

## Article

# Black Buddhists and the Body: New Approaches to Socially Engaged Buddhism

Rima Vesely-Flad

Philosophy Department, Warren Wilson College, Swannanoa, NC 28778, USA; rvesely@warren-wilson.edu

Received: 24 August 2017; Accepted: 9 October 2017; Published: 31 October 2017

**Abstract:** This article deconstructs how Buddhist practitioners of African descent acknowledge racism and challenge predominantly white, affluent Buddhist *sanghas* that embrace the tenets of Socially Engaged Buddhism. It argues that practitioners of African descent directly acknowledge the social constructs of the black body that result in violent practices such as police brutality and disproportionate black incarceration. To support this argument, I rely on primary texts published by Socially Engaged Buddhists. The results conclude that black Buddhists not only highlight the suffering wrought by racism in the West, they also challenge white *sangha* members to reckon with the depth of racism in society and in their *sanghas*. I conclude that black Buddhists, in their acknowledgement of the socially constructed meanings of the black body, offer an important challenge to Socially Engaged Buddhism.

**Keywords:** black; Socially Engaged Buddhism; racism

## 1. Introduction

Socially Engaged Buddhists identify social action as an expression of Buddhist spirituality and teachings. Numerous texts published over the past thirty years illuminate case studies and figures in the Sarvodaya Shramadana Sangamaya community in Sri Lanka, the environmental projects in Thailand, and the anti-war movements that have emerged in Cambodia, Vietnam, and Tibet. In the West, Socially Engaged Buddhists have committed to human rights and environmental justice from the position of Buddhist ethics. Yet, due to the history of genocide, enslavement, segregation, and institutional racism against people of African descent in the West, it is important to address how race and racism function in Buddhist communities that are committed to social action. This article deconstructs how Buddhist practitioners of African descent acknowledge racism and challenge predominantly white, affluent Buddhist *sanghas* that embrace the tenets of Socially Engaged Buddhism. It argues that practitioners of African descent directly acknowledge the social constructs of the black body that result in violent practices such as police brutality and disproportionate black incarceration. Buddhist practitioners of African descent also consistently emphasize the importance of embracing queer identity within Buddhist practice. Thus, this article argues, black Buddhists are challenging the parameters of Socially Engaged Buddhism in important ways: black Buddhists insist that particular suffering results from the ways in which the minds of black people are conditioned in white supremacist societies. Black Buddhists also challenge white practitioners to reckon with white privilege, cultural homogeneity, and microaggressions within *sanghas*. In short, black Buddhists argue, Socially Engaged Buddhists must reckon with the social meanings of racialized bodies.

### 1.1. What Is Socially Engaged Buddhism? An Overview

“Engaged Buddhism is an effort to express the *ideals* of Buddhism—nonviolence, loving-kindness, and the rest—in practical action,” writes Sallie B. King (King 2009).

Several prominent Eastern Buddhist leaders argue that the Buddha taught an end to suffering that is distinctly located in ethical actions, and that economic, political, and environmental conditions lead to great suffering. Thus, Buddhist leaders must ethically address the social factors that perpetuate war, violence, and repression that lead to great psychological and physical pain. Indeed, this is the message of the most prominent spiritual and political leaders of predominantly Buddhist countries in the East. The head of the Tibetan government, the Dalai Lama, states in *Freedom in Exile* that

“Religion and politics do mix and both agree that it is the clear duty of religion to serve humanity, that it must not ignore reality. It is not sufficient for religious people to be involved with prayer. Rather, they are morally obliged to contribute all they can to solving the world’s problems” (Lama 1990)

Indeed, the Dalai Lama has witnessed atrocities committed by the Chinese government against the people of Tibet since the Chinese invasion in 1950. In his writings and speeches, the Dalai Lama describes “arrests without justification, beatings and torture, prison sentences and even execution by trial [that] characterise the behaviour of the Chinese authorities.”<sup>1</sup>

For the Dalai Lama, the goal of communist economic prosperity is not, by itself, a worthy goal: he believes that religious sentiment and practice are the foundations for harmony, and that it is religious conviction, not economic prosperity, that will lead to widespread non-violence and peace.<sup>2</sup> The tenets of Buddhism and the practice of meditation foster compassion and goodwill, the best of human beings. Thus, contemplative practice and prayer are inseparable from creating social conditions in which all sentient beings can thrive. The Dalai Lama identifies the Bodhisattva ideal as a path to helping all sentient beings.

