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THE WORK IS WITHIN: MY BUDDHIST FAITH AS I RECKON WITH POLICE SHOOTINGS & RACIAL UNREST

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ABSTRACT

Based on the author's life story in which her husband was shot and killed by police officers in front of her and their two young children, she provides a first-person narrative of her experience, linking the ways her Buddhist faith and practice have sustained her over the years. She recounts snippets of her privileged childhood growing up Jewish in the South before meeting and marrying her Ethiopian husband and beginning a family with him, along with beginning their Buddhist practice. Specific aspects of Buddhist philosophy are incorporated in this piece to provide insights into a Buddhist lens on our current troubled times replete with police shootings and civil unrest.

Keywords: Buddhism, police shootings, personal narrative, Ikeda's philosophy

OPENING UP OLD WOUNDS

Seeing George Floyd die under the neck of a White police officer as he cried out for his mother between gasps of "I can't breathe," evoked deeply painful memories I often keep buried, hidden within—sealed and concealed, in order to keep living. Yet, I have continued living through the quiet grief of my husband's murder at the hand of police officers, and it has been my faith that has kept me stitched together. This is *that* story: my husband's death and the ways in which my faith and practice of Buddhism buttressed me over the years to keep on living and growing.

As our hot summer streets of 2020 became filled with protesters of all ages and backgrounds—despite risks to their lives in the midst of Covid-19--I knew I had to muster the strength and courage to revisit my own painful wounds. My invisible lacerations rupture each time there is a senseless killing of a Black person by the very people in blue uniforms I was taught had a role in our society to serve and protect.

It was the first cool evening of fall on October 7, 1992. After my husband, Tesfaie, came home from a long day of running his landscape business, I was busy cooking a spaghetti dinner. Just as the sun was setting, he insisted I turn the stove off and bring our two daughters outside so we could admire the sunset together. It was one of those orange, purple-pink, azure, picture perfect sunsets for which Texas is famous; Tesfaie wanted us to admire it together, as a family. Even our pet goose and parrot were with us, along with his friend, Berekat--watching the colors shift and melt into each other with the setting sun. That moment together as a family is frozen in my memory; I had no idea how that evening would end.

I was exhausted from working all day as a high school teacher and then rushing to get Sara, our older daughter, at her bus stop and then our baby daughter, Aileen, from the day care center. I was annoyed his friend was over because I felt he was not a good influence on my husband, but I pretended to be gracious and we all ate dinner. As Tesfaie took Berekat home, I cleaned the kitchen, fed and bathed Aileen and made sure Sara took a bath and got ready for bed. Even though we had plenty of beds and bedrooms, we often fell asleep together in the downstairs room that had a mattress, along with my Buddhist altar, where I chanted each morning and evening. It had been 9 years since I first embraced Buddhism and sincerely studied its teachings, while chanting Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo, with a hope and prayer to find peace within myself as a way to create a more peaceful world, starting within myself.

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What do those foreign-sounding words mean? I wondered that when I first heard them, even though I felt that saying them gently massaged my soul. According to *The Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings* (2004), the actual translation of this chant, which is the title of the Lotus Sutra, one of the last teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha is this: *Nam* means "dedication," or devotion, and it is actually a Sanskrit word; the other words are Chinese. *Myoho* represents the idea that the ultimate truth in life (also called *Dharma)*, or enlightenment, and ignorance, or delusion, are together as one entity. *Renge* represents the lotus flower, which symbolizes the simultaneity of cause and effect through thoughts, words, and deeds. *Kyo* symbolizes the voices and words of human beings, or the teachings of the Buddha that are constant and unchanging in the midst of the impermanence of the past, present and future in all life.

BECOMING BUDDHIST

Though raised in the deep South by an observant reformed Jewish family who celebrated the Sabbath every Friday night with a special meal after saying prayers over the candles we lit, the challah we ate, and the sweet Manschewitz wine we drank, I found myself asking more questions than the rabbi or my parents could ever answer—starting at a young age. I saw racial inequities all around me, and viscerally I knew our world was wounded, along with many of the people in it. I found solace in reading, and once I encountered the writings of Thoreau and Emerson, I began to form an understanding of life, spirituality and religion that took me down a path different from the one I started on as a child.

After graduating from college outside of Boston and then living in northern California for a little over a year, I moved to Texas--a place that seemed very alien to me at the time after living close to beautiful cliffs overlooking the emerald waters of the Pacific Ocean. While in California, I was introduced to reggae music and the lyrics of Bob Marley, who seemed to offer solace to my confused soul, through his rhythm and lyrics. Shortly after moving to Dallas, I met my future husband, Tesfaie, while working at a mall in a local restaurant; he had recently arrived in Dallas as an Ethiopian political refugee, and his long locs cued me into his love for reggae music. We felt a kinship and bond from the very beginning—most likely our ancient ancestral roots recognizing each other.

