



What Is Buddhism, and What Is Buddhism in the Insight Meditation Community (IMC)?

Abstract Buddhism is one of the largest religions in the world, but many people, including Buddhist practitioners, do not understand the psychological impact Buddhist practices have on their ego structures, internal object relations, and external object relationships. Buddhism in the Insight Meditation tradition includes teachings in the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, and the Brahma Viharas and is also practiced by women who are African American and same-sex loving. The women in this study bring an African-American norm of interdependence to their understanding of self and no self, contributing to their “remarkable relational resilience” in patriarchal, racial, homophobic, and Christian supremacist cultural contexts.

Keywords Buddhism • Insight Meditation • The Noble Eightfold Path • The Four Noble Truths • The Brahma Viharas

Buddhism is one of the largest religions in the world. According to the Pew Research Center, there are about 400–500 million people in the world who consider themselves religious Buddhists,¹ and about 1.5 million Buddhists² in the US, including women, African Americans, and members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ) communities. Many more Americans of other religious traditions or no religious tradition have intentionally or unconsciously adopted Buddhist philosophy

(e.g. letting go), psychology (nondualism), meditation practices like Mindfulness Meditation, and art (Buddha statues). Though millions of Americans have some familiarity with Buddhism, most do not understand the psychological impact Buddhist practices have on their ego structures, internal object relations, and external object relationships. In fact, the claim that Buddhist practice leads to detachment from others and cultivates introversion is not supported by my research on the psycho-spiritual experiences of African-American lesbians in the Theravada Buddhism—inspired Insight Meditation tradition.³ This research establishes how Buddhism in the Insight tradition contributes to Remarkable Relational Resilience, especially for women who live in a context where their humanity is in question based on gender, race, sexuality, and religious biases, discrimination, and oppression, but also for others who are challenged by US society’s disdain for people who are deemed radically different.

In *Object Relations, Buddhism, and Relationality in Womanist Practical Theology*, I draw on a variety of resources including the narratives of the women I interviewed, my own experiences in the Insight Meditation Community, scholarly articles, commentaries from Buddhist teachers, www.accesstoinight.org, and the Pali Canon, a collection of suttas (like sermons) that include the *Anguttara Nikaya* (AN)—*Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, translated by Nyanaponika Thera and Bhikkhu Bodhi; the *Digha Nikaya*—*The Long Discourses of the Buddha* (DN), translated by Maurice Welshe; the *Majjhima Nikaya* (MN)—*The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, translated by Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi; and the *Samyutta Nikaya* (SN)—*The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi.

In “Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Buddhist Practitioners,” Wendy Cadge writes about Buddhists of the Insight Meditation tradition who are gay, lesbian, and bisexual,⁴ but not about African-American lesbians. Roger Corless, in “Gay Buddhist Fellowship,” writes about white gay men who are Buddhists and their experiences of their community,⁵ but his essay is not about women, African Americans, or lesbians. Winston Leyland’s edited volumes *Queer Dharma: Voices of Gay Buddhists*⁶ are about men. This book attempts to fill epistemological voids in the psycho-spiritual experiences of African Americans who practice Buddhism, the psycho-spiritual experiences of African-American women who practice Buddhism, and the psycho-spiritual experiences of African-American lesbians who practice Buddhism through the narratives of Alicia, Deborah, Marcella, Mary, Norene, and the 26 other women who completed the Fetzer

Spiritual Experience Index (SEI). Filling these epistemological voids contributes to knowledge in several disciplines, including Women's Studies, Religious Studies, Buddhist Studies, Psychology, Psychotherapy, African-American Studies, Interfaith Dialogue, and Pastoral Care and Counseling.

Most books in pastoral care and counseling are written from Christian perspectives by Christians. In an attempt to include Buddhism into the conversation on what is religious or pastoral or spiritual care and counseling, due to the rise in interest in Buddhist (religious, spiritual, and secular) practices in the US, it is critical to understand some foundational concepts about Buddhism that can be taken as religious or philosophical, or as a way of life, a psychology, a set of ethics, or a combination thereof.

In this chapter, readers are briefly introduced or re-introduced to some of the core elements of Buddhism in the Insight Meditation Community (IMC). The core elements explored include: the founding of the IMC, the relationship between the common Insight Buddha narrative and what is taught in the IMC, the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, the Brahma Viharas, the paramitas, the suffering of clinging and craving, teachings on self and nonself, and some of the differences between various types of Theravada Buddhism, the foundation for the IMC, and the IMC itself.

