritual materialism.' You can choose among hundreds of different traditions and lineages in the spiritual supermarket, and then you pay.

"That's part of why Soka Gakkai has had success," she says of the Japanese Pure Land organization, which counts many blacks among its members. "They're in the cities, they've tried so hard to bend over backwards to assimilate with American holidays and they have a simple ritual." The same, Willis continues, is true of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, the group she met with in Britain. But in the American sanghas of the more traditional Buddhist lineages, blacks are largely absent.

Ralph Steele has also begun to tackle prejudice and exclusion within the sangha.

"Diversity," he says, "is a magic word here in America, but no one has been tackling diversity on a cultural basis in Buddhism." The New Mexico-based teacher wrote a letter last year to 25 leading American Buddhists calling for a greater emphasis on inclusion. "Our sangha will end up being like the Christian Church-there will be a white Buddhist sangha, a black Buddhist sangha, an Hispanic Buddhist sangha-if we don't begin to do something about bringing Buddhism into the whole of an American sangha."

Spirituality runs in Ralph Steele's blood. The grandson of a minister, Steele's family has run a church for the past 150 years. A devout Christian upbringing is one of the things that Steele shares with Willis and Jarman-and the vast majority of African-Americans.

He also shares with them the experience of living as an outsider. Steele grew up on Pawleys Island, a then-isolated speck of land off the South Carolina coast populated by freed slaves from Sierra Leone. Steele grew up speaking Gullah, a Creole language formed from Elizabethan English and African dialects. He was 12 years old before he spoke English.

"It has always been a practicing Christian community," he said. "What that means is that when some Christians elsewhere started saying they were 'born again,' that never happened there because no one ever left Christ."

An Army brat, Steele's first exposure to the dharma came during his high school years in Japan, when he began to study martial arts. He remembers the day his instructor leaped up and kicked the rim of a basketball hoop.

"That's when my life began to change," he says. "Right then I knew that life was different from how you see things."

Like so many Vietnam veterans, Steele was nearly destroyed by the war. Along with physical and psychic scars, Steele brought home an addiction to heroin and a five-pack-a-day cigarette habit. He credits devotion to his martial arts teacher and to the discipline of martial arts practice with getting him through.

"It wasn't the martial arts itself," he says. "It was the teacher, the trust in the teacher." Back in the States, Steele enrolled at the University of California at Santa Cruz and signed up for a course on Buddhism-taught by a young black professor named Jan Willis. "I was pretty tough on him," Willis reports without elaboration.

Among the things he learned from her were techniques of meditation from the Tibetan tradition. "That helped, because I was simultaneously going down to Palo Alto VA hospital to deal with flashbacks," he says. "Meditation allowed me to begin to get some balance."

His Christian connection still strong, Steele would go on frequent meditation retreats at a Catholic hermitage in Big Sur, and, for a time, even considered joining the order. But his link with Buddhism was cemented when Willis went on sabbatical and Lama Thubten Yeshe came to teach in her place at UC-Santa Cruz. Not long after, the 16th Karmapa, head of the Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, came to town: "I went on a one-week retreat to prepare to meet him. When I went up to get his blessing, we had this exchange: I gave him a rosary and he gave me refuge."

Now a psychotherapist, Steele runs the Life Transition Institute in Santa Fe, a center built around the body-mind meditation practices pioneered by Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn. But Steele had several stops en route to New Mexico. He practiced briefly in Seattle, using Buddhist psychotherapy techniques, but he began to receive death threats and left for Portland, Oregon, where he spent many months with the renowned Tibetan teacher Kalu Rinpoche. In those days, the idea of teaching Buddhism never crossed Steele's mind. But then, nine

years ago at a Metta retreat with Joseph Goldstein, co-founder of the Insight Meditation Society (IMS), Steele looked around and realized that he and one Vietnamese practitioner were the only non-whites in the crowd. Steele recalls that he said, "Joseph, something has to change," to which Goldstein replied, "Yes, but for now just do the practice." Steele did. But eventually, during a retreat in Santa Fe, he told Jack Kornfield, another IMS co-founder, that he was ready to teach. "I saw myself starting to become a closet practitioner, and I didn't want to do that," he says now. And how does his Christian family back on Pawleys Island take his new role? "They all accept what I do. People walk their practice there. They have a deep understanding of what practice is."

Not everyone involved in mainstream Buddhism is sitting with hands folded in their laps when it comes to diversifying the sangha. Spirit Rock in Woodacre, California, for example, is opening a new center in the heart of Oakland. Ralph Steele sees such steps as positive, but not enough. "More people are speaking it than actually doing anything," he says sadly. Where efforts are being made, the transition is not always easy. Steele recalls a diversity training day at Spirit Rock when discussion turned to the idea of proactively seeking out Buddhists of color. "They got the message that their sangha wouldn't be the same and they got scared," he remembers. "The reaction was: 'I don't know if I could handle that kind of shift.' They had to sit with that and assimilate it."