According to Buddhist thought, a Bodhisattva is someone on a path to Buddhahood who dedicates themselves entirely to helping all other sentient beings towards release from suffering. The word Bodhisattva can best be understood by translating the *Bodhi* and *Sattva* separately: *Bodhi* means the understanding or wisdom of the ultimate nature of reality, and a *Sattva* is someone who is motivated by universal compassion. The Bodhisattva ideal is thus the aspiration to practise infinite compassion with infinite wisdom.<sup>3</sup>

The Dalai Lama emphasizes that it is not just sentient beings, but also nature that thrives in genuine Buddhist practice. Indeed, Socially Engaged Buddhists state that as all sentient beings live in nature, it is important to protect earthly resources. This is a similar approach to Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, who is credited with coining the term “Socially Engaged Buddhism” and who engages social and environmental issues through adaptations of Zen teachings.<sup>4</sup>

In his teachings on how to relate to the increasingly busy, chaotic social world and to destruction of the earth, Nhat Hanh writes simply: “Many of us become sick because we’re alienated from our body and from the body of the Earth. So the practice is to go home to Mother Earth to get the healing and the nourishment we so desperately need” (Hanh 2013). Nhat Hanh continues:

<sup>1</sup> Ibid, pp. 124, 265. He describes methods of torture such as “crucifixion, vivisection, disemboweling and dismemberment of victims [as] commonplace.” He notes that, as of 1990, “almost one and a quarter million Tibetans lost their lives from starvation, execution, torture, and suicide, and tens of thousands lingered in prison camps...” (Ibid, p. 149). Furthermore, China continues to produce nuclear weaponry in Tibet and to dump nuclear waste (some of it received from other countries) in Tibetan rural areas, causing environmental destruction and illnesses.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, pp. 227, 268.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, pp. 204–5.

<sup>4</sup> “The Order of Interbeing, Tiep Hien in Vietnamese, is a community of monastics and lay people who have committed to living their lives in accord with the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings, a distillation of the Bodhisattva (Enlightened Being) teachings of Mahayana Buddhism. Established by Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh in Saigon in 1966, the Order of Interbeing was founded in the Linji tradition of Buddhist meditative practice and emphasizes the four spirits: non-attachment from views, direct experimentation on the nature of interdependent origination through meditation, appropriateness, and skillful means.” See (Thich Nhat Hanh Foundation n.d.). Nhat Hanh is concerned with appealing to Western audiences; he founded the Order of Interbeing (1966) and the Unified Buddhist Church (1968) and later Plum Village, his monastic order in France.

Unless we restore the Earth's balance, we will continue to cause a lot of destruction and it will be difficult for life on Earth to continue. We need to realize that the conditions that will help to restore the necessary balance don't come from outside us; they come from inside us, from our own mindfulness, our own level of awareness. Our own awakened consciousness is what can heal the earth.<sup>5</sup>

Nhat Hanh's approach to environmental healing is extended to social dynamics. As an anti-war activist who fled Vietnam during the Vietnam War, he advocates for an awakened consciousness that finds peace first in oneself and thereafter in peace movements. Nhat Hanh writes:

Can the peace movement talk in loving speech, showing the way for peace. I think that will depend on whether the people in the peace movement can be peace. Because without being peace, we cannot do anything for peace . . . The peace movement is filled with anger and hatred. It cannot fulfill the path we expect from them. A fresh way of being peace, of doing peace is needed. (Hanh 1996)

Thich Nhat Hanh's approach to peacemaking in situations of conflict and war echoes the approach of The Dalai Lama. Indeed, both teachers exhibit an inner stability founded upon meditation practice and Buddhist teachings. They forge connections between silence, ritual, and working towards a more humane and just world. At the same time, both leaders write from a social heritage that does not acknowledge oppression based on race, nor do they acknowledge social oppression based on gender and sexuality. There is a lack of acknowledgement of oppression based on *embodied identity*. Similar approaches to Socially Engaged Buddhism can be seen in predominantly white, affluent Buddhist communities that have emerged in the West since the 1970s.

