

# Exploring Bias, Racism, and Diversity

## Baltimore Shambhala Meditation Center

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By Linda Gail Francis

“Bias is a habit,” said Acharya Gaylon Ferguson, as he led a mindfulness meditation exercise during the Going Beyond Bias conference held by the Active Compassion group at the Baltimore Shambhala Center last March. (Active Compassion is a group that explores social engagement and the Shambhala teachings.)

The conference, led by Acharya Ferguson and Acharya Arawana Hayashi, explored bias, racism, and diversity, and offered practices designed to infuse clarity and gentleness into a discussion that is often accompanied by a great deal of fear, aggression, and pain.

Efforts to publicize the conference in the Shambhala community and in a variety of locations around Baltimore—especially in neighborhoods of people of color—attracted many first-time visitors to the center. Eighty-plus people of different races, age groups, sexual orientation, religion, and economic situations gathered to explore biases—their own and others’. One woman wanted to explore the possibility of “white allies” on the path of diversity; another expressed feelings of isolation as the only person of color in her Buddhist sangha; another participant was curious and concerned about the intersection of environmental justice with social justice. Several participants expressed the desire to bring mindfulness meditation and dharma teachings to those who might not come to a Shambhala center.

The acharya produced a humorous and gentle atmosphere and helped participants see how contemplative exercises like mindfulness, sitting meditation, meditation in action, and contemplations can help people go beyond bias and engage in compassionate action. Acharya Hayashi presented a series of formats for mindfully discussing topics of individual and shared interest. Participants worked within formats ranging from deep listening dyads to broader conversations where individuals could enter and leave discussion depending on their interests. During lunch breaks we enjoyed ethnic meals and lively engaging conversation.

The whole weekend was a container for fearless exploration, trust, and gentleness. Many fresh realizations resulted. La Sarmiento was struck by the idea that white people are willing to work with their own power and privilege. “It’s heartening to know that there are white allies out there willing to act rather than just talk about it all the time,” she stated. Andrea Williams, from the Philadelphia Shambhala Center, noticed how totally different people often share the same experiences. Before coming to the program, Charles Henry was concerned that it would be a pity party. “I’m very happy to say that this program went way beyond a catalog of ills,” he said, “and is coming to the next steps [of] engaging, leaning into the problem.”

Over the years, Margo Kelly has been to many anti-racism programs with more emphasis on power dynamics and “isms.” She said the Going Beyond Bias program challenged her to approach the subject in a different way. “Personal bias is front and center,” she added.

“For some years now the Active Compassion group in Baltimore has been meeting and moving forward on the vitally important paths of personal and social transformation,” said Acharya Ferguson. “Our weekend was a part of that ongoing effort. On the golden ground of basic goodness, mindfulness, and bodhichitta, we explored differences of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation, opening to both anguish and pain as well as the healing waters of compassion. We made some inspiring steps in beginning to listen to each other.”

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