Chapter 2, "Womanism and the Absence of Explicit Black Buddhist Lesbian—Black Christian Straight Interdependence in Foundational Womanist Theological Scholarship," introduces a black lesbian hermeneutic into understanding what womanism was meant to be and is becoming, relying on Alice Walker's use of Audre Lorde's essay "The Uses of the Erotic, The Erotic as Power" in Walker's 1979 short story "Coming Apart," where Walker first coined the term "womanist"; the invisibilization of lesbians and same-sex loving women in foundational womanist Christian theology, as questioned by Afrocentric Christian womanist theologian Delores S. Williams; and the re-visibility of Christian queer African-American women in Christian womanist scholarship.

Chapter 3, "The Spiritual Practices and Experiences of African-American Buddhist Lesbians in the IMC," includes 38 statements from the slightly modified Fetzer Spiritual Experience Index (SEI) that was answered by 31 women; along with responses, analysis, and interview excerpts from five African-American Buddhist lesbians in the Insight Meditation tradition: Norene, Alicia, Deborah, Mary, and Marcella.

Chapter 4, "Self, No Self,⁷ and the Paradoxes of Self and No Self Preservation," illustrates the psychological-spiritual journey of these women from Christianity to Buddhism, as well as their changing views of self, no self, and the necessity and fallacy of self preservation.

Chapter 5, “African-American Women Buddhist Dharma Teachers and Writers on Self and No Self,” is an introductory discussion of the works of African-American Buddhist women writers angel Kyodo williams, Jan Willis, Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, and Jasmine Syedullah.

Chapter 6, “Object Relations in East and West: Self, No Self, the Abhidhamma, and W. R. D. Fairbairn,” is a discussion on how mind objects are viewed from Buddhist and Fairbairnian objects and object relations perspectives, the sources of those views, and the impact of those views on how one understands one’s self or no self. Attention is paid to the ego fracturing and creation of the Internal Saboteur, or persecutory object, and contemporary object relations commentary from Aronson, Muzika, Engler, Epstein, and Metcalf.

Chapter 7, “Wholeness as Object Liberation: The Efficacy of Buddhist Lovingkindness Meditation,” returns to the conversation about intrapsychic wholeness, the womanist value of wholeness, the introduction of Theravada Buddhist nun Ayya Khema and her views on wholeness from a Buddhist perspective, lovingkindness meditation as an antidote for ego fracturing, a return to commentary from Engler and Muzika with an introduction to another object relations commenter, McDargh.

Chapter 8 is the concluding chapter that offers care and counseling recommendations specifically for African-American Buddhist lesbians, but can be modified for others. *Object Relations, Buddhism, and Relationality in Womanist Practical Theology* offers current scholarship in Western Object Relations Theory, a Buddhist view on object formation and dissipation through meditation, a Buddhist view on what it means to be pastoral, an African-inspired relational dynamic not present in Buddhist scholarship, a womanist definition with a black Buddhist lesbian hermeneutic that expands what womanism means and can be, and demonstrates how Buddhist practices in the Insight tradition promotes Remarkable Relational Resilience for women marginalized by sexism, racism, homophobia, and Christian supremacy.

Buddhism takes many forms around the world and in the US.⁸ Insight Meditation Society (IMS) was originally founded in Massachusetts in 1975 by Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield, and Sharon Salzberg. Since its founding, an overwhelming number of dharma teachers, perhaps ironically in the context of a racially and ethnically pluralistic society, happen to be white.⁹ Yet, as Insight Meditation has grown in the US, more dharma teachers of color have been trained, including Larry Yang, Gina Sharpe, Spring Washam, DaRa Williams, Bonnie Duran, Bhante (another word for “monk”) Buddharakkhita, Anushka Fernandopulle, and JoAnna Harper.