So where are the black Buddhists, if not in the sanghas of the mainstream schools? Robina Courtin, an Australian nun who heads a dharma prison project, has a ready answer: "They are all in prison."

Joseph Jarman, whose own son is behind bars, reluctantly agrees. "The vast majority of them are." The reason, he says, is that only in prison do many African-Americans encounter the dharma. "In our culture, many people commit crimes because of psychological perspectives of the Devil or some negative energy overtaking them," says Jarman, who runs a martial arts dojo and leads a multicultural sangha in Brooklyn. "Buddhism doesn't have those perspectives, but instead offers tools for dealing with non-positive energy."

Jarman has firsthand knowledge of those tools. In the late 1950's, he served in a secret U.S. Army Special Forces unit in Southeast Asia. The experience was so traumatic that for a year after his return he was literally mute. "I was in a negative space—a super-negative space—filled with depression and completely alienated from society," he recalls. "I was going to a library daily and not speaking, and one day, the librarian, this old man, gave me this book and said it was the teachings of the Buddha."

Shortly after, as he began to recover at a Milwaukee hospital, Jarman met the Japanese priest who would become his teacher: "I said, 'Hello,' and he said, 'I give you ten thousand years and then I will kill you,' and I said, 'O.K.'"  
A month after that enigmatic encounter, Jarman, a fifth-degree black belt Aikido master, was invited to a karate demonstration at a nearby Buddhist temple. "And who is there, but this guy. After that, I began to go there once a week." The teachings, Jarman says, helped him to transform his image of himself and move beyond the anger and suffering to which

he had clung since Southeast Asia. He would go on to become a successful jazz musician, retiring in 1993 from the renowned Art Ensemble of Chicago.

In spite of the marginalization of blacks in the American sangha, Willis believes that Buddhism can offer the kinds of transformation that she-and Steele and Jarman-have experienced to other African-Americans.

"Buddhism offers a method for helping us improve our self-esteem, because the legacy of slavery and racism is so heavy," says Willis, who describes her autobiography as a narrative about self-esteem. "It's something people don't want to talk about but that all of us feel the weight of."

Willis came to the dharma at the height of the civil rights movement in the sixties, eventually choosing a fellowship to study Buddhism in Asia over an invitation to join the Black Panthers. Soon after she met Lama Yeshe, who offered the angry young activist an entirely new perspective on herself. "That's what Lama Yeshe took 15 years doing, transforming me. It took that long," she says with a laugh, then continues, imitating her teacher's broken English: "'You O.K. You mind pure. You quick intellect.' All the time, he'd tell people, 'Be strong like this woman.' I think we can all use that."

In particular, the black students who come to her angry, confused and uncomfortable in their own skins could benefit from this message of basic purity, she says. "I want them to know there are some methods out there for helping with self-confidence and self-esteem," says Willis. "I truly believe that Buddhism-especially tantric Buddhism, because visualization is so central to the method-is something that can help us re-envision ourselves, help us put down this heavy weight we carry around with us."

Willis calls herself a "Baptist Buddhist." Growing up in the revival meeting tents of the Old South, she watched in awe as friends and relatives were swept up in spiritual frenzy. "Quite simply," she wrote in *Dreaming Me*, "nothing scared me more than black women engaged, as good feeling Christians, in the activity known as 'shouting.'" But it was in just such a setting that the diminutive 14 year old "found Jesus" and was baptized in a water tank out behind the church. On that day, Willis first felt herself engulfed in spiritual love as friends and family reached out to welcome her into the bosom of the church.

"These hands were wondrous things. They were like the Holy opening its arms to me. This love, in a flash, dissolved all my fears. These hands took me completely beyond myself. They reached out with equanimity toward all," she writes in the book. "For the first time, I felt that I belonged to a family as big as humankind itself; and yet even bigger than that, taking in all creatures who breathed and cried and struggled and sang."

Years later, meditating on a Himalayan mountain, she would again touch that equanimity and recognize the common roots of love and compassion that link the Christianity into which she was born and the Buddhism she had embraced. Still, it was with some trepidation that she returned to Alabama with her new-found beliefs, only to find her

conviction that Buddhist meditation had much to offer African-Americans confirmed by none other than the pastor of the church where her father served as deacon.

"We Baptists could use some of these methods," she recalls him declaring. "It's one thing to say, 'Love thy neighbor.' It's a whole 'nother thing to do it." That, she says, holds true even for Buddhists: "I can't even love myself! So we're talking about transforming prejudices about others and about ourselves." Willis and colleague Marlise Bosch, a women's counselor in the Netherlands, are currently at work on a booklet containing a series of visualizations and exercises designed to help American Buddhists confront-and go beyond-their innate prejudices.