Life in Dallas as an inter-racial couple and family in the early 1980s meant we were often stared at with judgmental eyes. We faced discrimination based on how we looked and for choosing to be in relationship with each other. Over time, I became a teacher, and Tesfaie started his landscape business. After we had been together for a couple of years, I was introduced to Soka Gakkai Nichiren Buddhism by a neighbor. Even though I had read about Zen Buddhism and tried meditating before, I never developed a regular practice. Several things attracted me to Nichiren Buddhism:

- Every gathering was full of all kinds of people from different backgrounds, nationalities, ethnic groups, economic classes, and ages (Strand, 2003).
- The teachings reminded me of what I had learned from Thoreau and Emerson: the divine is within us all and nature (Ikeda, 2006).
- We have the power within our lives—through connecting with our inner wisdom/divinity (through chanting) to transform deeply rooted patterns (karma) that cause us suffering (Ikeda, 2010/2013).
- The community of believers support each other through weekly neighborhood gatherings.

These were the main reasons I left the faith of my ancestors and embraced Buddhist philosophy. I had been searching for many years, and along the way, I practiced Sufism and learned of the poetry of Rumi; I had attended a church service to consider the Christian path; and I had re-visited Judaism. Ultimately, I felt most "at home" with my Buddhist faith and the community of practitioners I encountered.

THE SILENT PAIN OF ADDICTION

At first, Tesfaie was not happy that I began to practice Buddhism, but after many passionate discussions when I pointed out that Bob Marley's lyrics and philosophy closely aligned with Buddhism, he began to practice with me. The birth of our two daughters brought us great joy. Even though my parents were blinded by their prejudice/racism and never fully accepted that I married a Black man and did not choose the route of a "nice Jewish boy," they grew to respect Tesfaie and could see how much our Buddhist faith and practice helped us deal with life and our problems. The most difficult karmic challenge for me that we lived with was Tesfaie's addictions; since addiction is a family disease, it was most definitely my problem, too, and though my tendency towards addiction was milder, we both suffered in silence.

While I had grown up in a comfortable middle-class Jewish family who had benefitted from all the privileges of Whiteness, I simultaneously and unconsciously internalized aspects of White supremacist ideology fed to me from birth. I can now see that the internal angst from such an upbringing was at the root of my rebelliousness, and I chose a path in life that more aligned with the kind of world I wanted to create. Tesfaie had never fully shared with me about his family because there was deep pain and shame in his family story rooted in the Italian occupation of Ethiopia and rape. Such a

story did not fit neatly and nicely in a "tell me about your family" conversation. His drinking and use of drugs, I now realize, served to anesthetize his consciousness from a troubled childhood. For many years, our Buddhist faith and practice served to help him (and me) deal with our struggles, and we experienced several years of good health—physically, spiritually and psychologically.

Just as cancer can often re-occur after years of good health, so can addiction, and I had a sense that Tesfaie had started using again in the early fall of 1992. The mood swings of severe depression followed by manic activity could have been signs of mental illness, or they could have been his intuitive knowing his time on the planet was limited and he wanted to cram as much of life in as he could. So, on the cool fall night in October of 1992, after our family admired a beautiful sunset, ate a spaghetti dinner together, and Tesfaie came back home after dropping off his friend, he went into our garage and sat back there with our goose. Unbeknownst to me, he had smoked a joint laced with PCP, and while our daughters were sleeping—around 9:30 that night, he called me into the garage.

TESAFIE'S DEATH

When I entered the garage, the person I knew and loved for more than ten years had a look in his eyes I had never seen in any human being. I later realized he had a drug-induced psychotic break from the PCP. He had taken a large kitchen knife in the garage with him and he said, "You're going to see blood tonight." My maternal instincts kicked in, and I said, "If you kill me, you'll go to prison, and who will raise our girls?" Hearing myself say that, I realized I had to come up with a plan quickly.

I went back into the house and called 911, saying that my husband was acting crazy and I needed help to get him to a hospital. After giving them our address and hanging up, I went back into the garage and tried to reason with him. He gave me the knife and we decided to take a walk, but just as we were going to do that, the doorbell rang and we heard someone say, "Police." He grabbed the knife again and went back into the garage—probably fearful since he had been the victim of racial profiling and the excessive use of force by police in the past.