Many more people of color, myself included, have been trained to be Community Dharma Leaders (CDLers). Though CDLers are not full dharma teachers, we can start meditation groups and communities and lead short meditation retreats with the “blessing” of the Insight dharma teachers and community. The impact of having teachers of color may not yet be fully known, but there is greater awareness that the absence of people of color who are dharma teachers has meant that the Insight Meditation communities were virtually silent on the subjects of justice, pluralistic scriptural interpretation, interracial dialogue, and critical race social analysis. Groups for LGBTQ, women, and various ethnic groups and retreats specifically for these various groups, have formed within the Insight communities, providing support to some and confusion for others who do not understand the need to relate to like-minded people, or believe doing so is contrary to what Buddhism is or should be. Given that Insight in the US was founded by three white Jewish Americans just four decades ago, the growth and diversity within Insight is remarkable. But what are the narratives undergirding Insight Meditation that make it attractive to people from a variety of backgrounds? Insight does not emphasize the depravity of women as some strands of thought in Theravada Buddhism do; unlike some Zen schools that emphasize the absolute or ultimate reality of no gender, Insight acknowledges the relative reality and existence of different gender expressions. The equality of women and embracing different gender expressions separates Insight Meditation communities from an ancient and monastic Theravada Buddhism, but what about sexuality and same-sex attraction? Whether African-American Buddhist lesbians (or same-sex loving women) left church looking for a safer spiritual home on the basis of sexual oppression (which many of the research participants did not), they have found a place of relative “gay safety” in Insight. Cadge concludes:

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual people are comfortable today in all kinds of Buddhist organizations founded by white people across the country because Buddhist texts are generally read in the United States as being neutral about homosexuality and there is little antigay discrimination and prejudice at Buddhist centers. While there are certainly examples of homophobic behaviors at particular centers, these examples are fewer than in centers in many other religious traditions.¹⁰

Though there may be little antigay discrimination and prejudice at Insight Buddhist centers, practitioners like research participant Alicia may belong to more than one center or sangha. Alicia said:

I feel that some aspects of myself are validated [in sangha]. I feel like my spiritual practice is definitely validated and supported ... I don't always feel like my perceptions or my perceptions of reality as I experience it are always validated as an African-American person, but it's kind of funny that sometimes I do feel validated very much so I'm a member of a person of color sangha, I'm a member of an LGBTQ sangha ... so it just depends on what sangha I'm in and what it is I need by way of validation It's unfortunate in some ways I have felt like I sort of segment—that I've had to, that I felt like I had to join multiple sanghas to have my needs met.

I feel that some aspects of myself are validated. I feel like my spiritual practice is definitely validated and supported by people in my sangha and by my teachers. I don't always feel like my perceptions of reality as I experience it are always validated as an African-American person, but it's kind of funny that sometimes I do feel validated very much so. Most of the people in my sangha are white and most are heterosexual, but I do have—I'm a member of several different sanghas. I'm a member of a person of color sangha, I'm a member of an LGBTQ sangha, a dedicated practitioner sangha at Spirit Rock, I'm a member of a couple more sanghas [chuckle] so it just depends on what sangha I'm in and what it is I need by way of validation. In the POC [people of color] sangha I feel very validated as an African American person, [in] my LGBTQ sangha I feel validated as a member of the queer community ... and that's probably not an experience that someone who's [recording garbled, but I presume from the context Alicia was referring white heterosexual Americans] has to contend with, you know, they can pretty much show up at most of the sanghas in my spiritual community, in my Theravada Buddhist community, and they will be welcomed and accepted in the vast majority of them. But I don't necessarily consider it a detriment 'cause I enjoy being a member of all these sanghas and I get to learn a great deal about people and so it's been nourishing nonetheless.

Cadge is close to being correct about homosexuality and neutrality for white people in Insight communities, but it is more accurate to say sexuality (heterosexual, pansexual, bisexual, asexual, homosexual, and all other identities on the spectrum) are largely nonissues for dharma teachers to dwell on with householders, and not addressed in Buddhist scriptures, beyond the precept of using one's sexuality responsibly for lay people, or for the case of monastics, practicing celibacy since attaining the highest level of spiritual attainment requires refraining from sexual activity which, heterosexual or otherwise, promotes clinging, craving, and thus rebirth into other rounds of suffering.