### 1.2. White Western Buddhists and Socially Engaged Buddhism

In highly racialized Western contexts, especially the United States, Buddhist practitioners of varying racial identities take different approaches to Socially Engaged Buddhism. Thus, it is important to trace the evolution of Buddhism amongst white practitioners, distinct from Asian immigrant communities settled in the West and practitioners of African descent. The three main lineages in Buddhism—Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana—are primarily known as Vipassana or Insight, Zen, and Tibetan Buddhism in the West, respectively. Insight meditation was first transmitted through white, Jewish practitioners who studied in India and Southeast Asia with lay people and monastics. These teachings were then transmitted through established meditation centers on the East and West Coast. Zen teachings, as well as Tibetan rituals, were primarily transmitted through immigrant Korean, Chinese, Japanese, and Tibetan teachers who settled in the United States. The teachings primarily reached white, affluent communities, which continue to be largely homogenous. As Socially Engaged Buddhism evolved, predominantly white *sangha* members sought to live out their contemplative practices with a commitment to alleviating social problems.

One of the foremost white teachers of Socially Engaged Buddhism is Bernie Glassman, author of *Instructions to the Cook: A Zen Master's Lessons in Living a Life that Matters*. In his reflections, Glassman chronicles his commitment to alleviating joblessness and homelessness in the predominantly black city of Yonkers, New York. He and fellow community members founded a bakery to provide employment and purchased buildings to provide housing, childcare, and community centers. He reflects briefly on being a visible white leader in predominantly black communities:

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 56.

When I went to talk to Afro-American coalitions, for example, I was always introduced as “Bernie, the guy who makes all those great cakes.” Then we could talk about politics and housing strategy and so on. I was still white, but I was more accepted because of my role in the bakery they all loved (Glassman and Fields 1996).

Glassman states that meditation practice fueled his commitment to “right livelihood,” the fourth rung on the Noble Eightfold Path. Meditation practice fosters doubt, faith, and determination, “ingredients” that are “like air, water, and heat.”<sup>6</sup> From this foundational practice of clear seeing without judgment, one is able to move into a life of social action. In what Glassman calls the “Five Courses,” he delineates “Recipes for Social Change” in the fourth course. “... if I mean starving people, I first give them food. That’s where they are. If I were hungry, I’d want to eat first. If I were homeless and cold, I’d want shelter... The point is to identify with the people you’re working with, in order to discover their needs.”<sup>7</sup>

Glassman writes about his approach to Socially Engaged Buddhism from the perspective of a white, Jewish man who was able to access enough resources to purchase property, start a business, and network with wealthy entrepreneurs throughout the country. In recounting the ups and downs of initiating a bakery to counter homelessness and joblessness, Glassman writes:

... it’s in the nature of form to exclude other forms. As soon as you create something, you create a boundary. No matter how deep our sense of egolessness is, or how far we can extend our sense of interconnectedness, we still feel some kind of separation. And the practice, the path, in trying to eliminate that boundary, then creates a new one. The trick, I think, is to be aware of this so that you can either expand the boundary or perhaps create another way to take care of the aspect that has been left out.<sup>8</sup>

Boundaries exist. Glassman recognizes, even briefly, the social boundary of skin color and that he is received as a white “guy,” a minority, in a predominantly black community. It is important to be self-aware of racial constructs and to acknowledge pervasive racial boundaries.

Yet acknowledging differences in suffering, based on racialized constructs of the body, is not central to Buddhist teachings and interpretations. Sallie King, a white, female author of the text *Socially Engaged Buddhism*, argues that Socially Engaged Buddhism is “an expression” of Buddhist spirituality (King 2009, p. 1). Buddhism has always been engaged in the world, King argues, noting not only the example of contemporary leaders, but the Buddha himself, who taught interpersonal and social ethics as part of the Noble Eightfold Path. Buddhist teachings can thus be applied to situations of war, deforestation, poverty, and exile. In contexts of such intense suffering, King describes how teachings on “No Self” are interpreted:

We have no self; we have no fixed and immutable “nature.” We have ourselves created our own characteristic patterns of feeling and behaving through our responses to the events of our lives, until they have become habitual. These habitual patterns are what we call our “selves” or our “natures.” The important point is that they can be transformed by intentional and sustained effort. In many ways, this is the main point of Buddhist practice: we are responsible for our own inner life; we can and should shape it intelligently for our own well-being and that of others.<sup>9</sup>

King’s interpretation of “No Self” is echoed throughout most texts on Socially Engaged Buddhism. Humans suffer due to defilements of the mind; there is no fixed nature within human beings; we must

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 51.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 93.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 31.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 47.

overcome our suffering and liberate our minds, by engaging in concentration practices and ethical social commitments.