I answered the door, and the police asked me what was going on. I explained, "My husband is acting strange; he's never acted this way before. He has a kitchen knife and I need help to get him to a hospital." They asked me where my children were and then told me I needed to get them and leave for the evening. I woke Sara and told her we needed to go to a hotel that night; she was barely awake. I wrapped Aileen up and since she was still asleep, I held her in my arms as she slept. I yelled to Tesfaie that we were going to sleep in a hotel for the evening and that I would be back in the morning. As we stood near the door to leave, Tesfaie ran into the room with the kitchen knife and a phone.

In shock and horror, Sara and I watched as the police shot Tesfaie seven times, and we saw him stumble to the ground in utter disbelief. My life forever changed at that moment. Now, when I hear of police shootings that each have their unique situations but that are all linked to Black people being harassed, beaten, shot or killed by police officers, I feel a sinking numbness in my soul because it is a pain I know. I did not understand why the police felt justified to use deadly force that night, and it has taken me years to recognize the systemic nature of police brutality against people of color, and of Black people in particular. Being raised as a White woman blinded me from grasping the systemic and pervasive nature of racism and police brutality. The time has come for me to face these issues head-on and work to change them through dialogues, education, and writing.

Each of these people had mothers, fathers, siblings, and numerous loved ones, and none of them had to be beaten or die in the way they did: (to name just a few) Rodney King, Amadou Diallo, Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, Philando Castile, Clinton Allen, Eric Garner, Stephon Clark, Botham Jean, Jacob Blake, Breona Taylor, and George Floyd. The horror, shock and disbelief of each situation—especially when details unfold and we know their lives did not need to end on the receiving end of a police officer's bullet—(re)create a spiritual gash within, as my own tentatively healed wound reopens yet again. I know the lives of their loved ones have been shattered, and yet, I also know that we must all find a way out of our own unique sufferings. For each person, the question is how to find that way out. In my case, through daily chanting/prayers, regularly studying Buddhist teachings, deep self-reflections, and support from my Buddhist community of believers and family, I mustered strength from within to push forward.

LINKAGES TO MY SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

How does my spiritual faith, philosophy and practice help me make sense of some things that make absolutely no sense? How can Buddhist philosophy shed light on such suffering as the killings of Black people by police officers and of my own husband's death after I called the police for help to get him to a hospital? One concept I embrace in the Buddhist philosophy is that we are all born for a reason and that our lives are inextricably linked to the lives of others.

The Buddhist belief in the interconnectedness of all life means that my victories, joys, as well as sufferings, affect those around me. Ikeda (2017a) explains: "the same power that moves the universe exists within our lives. Each individual has immense potential, and a great change in the inner dimension of one individual's life has the power to touch others' lives and transform society. Everything begins with us" (p. 3). This means that as I win over my suffering and other challenges in this lifetime that are rife with pain, I can walk alongside others who are also suffering and with a deeply empathetic understanding, I can support them to win over their pain.

Ikeda (2017b) further expresses that "…we each have a mission we were born to carry out…" (p. 127). For me, being a Buddhist means to discover and fulfill my unique mission in life, including the tribulations; I must find out what my suffering means for others and me. Rather than being crushed by problems, when I recognize that I can win over suffering, in order to support others along the way, I am fulfilling my mission—since our lives are interconnected.

From this perspective, my own suffering is not in vain, but it exists to expand my capacity to support others so together, we can find a pathway. I saw this, also, in the death of George Floyd. When I saw him take his last breath and witnessed the outpouring of both sadness and support at his funeral, along with the protests that followed, I sensed a profound meaning for his life and death. Through his death, his life took on a profound significance to awaken the consciousness of so many Americans (especially White Americans) who continue to be in denial about the brutality of policing and the ever-present prevalence of racism in our world. The actions of police officers in the summer of 2020 against George Floyd, Breona Taylor and Jacob Blake served to awaken the consciousness of so many people, and, I see a deep meaning in their lives and deaths. Their sufferings became our own, and their deaths served to awaken others in a way such a lesson could not otherwise be learned; they did not die in vain. In the 20th century, Emmett Till's tragic death took on a similar role—to push people out of complacency and awaken our world to the need for a dramatic social change.