Though Insight Buddhism promotes equality, it comes from androcentric roots and myths, including a prevailing narrative (there are many) of who the Buddha was and how he came to be. It is important to know this story in order to understand the core of Buddhist teachings and understand why women, people of African descent, same-sex loving women, and people with these intersecting identities (such as my research participants) might find this story appealing. One of the prevailing narratives says that Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha's name before he became enlightened, was born into a wealthy family. Seven days after he was born, his mother, Maya, died. Siddhartha was raised by his father and Maya's sister, Mahapajapati Gotami. As the story goes, Siddhartha's father, Suddhodana, gave Siddhartha every material possession he could have with the hope his son would want to inherit Suddhodana's wealth, power, and status. The strategy of spoiling his son worked for the first three decades of Siddhartha's life. Siddhartha married a woman, Yasodhara, who gave birth to their son, but their possessions and his familial relationships were ultimately not enough to keep Siddhartha committed to that way of life. Eventually, Siddhartha left his comfortable community and encountered someone who was sick, someone who was old, and a corpse. These encounters shocked the wealthy, powerful, spoiled, and secluded Siddhartha and for the first time he began to wonder if he might experience the same things. Afraid for his own well-being, he left his wife and son, and fled to the forest to engage in a variety of austere spiritual practices that he hoped would help him avoid sickness, aging, and death. After six years of these practices, including severely limiting his food intake to the point of near starvation, a young girl named Sujata approached him with something to drink. He drank it and proclaimed the Middle Way—the way of no extremes—a shift in consciousness that led to other insights about the nature of reality.

After his realization of the Middle Way, Siddhartha was heavy-hearted. He knew that his knowledge was special and not known to others. As he contemplated living as a recluse for the rest of his life, he was visited by the creator god Brahma who told Siddhartha to reject his impulse and instead, out of deep compassion, teach others so that they could realize what he had realized. Siddhartha began teaching and became known as the Buddha, the awakened one. The Buddha began to attract followers as he went from grove to grove teaching a new dharma (contrary to the prevailing Vedic dharma). The new dharma did not support belief in Vedic hierarchy, Vedic anthropology, or Vedic rituals. The new dharma did not support the notion of a soul or a Self. The Buddha's teachings, or Buddhadharmā, espoused no Self and therefore no hierarchy,

and no usefulness in conjuring rituals. The Buddhadharma espoused the Middle Way, liberation from delusion, deep concentrative meditation, mindfulness, the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Noble Path, character development, and a variety of ethical perspectives.

It is also said in some traditions that there will be many Buddhas and that each time a Buddha is born, *his* mother dies seven days after his birth. The word Maya (Siddhartha's mother's name) means "illusion," as if she never existed. It is also the case in some Buddha stories that the Buddha was conceived through a white elephant entering Maya's side. Some Buddhist anthropologies say that a woman's reproductive organs are vile and thus a Buddha cannot possibly come out of such filth. The Vinaya, the code of behavior for Theravada monastics, says it is better for a man's penis to burn in hot coals than to enter a woman's vagina. This is not the Buddhism of Insight nor the Buddhism of the women in this research project. Insight Meditation communities in the US promote the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, regular meditation, meditation retreats, and enlightenment (insight or awareness are other words used to describe an evolved consciousness). The understanding that Buddhism accepts suffering as a given for the unenlightened, a method for the end of suffering including meditation, and the promise of a new way of seeing and being, appeals to those who are open to experimenting with their minds, and those who want to feel better than they do—including women, people of African descent, same-sex loving women, and people for whom these identities intersect. The IMC dharma teachers play a significant role in how practitioners experience and become Buddhists. An Insight dharma teacher is likely to become skilled in teaching the core teachings in Theravada Buddhism including the Four Noble Truths.

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

The Four Noble Truths conceptually reduces our universal existential threats into manageable "pieces" while also prescribing a step-by-step method for easing the generalized anxiety of being human. The Four Noble Truths include: (1) there is suffering; (2) suffering has its causes; (3) there is a way out of the causes for suffering; and (4) the way out of suffering is through the Noble Eightfold Path. The Noble Eightfold Path includes: (1) Right View; (2) Right Intention; (3) Right Speech; (4) Right Action; (5) Right Livelihood; (6) Right Effort; (7) Right Mindfulness; and (8) Right Concentration.

Returning to the First Noble Truth that there is suffering—keeping in mind the story of Siddhartha's six-year attempt to avoid illness, old age, and

death through austere and extreme spiritual practices, it is considered a “gift,” a relief to know that one’s innate suffering is not particular to one’s particular body, one’s particular personality, or one’s particular thoughts. This belief that “there is suffering” relieves one of the futile attempts to avoid the unavoidable, freeing one to place that energy of avoidance elsewhere. From an Insight Meditation perspective, the First Noble Truth, with scant attention paid to Theravada Buddhist or Vedic cosmology that argues that suffering comes from being born in the lower castes, places no blame for suffering on deities or Gods. It might be appealing to someone who grew up in church to know that their suffering is not caused by a God who is not pleased with them. The Second Noble Truth states that suffering has its causes. What are they?