Yet this analysis of Socially Engaged Buddhism does not take into account how racialized bodies have been constructed and degraded in the West. For practitioners of color, teachings on “No Self” can often be interpreted as diminishing the corrosive experience of racism that has resulted in pervasive anguish and suffering. To describe “No Self” to people who have been historically dehumanized is often received as dismissing the weight of colonialism, genocide, slavery, and systemic racism that have been justified by interpretations of the body. Thus, black dharma teachers recognize that, to engage people of African descent, the teachings must be communicated in such a way that the reality of the body in society is acknowledged, and the truth of “No Self” is deconstructed and contemplated.

### *1.3. Black Buddhists and the Body: Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Social Movements*

Yet “No Self” is not all that we are, write Buddhist practitioners of African descent. The temporal, limited world must be reckoned with, even as Buddhist practitioners aspire towards enlightenment. Teachings of “No Self” are core to Buddhist philosophy, but contemporary interpretations can also perpetuate a broad social denial of the weight of oppression that results from racialized embodiment. The Soto Zen teacher Zenju Earthlyn Manuel states that the teachings of “No Self” that are often used to deny differences and suffering that arise from racism. Manuel writes:

Some [Buddhist practitioners] said, “We are delusional; there is no self.” Others said “We are attached to some idea of ourselves.” If I could “just let go of being this or that, my life would be freed from pain.” I thought for a time that I was holding on to my identity too tightly. Perhaps, I thought, if I “empty” my mind the pain in my heart will dissolve. What I found is that flat, simplified, diluted ideas could not shake me from my pain. I needed to bring the validity of my unique, individual, and collective background to the practice of Dharma. “I am not invisible!” I wanted to shout.

Although my teachers taught us the absolute truths of Zen practice, they seemed to negate identity without considering the implications that identity can have for oppressed groups of people. The critique of identity overlooks the emotional, empowering, and positive effects of identity on those who are socially and politically objectified (Manuel 2015).<sup>10</sup>

Manuel points to the black radical activists of the Civil Rights and Pan-African movements as cultural forebears who helped to create a positive social identity for her and other people of African descent. Indeed, Manuel and other dharma teachers of African descent recognize that there is lived experience that forges personal identity, and that personal identity is inevitably linked to social identity.

... simply knowing race to be constructed or an illusion does nothing to change the mind saturated with hatred. To know that there are many ways to live sexually, with or without a prescribed gender, does not affect the extent to which one might be tortured or killed for doing so. Hatred remains potent whether directed at a construct, an illusion, or at the reality of others. Therefore, identity should not be dismissed in our efforts towards spiritual awakening. On the contrary, identity is to be explored on the path of awakening. Identity is not merely of a political nature; it is inclusive of our essential nature when stripped of distortion. In other words, identity is not the problem, but the distortions we bring to it are.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> (Manuel 2015, pp. 17–18).

Manuel writes further, on page 47, that “Those who shed light on particular mistreatments become the focus, rather than the mistreatment itself. It is quite possible for the majority of the community to stand aloof and watch, as if they are not affected by the mistreatment. This kind of experience can become the source of longstanding divisiveness and isolation.”

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, pp. 7–8.

The primary way that humans relate to other human beings is through the embodiment and social identity, including constructed identity. And yet, teachings on ultimate, formless reality facilitate liberation of the mind. Manuel quotes Dogen, founder of the Soto Zen tradition:

To study the Buddha way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things. When actualized by myriad things, your body and mind as well as the bodies and minds of others drop away. No trace of realization remains, and this no-trace continues endlessly. (Aitken and Tanahashi n.d.)<sup>12</sup>

In short, the mind can be free of oppressive pain even if the self is indeed a construct. There is nothing substantial or inherent in the self; thus, oppressive social messages need not be internalized. Indeed, if through meditation black practitioners deconstruct the damaging messages of inferiority and degradation that have been perpetuated in white supremacist environments, practitioners can see through the falseness of such narratives, and reject them.

To deconstruct social- and self-hatred, then, is to bring a critical lens to the dominant culture, which is often perpetuated in Buddhist *sanghas*. Manuel writes poignantly:

I have experienced awakening in many worlds, and across those worlds my awakening came within racist, sexist, and homophobic environments. This is important to note. Awakening does not come in a blind, euphoric, or empty world. (Manuel 2015, p. 7.)