The Transience of Life

For Buddhists, the roots of our philosophy originate from Shakyamuni Buddha. However, many teachings also derive from a Buddhist Japanese monk, Nichiren, who wrote a letter to a follower in 1278, where he quotes from a Chinese Buddhist monk, T'ien-t'ai. In that letter that focused on the topic of death, Nichiren (2006) wrote:

> Looking back, I have been studying the Buddha's [Shakyamumi's] teachings since I was a boy. And I found myself thinking, 'The life of a human being is fleeting. The exhaled breath never waits for the inhaled one. Even dew before the wind is hardly a sufficient metaphor. It is the way of the world that whether one is wise or foolish, old or young, one never knows what will happen to one from one moment to the next. Therefore I should first of all learn about death and then about other things.' (p. 759)

Recognizing the transient nature of life and studying, chanting/praying, and deeply pondering death and its significance informs how I live and understand life from a Buddhist viewpoint. In addition to acknowledging the transient nature of life, Buddhists conceive of life and death as an eternal cycle. In a recent article, Ikeda (2020) writes, "each individual can be likened to a wave in the ocean. When a wave rises from the ocean, that is life, and when it merges back into the ocean, that is death. This process continues eternally, without beginning or end" (p. 57). The Buddhist view of death, then, resonates with the First Law of Thermodynamics, which "states that energy is neither created nor destroyed" (Rutishauser, 2013, p. 507). Many aspects of life and death continue to be mysteries that philosophers, scientists, artists, and many of us continue to ponder. Buddhism offers just one path, of many in the world, and I feel it suits me best.

The Sanctity of Life

Another Buddhist concept that anchors me in a world rife with racial injustices is the foundational Buddhist belief in the sanctity of all life. Regardless of a person's past, from a Buddhist perspective, all life is precious and has deep meaning. To disrespect, disregard, or take another human being's life is to violate that person's precious life, and anything that disparages or disregards a person's life goes against Buddhist teachings. The focus in Buddhist philosophy is on respecting and protecting human lives, and this core concept is what is so desperately needed in our world today. While I continue to struggle and reconcile within myself that I was the one who called the police for help, I also recognize the urgent need for cities to activate mental health professionals when community members experience any kind of mental health crisis. The reality is that few police officers, if any, have skills in de-escalating mental health crises and tend to justify their use of deadly force, when humane alternatives need to be considered. I fully believe that utilizing mental health professionals, an approach advocated by the Movement for Black Lives, who seek to defund police departments and reallocate funds for precisely these kinds of mental health interventions, would have saved my husband's life when he was in the midst of a mental health crisis.

From my interpretation as a Buddhist, I imagine a world (and will continue to work to create a world) where all community members can flourish as their needs are met in our society; the need to police and incarcerate people will naturally diminish significantly. Schools, too, need to emphasize supporting students' development, rather than criminalizing them. These ideas align with the Buddhist perspective that recognizes the sanctity of all life and serve to decenter the roles of power and policing that Black people often face in their daily lives and which most Whites continue to deny and/or disbelieve. Embracing a worldview based on the value, worth and sanctity of every single human being is a foundational concept in Buddhism, and I seek to live with that spirit, though it is not easy and I often fall short.

Finding Courage, Wisdom, and Compassion Within

People of color, and especially Black people, continue to be murdered and harassed by police officers, and I must find my equanimity in order for me to continue to function and live in this world knowing that my personal painful inner wound still lies just below the surface of my life. To do that, I chant/pray abundantly every single morning and evening without fail. Why do I chant Nam-Myoho-Renge -Kyo, the Sanskrit and Chinese title of the Lotus Sutra? A key reason is so that I can muster the wisdom, courage, and compassion to continue finding meaning in life. Ikeda (2006) explains that

> wisdom, not might, is the most important thing. Wisdom and compassion are deeply connected. Giving earnest thought to others' welfare, asking ourselves what we can do to help—using our minds in this way is a sign of compassion. (p. 366)

Wisdom can neither be bought, nor given to us; rather, we develop wisdom from within ourselves and I find it through chanting and studying Buddhist philosophy.

I found a way to tap into inner wisdom, a source of clarity that provides a pathway for me to move onward in the midst of an ever-present grief, much like a dull pain. Inextricably tied to wisdom that comes from connecting to my Buddha nature, or divine nature within, is courage. For me, courage means taking a stand and refusing to be defeated by any hardships or obstacles I encounter. Compassion unfolds from having the courage to persevere and the wisdom to continue living my life with a heart to support others. The compassion borne of my sufferings inform my pedagogy, as I seek to educate students from a social justice and anti-racist positionality. I work to develop and refine a pedagogy of passion and compassion to support my students as they face themselves, internalized oppression, and a world of injustices.

Self-reflection is another foundational principle in Buddhist philosophy, and as such, I must constantly be looking within myself—seeking to be a better version of myself today than I was yesterday. Through chanting and self-reflection, I challenge how I was socialized, and from this practice, I have found that inner peace I so longed for as a child. On the most fundamental level, this kind of inner heart work is at the root of both individual and collective change.