Two overarching categories for the causes for suffering are unwholesome craving and unwholesome clinging. Craving is defined in the *Tanha Sutta* as follows:

And which are the 18 craving-verbalizations dependent on what is internal? There being “I am,” there comes to be “I am here,” there comes to be “I am like this” ... “I am otherwise” ... “I am bad” ... “I am good” ... “I might be” ... “I might be here” ... “I might be like this” ... “I might be otherwise” ... “May I be” ... “May I be here” ... “May I be like this” ... “May I be otherwise” ... “I will be” ... “I will be here” ... “I will be like this” ... “I will be otherwise.” These are the 18 craving-verbalizations dependent on what is internal.¹¹

and in the *Tanhavagga Sutta* as:

If its root remains
undamaged and strong,
a tree, even if cut,
will grow back.
So too if latent craving
is not rooted out,
this suffering returns
again
and
again.¹²

The cosmic problem with craving that is not transformed into nonattachment is that it leads to suffering in the life following the death in the present life. In addition to craving, there is clinging. Clinging in the *Upadana Sutta* is described as:

Just as if a great mass of fire of ten ... twenty ... thirty or forty cartloads of timber were burning, and into it a man would time and again throw dried grass, dried cow dung, and dried timber, so that the great mass of fire—thus nourished, thus sustained—would burn for a long, long time. In the same way, in one who keeps focusing on the allure of clingable phenomena, craving develops. From craving as a requisite condition comes clinging/sustenance.¹³

It might strike some who wish to be reborn as a human being that the Insight Meditation tradition promotes the end of clinging and craving and thus ends the cycle of rebirth, but if human life and its universal existential suffering cannot be fixed, treated, or eliminated, then one lifetime of suffering might be enough for others. The belief that through Buddhist practice one can cease clinging and craving and therefore avoid suffering is a great motivator. As it relates to causes of suffering, craving and clinging can be transformed, and how is no secret, according to the Third Noble Truth.

The Third Noble Truth, which states that the causes of suffering are knowable to the sufferer, takes the mystery out of knowing oneself. Not only does it take the mystery out, it empowers, inspires, and motivates the believer. The potential for healing from universal existential angst lies within humans themselves. A woman can heal herself from the pain of sexism, a black person can heal from the pain of racism, a lesbian can heal from homophobia, and a person with these intersecting identities can heal from them all through Buddhist practice. When the First, Second, and Third Noble Truths begin to ring true, it gives rise to faith (a spiritual faculty) in one's self and the teachings that come thereafter, the Fourth Noble Truth, outlines an eightfold method to work with the knowable causes of suffering so that one does not needlessly suffer from the universal human existential situation.

THE NOBLE EIGHTFOLD PATH

The way to reduce (some Buddhists say eliminate) suffering and end the round of human rebirth requires: (1) Right View; (2) Right Intention; (3) Right Speech; (4) Right Action; (5) Right Livelihood; (6) Right Effort; (7) Right Mindfulness; and (8) Right Concentration.

Right View

To understand Right View on a phenomenological level, one must have experienced meditation. In meditation, one can come to observe how their thoughts come and go, how their opinions are formed and released, how images arise and disappear, how agitation occurs, and eventually, how none of those things are everlasting or solid. The ultimate Right View, from an Insight Meditation perspective, is no view, the “view” that has arisen through meditation that leaves one feeling like a pulse, a vibration, a breath, and no more. Without this experience, Right View can be understood as “a correct grasp of the law of kamma, the moral efficacy of action.”¹⁴

Right Intention

Right Intention is the intention of renunciation, the intention of good will, and the intention of harmlessness. Recalling one of the Buddha stories, Siddhartha Gautama was wealthy and powerful, a son and nephew, married and a father, and he left it all to work through his existential crises and after awakening and becoming the Buddha, he never returned to householder life. Instead he became a renunciant—a monk—founded an order of monks, then nuns, and monasticism became and remains the higher spiritual way of being, thinking, believing, and living. Monasticism is not part of the Insight Meditation tradition, but many in Insight hold Buddhist monastics in high esteem, and some even become monks and nuns themselves. In Insight Meditation, dharma teachers do not teach their students to renounce their parents, spouses, and children, but teach the renunciation of other things that cause suffering like unhealthy attachments.