For Manuel, investigation of the mind in a silent retreat setting allowed for an acknowledgement of distorted social and personal mental formations. She draws upon teachings in the *Dhammapada*: “Mind precedes all mental states/Mind is their chief; they are all mind-wrought.”<sup>13</sup> The process of investigating her own mind facilitates investigating of “the mental state of our whole society.”<sup>14</sup> The investigation must include, then, acknowledging “the body and the denigration of certain types of bodies in the world.”<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, liberation is twofold: it is recognition of the self and it is embrace of *anatta*: “No Self.” It is, as Manuel states, an engagement with “all of what we are—both the relative and the absolute, the physical and the formless.”<sup>16</sup> It is the embodied interrelationship with emptiness, formlessness, and mental vastness that facilitates the depth of liberation facilitated by Buddhist teachings and practice.

Manuel’s interpretation of the self and “No Self”—the relative and the absolute—is echoed by Rev. Angel Kyodo Williams and Lama Rod Owens, two Buddhist teachers of African descent. In their book *Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation* with Dr. Jasmine Syedullah, Williams and Owens speak directly to the paradox of embracing embodiment and formlessness as a path to liberation. Williams elaborates on the four Bodhisattva vows and her personal embodiment as a black, queer woman:

Beings are numberless; I vow to save them all.  
Desires are inexhaustible; I vow to put an end to them.  
The truth is boundless; I vow to perceive it.  
Liberation is unattainable; I vow to attain it.<sup>17</sup>

Williams uses these Zen paradoxes to reflect upon her childhood and early adulthood. In expanding upon the last precept, she recognizes the contradictions in her social identity as well as the freedom expressed in dharma practice:

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.thezensite.com/ZenTeachings/Dogen\\_Teachings/GenjoKoan\\_Aitken.htm](http://www.thezensite.com/ZenTeachings/Dogen_Teachings/GenjoKoan_Aitken.htm).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 24.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 25.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 26

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in (Williams et al. 2016, pp. 26–35).



Black, white, mixed, Cherokee, Blackfoot. High yellow and sweet berry Black. The Catholic that never was. The Baptist, agnostic, heathen, not Buddhist but Zen priest. Poster child modeling pain, foreigner in my own land. Being in the territory doesn't make you belong. Every time I tried to stay within the lines, they ran over me, so I chose the borderlands and left the divisions behind . . . the dharma that I would come to taught me everything and the path of liberation is paved with pain and joy but always near when you know you're just looking to return to you and have to leave the home of Me behind.<sup>18</sup>

The silence of dharma practice allows for the merging of the relative and the absolute, embodied identity and clarity of the mind. Owens reflects: " . . . silence became the medium in which I was reborn into a sense of happiness and contentment. But overall, it ushered me into a period of thriving and flourishing in my life."<sup>19</sup> He later writes: "In the end, my healing has been learning to see myself and to celebrate myself. It is interrogating the stories about how I do not matter and choosing to let go of those narratives and engage in the necessary and revolutionary work, self-love, and liberation."<sup>20</sup> The practice has the power to heal the heart and mind. It is fundamentally inclusive, in that all genders and sexual identities are embraced.

For long-term practitioners such as Owens, Williams, and Manuel, Buddhist teachings and practice thus allow for the full recognition of social and personal identity, as well as a path of internal freedom: the relative and the absolute.

The embrace of Buddhist principles as a path of liberation for black people can similarly be found in Charles Johnson's *Taming the Ox: Buddhist Stories and Reflections on Politics, Race, Culture, and Spiritual Practice*. Writing from the Vipassana tradition of Southeast Asia, Johnson takes into account "Ultimate truth (*paramartha-satya*) . . . a nonconceptual and nondiscursive insight into ourselves and the world":

Nirvana literally means "to blow out" (*nir*, "out"; *vana* "blow") craving and a chimerical sense of the self, like a candle's flame, thereby leading to our experience of things in their true impermanence, codependency, and emptiness (*sunyata*) . . . However, Buddhism also acknowledges a region of conventional, relative truth (*samvrti-satya*) that is our daily, lived experience, and for this reason Shakyamuni in the sutras can refer to his disciples individually and by name. Here, in the realm of relative truth and contingency, of conditioned arising, each person presents to us a phenomenal, historical "substance," which due to custom and habit we refer to as "individuality".