As a woman who walks through the world with all the privileges and burdens linked to Whiteness, daily self-reflection is essential and necessary. I have come to recognize that the privileges of Whiteness have protected me throughout my life, and a central aspect of Whiteness is to remain blinded of those privileges (Feagin, 2014). Rather than being about shame, blame or guilt, taking time to unflinchingly look in the mirror of my soul and honestly explore how my actions and words impact others is a component of Buddhist practice that prompts me to look at my role in actively dismantling, or inadvertently and complicitly supporting, a system imbued with White supremacist ideology. This kind of inner work is central to my Buddhist faith. I recognize the power of my privilege and use it through my work as an educator to support others in acknowledging, recognizing, and dismantling the ways White supremacist ideology has also affected them. This "quiet" form of activism is the path I have chosen.

BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY, IKEDA, BUBER, AND ANZALDÚA

Many of the core ideas in Buddhist philosophy that began with Shakyamuni Buddha parallel ideas of disparate philosophers from very different cultures, such as Martin Buber, who was of Jewish descent, Daisaku Ikeda, a contemporary Japanese philosopher, and Gloria Anzaldúa, a South Texas border feminist writer. A common thread unites some ideas of these writers, which is the belief in the need for deep internal work as the essential root source for external social changes. The scope of this paper, however, does not include the operational "how" that connects the inner work to these social changes; rather, the focus remains on the inner source of change as the starting point. The work starts within.

Some of the writings about Buber parallel Ikeda's ideas about the inner work, which Ikeda refers to as "human revolution." Avnon (1998) wrote extensively about Buber and he recognizes that for Buber, "profound, effective revolutions are reflections of ontological turning points and are manifested in deeds of singular individuals whose personal 'turnings' towards being challenge conventional ontology and create new forms of relation to being" (p. 100). This very "ontological turning" linked to our way of being in the world begins within for Buber. Ikeda (2010/2013) elaborates on this point, saying that what is needed is "the reformation of the inner life, its expansion toward and merger

with the 'greater self' of wisdom, compassion and courage. It is my firm conviction that a fundamental revolution in the life of a single individual can give rise to the kind of consciousness and solidarity that will free humanity from its millennial cycles of warfare and violence" (p. 239). These quotes convey a spiritual worldview I have come to embrace and I am convinced that I must continue to do the difficult inner work in order to create a world very different from the one in which we now live.

Anzaldúa (2009) is another scholar whose work echoes Buber and Ikeda about the societal changes beginning within, when she writes:

> that by changing ourselves we change the world, that traveling *El Mundo Zurdo* [the left-handed] path is the path of a two-way movement—a going deep into the self and an expanding out into the world, a simultaneous recreation of the self and a reconstruction of society. (p. 49)

For Buber, Anzaldúa and Ikeda, the quintessential struggle begins in the heart, and it is the spiritual inner change that is the impetus for greater societal changes. While laws and policies may change, unless we do the deep inner work of the heart, these cycles of race-based violence against people of color, and especially Black people, will continue unabated. For these scholars, and as a Buddhist practitioner, I believe the root of outer social changes first begin in our hearts. The starting point and source of continual nourishment for social change lies within our hearts, though the work also takes place in the outer realms of our homes, communities and the world.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, I can say with confidence that my faith and practice of SGI Nichiren Buddhism have healed my spirit. Just as I have scars from cancer surgery, the internal scars from my husband's death remain, but they have healed. Through my prayers and deep reflections, I no longer blame myself for calling the police. At the time, my maternal instincts took priority, and I am certain my husband would have wanted me to do whatever I could to protect our children. As a Buddhist, I must consider "from this moment forward." Nothing I can ever say or do will change the past, and I made up my mind that I would find ways to create value from this tragedy. I focused on being a loving and caring mother to our children, while keeping his memory alive for them. While we sought counseling, the true healing came from within, and I feel grateful I had my Buddhist faith, family, and friends. Our daughters have grown into amazing women, and Tesfaie would be proud.

In the midst of racial strife, civil unrest, continued state-sanctioned murders of Black people, I rely on my spiritual faith that serves to give me the strength to fight onward until justice prevails for all people. I look to the ancient Buddhist philosophy and practice, along with both ancient and contemporary writings that encourage me to remember, "just as the consistent pounding of waves erodes massive rocks, ceaseless efforts can surmount any barrier and achieve the impossible" (Ikeda, 2010, p.6). I will not give up; in my husband's honor and memory, along with countless others whose lives have been needlessly cut short, I fight on through my writings, my life, and using education as a sharp tool of resistance to walk alongside others on this journey.

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