***Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation*. By Rev. angel Kyodo Williams, Lama Rod Owens, with Jasmine Syedullah, PhD.**

**Thesis**

Radical Dharma challenges Buddhism in America to recognize racism at an individual and societal level as well as within Buddhist communities, and to bring about necessary change. The authors make a case for the necessity of interrogating racism and working toward transformative social change as integral to the work of liberation. Personal and social liberation are interwoven throughout the book. The authors observe that although Buddhism provides profoundly liberating teachings and practices to root out destructive behaviors and thought processes, white Western dharma communities have not utilized these resources to examine destructive systems in American society. The book is designed to begin conversations to build new communities.

**Summary[[1]](#footnote-1)**

The early chapters describe the personal struggles and motivations that led each of the three authors to make their journey to Buddhism, as marginalized people in American society, because of their race and sexual orientation. The three authors are African American and identify as queer. Rev. angel Kyodo Williams is an ordained Zen teacher (sensei) and activist, Lama Rod Owens is a teacher in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition and an activist, and Dr. Jasmine Syedullah is a Buddhist practitioner and the student of Rev. angel; at the time of writing the book she was a University of California President’s Postdoctoral Fellow.

Buddhism, in many ways, appealed to each of the authors because it provided them tools to examine their experiences and their suffering as marginalized people; it was not based on a set of beliefs that one was required to adopt but practices intended to liberate from all the constructs we harbor, including our identity. These tools helped them to see the norms that were being imposed on them by white society and the rejection they experienced for not adhering to those norms. Even the iconography of Tibetan Buddhism, in the case of Lama Rod, was welcoming, as he viewed the deities of uncertain gender as he struggled with his own gender identity. Rev angel discusses the case of B.R. Ambedkar, Gandhi’s contemporary, who framed the constitution of India as it was emerging from colonial rule to form an independent nation. Ambedkar was born a Dalit (untouchable) and Rev angel sees a correspondence between the Indian caste system and racism in America. Ambedkar left Hinduism because of the caste system and embraced Buddhism because of the teachings of openness and acceptance of anyone as they are. As Rev angel puts it, the teaching and feeling space of Buddhism is “spacious and allowing of who you are as you are. … Difference fits.” (46)

Despite this spaciousness and acceptance of difference inherent in Buddhist teachings, the authors confront the ways in which American Buddhism has, largely unconsciously, adapted to white culture and the inherent beliefs and systems in white society, which include racism. The book includes conversations with each other and members of an audience consisting of both white and BIPOC. As one participant observes, there is no recognition in white sanghas that “…one’s whiteness forms a lens through which we read the teachings.” (163) They point to the focus on meditation in Western Buddhism, and emphasis on developing their sanghas in non-relational ways, as a function of whiteness with its hyper-individualism and disconnection from others. Another participant notes the African and traditional spiritual Caribbean practices that Black people bring to their Buddhist practice and wonders how Buddhist practice will look in a few decades with those traditions included in American Buddhist communities. The obsession with maintaining traditional authenticity that some white sanghas exhibit, mitigates against incorporation of the heritages of BIPOC, even though Buddhism has successfully adapted other traditions as it has moved into different cultures throughout its history.

The conversations reveal deepening inquiry into the anger, discomfort and suffering within themselves as well as in the community and in society, and the need for healing on all those levels. As articulated by Lama Rod, “When I am in tune to my discomfort, I am less likely to avoid your discomfort.” (71) They discuss the importance of developing beloved communities where people support each other in healing, recognizing that “there’s healing in what we bring from our traditions” as people of color. They should not be required to relinquish their power, their own wisdom and truth in order to belong to a community dominated by white ways of seeing and being.

An important insight discussed in the book is that white people suffer from their own racism. Generally, in American society, the focus is only on healing that needs to be done on behalf of people of color. In addition to the obvious trauma experienced by people of color, the authors shine a spotlight on “The suffering of whiteness. The trauma of whiteness.” Rev angel believes that generations of white people learning to live with the brutality of slavery, post-slavery lynchings, Jim Crow laws, down to modern-day mass incarceration and grinding poverty have required them to uproot and replace compassion for other beings with indifference, shielded by a cloak of ignorance. “…For generation upon generation, white America has traded its humanity for privilege.” (103). Radical Dharma also recognizes that it is not only white people who uphold white privilege, but others without white skin as well, who may not even recognize the suffering they are experiencing as a result.