"The fear is there, and for any human being in this country to say they don't have any issues with regard to another culture is absurd," says Ralph Steele, who looks forward to teaching the exercises. "But when you sit in a room and face off with other human beings, stuff is going to come up."

The foundation of Willis' booklet was laid at a series of workshops she held at the Vajrapani Institute, in which participants used drawings, visualizations and movement exercises to begin to recognize how they viewed those around them. "We started with awareness of our own prejudices, writing lists of what we thought the first time we saw someone in a wheelchair, a child with Down's Syndrome, an old person driving," Willis recalls. "Not one minute had gone by before the words discomfort, frustration, mistrust, anger and hatred came up."

In her early days in India, several lamas told Willis that she had been Tibetan in a past life. The patch of white in her hair, she was told, was a mark Tibet's dharma king, Trisong Detsen, conferred on those who had helped construct the great monastery at Samten. If that were true, she wondered, why was she reborn in the body of an African-American woman? Willis now thinks she has the answer.

"Can you think of two more oppressed groups: to be a black woman in the Jim Crow South?" she asks with a laugh. "I figured I was supposed to do something with this life, I had no idea it was going to be this: developing meditations on transforming prejudice. But that upbringing made sure I was familiar with it."

Earlier this year, Joseph Jarman sat in meditation beneath the Bodhi Tree, the site of the Buddha's enlightenment. It had been more than 40 years since he had first been exposed to the basic ideas of Buddhism. Now he was deep in a spiritual experience that he would forever treasure.

"I felt like I was floating," he recalls. "Even though I have meditated for 30 years, I never had that feeling. The energy was just like a barrel of water being poured down on you. It's the most positive energy I have ever felt." But there was something else about his visit to Bodhgaya that deeply struck the 63-year-old Chicago native: it was the energy of equality.

"People from all over the world come there and the most amazing thing was that every level of the human condition was right there without criticism and without conflict," he says. In earlier travels abroad, the acceptance that Jarman experienced highlighted the pervasive nature of prejudice among Buddhists in his native land. He had braced himself to encounter the same prejudice when he traveled to Japan in 1990 to be ordained at the main temple of his lineage in Kyoto. "I was on edge in the beginning, looking to see if they were going to say, 'This black guy is here, we better not eat with him.' But they all accepted me as one of them."

Still, neither Jarman nor the other black teachers I spoke to have any illusions that Buddhists elsewhere are free of prejudice. They know it's something Buddhism has struggled with since its earliest days. "The Buddha did address that, but he addressed it on the level of class differences," observes Steele, who encountered prejudice among Buddhists in Thailand and Burma during his year of study there. "Here, it is culture-the whites forgetting the issue of privilege-and that delusion causes things to go spinning off into unhealthy thinking such as racism. It's one culture interfering with another and that brings up lots of fear."

"We are all prejudiced," agrees Jan Willis. "We are all forming these judgments. In Buddhist psychology we know about this, so let's do what we do best at Buddhist centers: let's do some of these meditations that are specifically geared toward helping us recognize-become mindful of-prejudices and transform them. I want us to feel comfortable in our own skin. I think that's a starting place. Then we can see we're all human beings, and then maybe we can stand in each other's shoes," she says. The irony that practitioners who are striving to see beyond dualism find themselves viewing their own sangha in terms of black and white is not lost on the trio.

"We gotta crawl before we can walk," says Ralph Steele. "The dualism has to be looked at. You can't say, 'It's not there.' It's like looking at the four noble truths. There's dissatisfaction and the cause of it, how to stop it and the skills of addressing it. The sangha in America is sitting under the Bodhi Tree to be awakened on this issue, and it's going to have to happen on all different levels."

There is also, the three teachers agree, the issue of what-and how-to teach would-be American Buddhists, particularly those from among the African-American and other minority communities. Steele says he chose to concentrate on Theravada Buddhism-even though he studied under many revered Tibetan lamas-in part because of its simplicity. "It's like the Apple computer," he says. "User friendly."

Willis argues that communicating the practice in a digestible form is only part of making it accessible to African-Americans and other people of color. "One part of accessibility is making it comprehensible. One part is making it affordable. One part is making the centers in places where people can get to them. One is developing things that don't require a month-long retreat.

"There have to be accommodations made. Otherwise it's going to remain a homogeneous group of people with means and free time," Willis warns. "And I think there is more to the message of Buddhism than that."

Adds Steele: "I would love to sit in a retreat that is actually diversified. Some people say it will happen. I agree, but I want to push it a little quicker so it can happen in this lifetime." ~