Johnson recognizes that a racialized social structure, in which black people internalize hatred and fear, leads to a psychological of deprivation and rage. But he encounters healing in the dharma:

Fortunately, a black American exposed to the Buddhadharma sees that these racial illusions so much a part of conventional reality—as the caste system was in the time of the Buddha, who rejected the essentialistic thought that made some men and women "Untouchable"—are products of the relative, conditioned mind. He realizes that while he is not *blind* to what his own valuable yet adventitious racial, gender, or class differences reveal to him, neither is he *bound* by them; and those very phenomenal conditions may, in fact, spark his dedication to social transformations intended to help all sentient beings achieve liberation. The Buddha employed *upaya kaushala* ("skillful means") when he taught the truth of *anatta*, and said he would teach a doctrine of self if his followers became attached to the idea of No-self. Always, his teachings foreground the importance of a radical freedom. (Johnson 2014).<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, pp. 34–35.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 13.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 72.

<sup>21</sup> (Johnson 2014, p. 30). Johnson's application of Buddhist teachings to the conditions of contemporary black America echoes Angel Kyodo Williams's *Being Black: Zen and the Art of Living with Fearlessness and Grace* (2000) and Jan Willis's *Dreaming Me: Black, Baptist, and Buddhist* (2001).

The internalization of hatred due to skin color results in a particular form of suffering. It can be healed by dharma practice—yet the isolation experienced in predominantly white *sanghas*, along with microaggressions and an inability to relate to cultural perspectives, creates a divide that must be acknowledged. Thus, it is critical, these writers argue, that Buddhist *sanghas* acknowledge the social conditions of blackness and the unique perspectives of black Buddhist practitioners. Black people have undergone a particular form of suffering that is often perpetuated in predominantly white *sanghas*. The teachings of the Buddha, and the message that suffering enacted by racism can be healed in the practice of stillness and concentration, is a powerful tool for the longevity of racial justice activism.

As black people become psychologically and politically liberated, it is critical that white practitioners interrogate their assumptions, their social power, and their tendency to individualize suffering. In a racialized social reality, there is no possibility of black people “being at home in whiteness,” for it “goes hand-in-glove with the presumption that everything whiteness does must be best, right, noble, beautiful, moral, and productive.” (Williams et al. 2016, p. 18) Owens states: “The problem with becoming myself was that, no matter how nice I had learned to be, no matter how smart or accommodating, sitting with myself meant I was becoming more myself, more Black.”<sup>22</sup>

Dharma practice called my attention to the deepest of my investments in white supremacy and made me feel, without sugar coats, without apology or redemption, how deeply destructive it is to live in the afterlife of slavery as the unembodied trauma of the white experience.<sup>23</sup>

Dharma principles encourage Buddhist teachers of African descent to critique of white supremacy and challenge the articulation of Socially Engaged Buddhism. For these dharma teachers, the social meanings of the black body must be acknowledged, reconstructed, and embraced. This process is deeply internal and solitary, and overtly external and communal.

Manuel, Williams, Owens, and Johnson challenge the framework of Socially Engaged Buddhism in that they recognize the Ultimate and the Relative—embodiment and formlessness—as they directly confront the degradation wrought by racism in the U.S. The black body relates certain social meanings. The aforementioned black teachers and practitioners thus emphasize the primacy of the *body*: a material body composed of flesh and blood that is socially constructed in degrading ways. For black people, these social constructs lead to enduring psychological and often physical suffering. It is not enough to alleviate poverty and homelessness in a racialized Western society: Buddhist practitioners must reckon with the forces of racism *that emphasize the body* and that have led to self-hatred, misery, and rejection, even within *sanghas*.

## 2. Conclusions

If Buddhist practitioners are focused on alleviating suffering, then it is critical that white Buddhists acknowledge and confront the pervasiveness of racism within Socially Engaged *sanghas*. Because Western contexts rest upon histories of racialized colonialism, genocide, slavery, legal segregation, and de facto segregation, black Buddhist practitioners emphasize the need to examine racialized bodies. It is not enough for white practitioners whose bodies are constructed as acceptable, non-threatening, and beautiful to do good works in the world. In highly racialized societies, the racism that is internalized through social messages must be acknowledged and deconstructed. It is incumbent upon white practitioners of Socially Engaged Buddhism, as they embrace Buddhist teachings and practices, to acknowledge that the body matters, that there are particular forms of suffering that arise from racism, and that such racism is often perpetuated in *sanghas* that are established to provide support and community to practitioners. Thus, black Buddhist writers are challenging the parameters of Socially Engaged Buddhism in important ways. By articulating the experiences of practitioners who

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.



experience sustained racism, these writers critique the whiteness embedded in Western Buddhism and create a path for future practitioners who suffer the harms of racism.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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