All three authors discuss the challenge of anger in the face of discrimination and the systems that perpetuate the dominant culture at the expense of those at the bottom of the hierarchy. Anger is often the fuel that drives activists. The antidote is to be motivated by love, perhaps fierce love, as articulated in Rev. angel’s Warrior-Spirit Prayer of Awakening. Lama Rod observes “When I practice lovingkindness, I need to remember that I am cared for. I need to remember that my feelings of being lonely, isolated, and unlovable are essentially the illusions perpetuated by my ego fixation. When I am practicing, I wish to experience the deepest well-being and happiness, and gradually I began wishing that others experience the same thing.” (71)

Rev. angel discusses her Theory of Transformative Social Change. She has established a center bearing this name, and the website for the Center states that it is “…dedicated to bridging the inner and outer lives of social change agents, activists and allies to support a more effective, more sustainable movement of social justice for all.” ( http://center.transformativechange.org/about-us/) Transformative Social Change has roots in Liberation Spirituality but is not limited to spirituality and not limited to a particular religious tradition. She does consider the spiritual aspect to be important, because it is comfortable with paradox, whereas many political movements are not. She believes that “…to live in a space of transformative change is to engender greater and greater comfort with paradox.” (101)

The final chapter of the book includes a discussion on prophetic wisdom. Black prophetic fire is a cornerstone of Black spirituality. The steady, clear mind cultivated through Buddhist practice becomes “…the container in which to contemplate the questions posed by W.E.B. Du Boise, paraphrased by Cornel West, that prophets must search for responses to ceaselessly: “How does integrity face oppression? What shall honesty do in the face of deception? What does decency do in the face of insult? And how does virtue meet brute force?” (195-196)

**Methods of Practice**

The book moves from personal quests for liberation to the connection between personal and collective-movement liberation. It calls for a liberation that is rooted in interconnectedness. One of the threads running through the book is the connection between inner change and social change. Therefore, the methods of practice generally advocated for inner change are also advocated for social change:

Interrogation. This is one of the great strengths of Buddhism – the unflinching, honest interrogation of what is occurring within that is causing suffering. It is one of the chief tools advocated in Radical Dharma to examine and dismantle the causes of suffering at a societal level as well. There is a need for all people to see the dharma communities as places of liberation and this involves interrogation of uncomfortable issues. The authors see “refuge” as “…a place to meet discomfort in a protected environment.” (170)

Facing and Transforming Anger. The authors note the tendency of social activists to be fueled by anger. As social activists themselves, they repeatedly note the suffering caused by anger and the need to transform it to fierce love.

Love and Interconnectedness. Repeatedly, the authors, Lama Rod in particular, come back to love and the recognition of our interconnectedness as the key method to proceed toward liberation both personal and societal. They appeal to BIPOC to appreciate the willingness of white people to engage. “Love holds people in their humanity, distinguishing disease from host.” (194)

**Strengths/limitations**

Radical Dharma, as its title suggests, is a call to action. It provides a framework which calls for deep interrogation of the underlying assumptions of white culture embedded in American Buddhism, and the issues and tools to develop Buddhism in America in ways that recognize, heal and liberate the great multiplicity of people now residing in America. By acknowledging the fundamental teaching of interconnectedness of all beings in Buddhism, Radical Dharma is able to take a more holistic view of the trauma and suffering not only of BIPOC but also whites who have compromised their humanity by upholding systems of oppression and devaluing BIPOC. This is an important view which secular treatments of white privilege do not address. The book does not provide explicit formulations for personal and social liberation, as it is intended for a wide audience of Buddhists from various traditions. Some sections of the book use intellectual rhetoric about racism and other systems of oppression which may appeal to some but not to others.

1. As explained in the book, “We capitalize the B in Black while leaving the w in white lowercase to call up the peculiar historic violence of Black racial formation.” (p. xxxii) This review will follow the same style convention. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)