Right Speech

Right Speech is considered truthful, promotes wholeness, and is meaningful. It also includes renunciation from speech that follows ill will and deception. Therefore, even when no talking is taking place, if the silence is a renunciation from lying, it is considered Right Speech. Right Speech also has other qualities which include an “art” of speaking so that wise ones might say the speech was well spoken because it does not result in negative kamma. In order for Right Speech to rise to the level of being well spoken, the speech should be offered in a timely, friendly, and beneficial way with Right Intention.

Right Action

Right Action is behavior that does not result in suffering. Right Action is refraining from killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct. One can argue that Right Action involves more than refraining from killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct because speech is an action; therefore, Right Action involves the elements of Right Speech. Forming an intention is mental action, therefore Right Action also involves the elements of Right Intention.

Right Livelihood

In Buddhism it is said that Right Livelihood is refraining from commerce in activities that cause suffering, including human trafficking, weaponry, consuming animals, intoxicants, and other things that kill people, including poison.

Right Effort

When contemplating behaviors and the level of ease or intensity to enact these behaviors, in the service of reducing suffering for others and one's self, Right Effort involves elements of Right View, Right Intention, mindfulness, the cultivation of wholesome desire, the renunciation of unwholesomeness, the paramita¹⁵(character perfection) of determination for what is wholesome, the ability to discern beneficial from unbeneficial possible consequences, agency to make choices, an understanding of kamma, and I would argue, wisdom about one's limits.

Right Mindfulness

Mindfulness, in the Theravada Buddhist tradition, is the steady attention on one's body, mind, feelings, and mental qualities with the Right Intention of abandoning greed and the release of stress about the state of the world. Mindfulness is a method or technique to be at peace in the world as it is without clinging and craving, and is said to be the foundation for deeper states of meditation called absorption or Right Concentration.

Right Concentration

According to the Maggasamyutta,¹⁶ it is said that the Buddha said Right Concentration is when a bhikkhu (a monk) is in a place secluded from

sensual pleasures,¹⁷ and secluded from unwholesome states enters into ever-deepening states of meditation whereby the mind becomes unified.¹⁸

In essence, Right Concentration is not about how long one can keep their attention on any one thing without being distracted, but “Concentration” is progressive stages of a type of still and quiet consciousness that cannot perceive pain, pleasure, or a mixture of sensations. “Right” in this context is about wholesomeness; therefore, Right Concentration is the progressively still and quiet meditative stages that eventually go beyond perception of sensations that humans want to cling to and ultimately crave, and perceptions that humans want to avoid.

The Noble Eightfold Path is a method of ethics that also reorients the mind, changes behavior, and with mindfulness and meditation, brings wholeness and wholesomeness to the transformative process from being I-centered to other-regarding, and serves to protect practitioners from the shock of life’s realities.

THE BRAHMA VIHARAS

Buddhist scholars disagree on the origin and meaning of the Brahma Viharas, which are often translated as the “four immeasurables” and include compassion, equanimity, lovingkindness, and sympathetic joy. Some say the Brahma Viharas originated out of The Buddha’s meditation, others say that the Brahma Viharas are a direct political confrontation with the Vedic priests about what and who is actually holy.¹⁹ No matter the origin and meaning, cultivating compassion, equanimity, lovingkindness, and sympathetic joy are part of the Insight Meditation community practice.

Compassion

Compassion means to suffer with others. In some Tibetan Buddhist traditions, compassion means to suffer for others. In some Zen traditions, there is no difference between self and other, so suffering and compassion are not localized. In the Insight tradition, compassion can mean teaching others about the Noble Four Truths and how to travel the Noble Eightfold Path. Recalling the Buddha story, Brahma, the creator god, visited the Buddha after his awakening to encourage him to teach others what he had learned. Dharma teachers in the Insight tradition tend to be revered because they teach out of a dispassionate compassion.

Equanimity

The concept of deep equanimity that comes from meditation was discussed in the section on Right Concentration, but mundane equanimity can also be practiced through mindfulness and the cognitive technique of dialectics as expressed in the eight vicissitudes of loss and gain, disrepute and fame, praise and blame, and pleasure and pain.²⁰ Insight practitioners are taught that through mindfulness of thoughts, they can see the arising—and if not the arising, then the presence—of certain thoughts, like “I have gained something.” The experience of having gained something that was wanted can lead to a pleasurable feeling, a pleasurable feeling can lead to an attempt to cling to the feeling because it is pleasurable. Rather than get caught in the clinging that leads to suffering, practitioners are taught to momentarily reflect on the feeling of loss to bring themselves to a state of balance and avoid the narcissism that can come from over-identifying with the gain. This balancing of cognitive processes can also be used when one experiences fame, praise, and other types of pleasurable experiences. The dialectical process also works in the reverse order to soothe negative feelings. For example, if one experiences loss and pain resulting from loss, and then aversion to loss when loss is inevitable, they can momentarily recall an experience of gain to bring them to balance and support a holistic or nondualistic way of thinking. Mindfulness meditation and Right Concentration also support equanimity.

