



White Sangha Members Gather to Recognize and Root Out Unconscious Racism in Daily and Sangha Life

By Ruby Phillips and Denis Martynowych



At the June “Day of Mindfulness (DOM) for White Allies,” sanghas from the Seattle area gathered at SIMS to support and challenge each other to understand the dynamics of unconscious racist habits in our minds and hearts, how these dynamics may manifest in our Sanghas and daily lives, and how to heal and transform our reactive habits for the benefit of all. The collective eagerness to learn, be vulnerable, and take risks to grow was very palpable in the room all day.

Racism is an insidious, culturally-reinforced expression of delusion and conceit. Attitudes of white superiority run deep in our consciousness. Although it’s not our personal “fault” that we have multi-layered racist conditioning in our bodies and minds, as living beings, we do have the responsibility and joyful opportunity to root that conditioning out and contribute to equity in our world. Like all spiritual endeavors to uproot ignorance, this process is a long, deep one that requires our patience and diligence. We can take refuge in our intrinsic Buddha nature and our Sangha to call up the determination and joy needed to engage in this deep work. Our precious Dharma teachings and practices provide very valuable tools to investigate, heal, and transform our deeply held unconscious attitudes and habits, and to re-align with our intention for embodying mutual respect. At our DOM, we employed solo meditations, guided practices, Insight Dialogue (relational meditation), and metta meditation in our exploration of racism, implicit bias, “white fragility,” and “micro-aggressions.”

“White fragility” is a phrase coined by local race equity educator Robin DiAngelo. It refers to the habitual defensive patterns that can arise in white people when we are exposed to the karmic results of centuries of racism, including the anger and grief of people of color.

If white people want to be part of racial healing, it’s time for us to listen, really listen deeply. Many well-meaning white people want to listen, but get triggered when our conditioned sense of entitlement to racial comfort is disturbed. Instead of hearing others’ pain, we can interpret expressions of pain from people of color as personal attacks. If we are not mindful, we can easily react with blaming, shutting down, claiming exemption, or responding with a platitude, depending on our conditioned habits. These reactions usually reinforce the cycle of misunderstanding and separation. It can be disappointing and infuriating to people of color to experience our reactivity over and over.

Fortunately, our Buddhist practices of mindfulness and investigation are wonderful tools for us to use to develop stamina and replace fragility. If we are able to focus attention inwardly; identify arising emotions like anger, shame, fear, and confusion; and consciously feel body sensations, we can hold our uncomfortable experience with full acceptance. Then we can watch as discomfort transforms into wisdom and wholesome intention. We have found that support from an attentive partner, through use of Insight Dialogue, helps people feel safe enough to stay with discomfort, and move to an insightful perspective and used this technique at our day of mindfulness.

A highlight of our day's learning was hearing the heartfelt experiences of SIMS co-guiding teacher Tuere Sala, and of Vera Garibaldi of Mindfulness Community of Puget Sound. They each courageously told of their experiences as people of color in predominantly white Seattle sanghas. Tuere and Vera's expressions of suffering in sangha moved many of us very deeply and inspired some sanghas to launch initiatives for authentic racial welcoming.

Among her other open-hearted words, Tuere challenged white sangha members to consider if cultural diversity was truly desired or if we actually wanted to maintain our cultural comfort while having people with different skin tones in the sangha. Authentic diversity and equity would require changes in sanghas' cultural habits, from norms about simple things like regular gatherings as a community over shared food, to more subtle and powerful actions, like recognizing and relinquishing of our fish-in-the-water presumptions of white-centric habits as normal.

Longtime SIMS member Sooz Appel said of her experience at the Day of Mindfulness: "For me, to move toward freedom from greed, hatred, and delusion means to seriously investigate how those poisons manifest in my life. Dealing with racism in all its many forms is central to understanding how hatred and delusion have been institutionalized in our society and the many ways, overt and subtle, that they arise in my own life. The DOM offered a beautifully integrated process for blending deep dharma wisdom with an exploration of racism. It moved me and, I believe, our entire sangha, to grapple with these issues in a fuller and more courageous manner."

Aspiration for being a real ally to people of color requires humility. It requires internal and collective work to understand and counter-act our unconscious attitudes and reactive habits, listening and supporting people of color, and disrupting racism when we encounter it both internally and externally.

Moving forward: Ruby and Denis, the facilitators who led the June Day of Mindfulness are offering a new series for "Awakening White Allies" beginning September 29 entitled "Decolonizing White Views: Embodied Practices to Uproot Racialized Beliefs." Anna-Brown Griswold, an Insight Dialogue facilitator, will also be co-leading the learning series. Participants will gather one Thursday evening a month for five months to explore the elements of "white view" in our bodies and minds, with the intention of transforming into "right view" and more fully living our aspiration to awaken with all beings. For more information, contact Denis Martynowych (denismarty@gmail.com, 206 605-4068) or Ruby Phillips (rubydoobe@gmail.com, 206 323-5503). Ruby and Denis also recommend that we learn more about our own assumptions with by taking one of the many implicit bias tests offered by Harvard University's Project Implicit.