Lovingkindness

The *Metta Sutta* states that one should reflect on happiness and security for all without discrimination.²¹

Lovingkindness meditation practice is based on the *Metta Sutta*. A short version of the meditation might include these phrases, said silently to oneself, or said aloud by a dharma teacher or leader:

May I be happy
 May I be free
 May I be free from suffering

May others be happy
 May others be free
 May others be free from suffering

The meditator, after having sat in silent meditation, may recite similar phrases to themselves silently, or may be guided by a teacher leading the student from cultivating lovingkindness for themselves, then for someone they regard positively, then for someone they have neutral or mixed feelings for, then for someone they don't care for, then to all sentient beings on the planet, in the universe, and throughout other realms of existence, if Buddhist cosmology is part of the student's belief system.

Sympathetic Joy

Nyanaponika Thera writes:

Sympathetic joy holds compassion back from becoming overwhelmed by the sight of the world's suffering, from being absorbed by it to the exclusion of everything else. Sympathetic joy relieves the tension of mind, soothes the painful burning of the compassionate heart. It keeps compassion away from melancholic brooding without purpose, from a futile sentimentality that merely weakens and consumes the strength of mind and heart. Sympathetic joy develops compassion into active sympathy.²²

Cultivating sympathetic joy is aided by Right Concentration coupled with the belief, taught in Insight, that there is no self.²³ Brahma Vihara practices themselves promote selflessness as in less selfishness, and the teachings on whether this is or is not a self is debated in Insight communities.

It is taught in Theravada Buddhism, the tradition that gave rise to Insight Meditation, that attachment (craving and clinging) leads to suffering. In the Chapter of the Fours, Four Wonderful Things, it is written:

People generally find pleasure in attachments, take delight in attachments and enjoy attachments. But when the Dhamma of non-attachment is taught by the Tathagata, people wish to listen to it, give ear and try to understand it. This is the first wonderful and marvelous thing that appears on the manifestation of a Tathagata, an Arahant, a Fully Enlightened One.²⁴

Buddhism in the Insight Meditation tradition is considered a way of life, a religion, a philosophy, a practice, a set of ethics, and/or a psychology depending on a variety of factors. Insight practitioners tend not to focus on whether Buddhism is a religion or a philosophy but tend to think in terms of practice as a way of life. Within the practice, there is mindfulness, meditation, the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, the paramitas,

the Five Remembrances, the vicissitudes, the Brahma Viharas, and Buddhist anthropology regarding the nature of one's self or no self. Buddhism is much more complex than these elements suggest because it involves politics, history, the Vinaya, Buddhist ethics, dharma teacher and dharma leader training, different types of meditation retreats, the Pali Canon, the Abhidhamma, the Visuddhimagga, and the Dhammapada. One can study Buddhism in the Insight tradition (and study is encouraged) for many years, if not a lifetime. The purpose of this chapter is to introduce readers to some of the core elements of Insight Meditation Buddhism. Though founded in the US in 1975 and predominantly populated and led by European-descended people, Insight has been rapidly changing demographically over the past two decades. The inclusion of more people of color, including teachers,²⁵ has moved Insight in a more relational and justice-advocating direction.

Understanding Buddhism, surprisingly, is also helpful in understanding womanist Christian theology. The African-American, Buddhist practitioner, sexually fluid novelist and poet Alice Walker coined the term "womanist," which gave birth to womanist Christian theology. In order to understand Walker's Buddhist-inspired, sexually fluid womanism more fully, scholars need to incorporate a lesbian and Buddhist-inspired hermeneutic and revival in womanist Christian theology.

NOTES

1. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/05/christians-remain-worlds-largest-religious-group-but-they-are-declining-in-europe/> (accessed August 15, 2017).
2. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhism_in_the_United_States (accessed August 15, 2017).
3. Pamela Ayo Yetunde, "A New Spelling of Our Names: An Exploration of the Psycho-Spiritual Experiences of African-American Lesbians in the Insight Tradition," 2016.
4. Wendy Cadge, "Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Buddhist Practitioners" in *Gay Religion*, eds. Scott Thuma and Edward R. Gray (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2005). The Insight Meditation tradition was founded in the 1970s by three white Americans, Sharon Salzberg, Jack Kornfield, and Joseph Goldstein. They practiced Buddhism in the Theravada traditions of Southeast Asia. Their form of practice came from months-long vipassana (insight) meditation retreats. Their main retreat centers in the US are the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts, and Spirit Rock

- Meditation Center in Woodacre, California. Spirit Rock is my Buddhist spiritual home.
5. Roger Corless, “Gay Buddhist Fellowship,” in *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, ed. Christopher S. Queen (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2000).
 6. Winston Leyland, *Queer Dharma: Voices of Gay Buddhists* (San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1998) and *Queer Dharma: Voices of Gay Buddhists, Volume 2* (San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 2000).
 7. I use the terms “no self” and “nonself” synonymously. I believe I first encountered the term “nonself” in Thich Nhat Hanh’s writings, but the term “no self” is used more frequently in other Zen traditions as well as the Theravada and Insight Meditation traditions. My use of “nonself” is not to suggest I have a preference for that terminology but to illustrate my Buddhist formation and conditioning in the Community of Mindful Living.
 8. Read *Buddhist Religions: A Historical Introduction*, Fifth Edition (2005), by Robinson, Johnson, and Thanissaro for a historical overview of the local founding and global proliferation of Buddhism.
 9. The names of some of the more well-known Insight dharma teachers who are white also include: Sylvia Boorstein, Gil Fronsdal, Steve Armstrong, Sally Armstrong, Guy Armstrong, Rebecca Bradshaw, Chas DiCapua, Christina Feldman, Andrea Fella, Michael Grady, Kittisaro, Thanissara, Tempel Smith, Mark Coleman, Sharda Rogell, Wes Nisker, Phillip Moffitt, Donald Rothberg, James Baraz, Anna Douglas, Eugene Cash, and Debra Chamberlin-Taylor.
 10. Wendy Cadge, “Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Buddhist Practitioners,” 149.
 11. <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an04/an04.199.than.html> (accessed August 21, 2017).
 12. <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/dhp/dhp.24.than.html> (accessed August 21, 2017).
 13. <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn12/sn12.052.than.html> (accessed August 21, 2017).
 14. Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Noble Eightfold Path: Way to the End of Suffering* (Onalaska, WA: Pariyatti Publishing, 1984, 1999).
 15. Insight Meditation Dharma Teacher Sylvia Boorstein offers a commentary of the paramitas in *Pay Attention, For Goodness’ Sake* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002).
 16. The Maggasamyutta—Connected Discourses on the Path is in the Pali Canon collection of suttas called *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha—A Translation of the Samyutta Nikaya* by Bhikkhu Bodhi (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 1523.

17. When one attends a meditation retreat at an Insight Meditation retreat center, they will typically find that the setting is clean, austere, scentless, and occupied with only a few or no statues or other pieces of art.
18. Retreatants at Insight Meditation retreat centers are asked to refrain from intoxicants, sexual activity, and other activities that might form or maintain attachments, so that retreatants can experience wholesome states of mind.
19. John Peacock, a Buddhist scholar from Great Britain, spoke at my Community Dharma Leadership training program, about the possibility that the Buddha was more of a political figure than a religious figure. His talk was rejected by many of my classmates.
20. The Vicissitudes of Life in Chapter of the Eights is in The Pali Canon collection of suttas call *The Anguttara Nikaya—Numerical Discourses* translated by Nyanaponika Thera and Bhikkhu Bodhi (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 1999), 198.
21. Gil Fronsdal, *The Issue at Hand: Essays on Buddhist Mindfulness Practice* (2001), 146.
22. <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/nyanaponika/wheel006.html#inter> (accessed August 23, 2017).
23. I argue that the confusion lies partly in the absence of teachers and students discussing the suttas out of the context of Vedic beliefs where Atman, or Self, meant soul and anatman meant no soul, not that there was no body.
24. *Anguttara Nikaya*, 110.
25. According to Insight Dharma Teacher Larry Yang, George Mumford, an African-American man, may have been the first person of color to become an Insight dharma teacher through “transmission,” or individual mentoring from another dharma teacher. A few other teachers of color followed. According to Yang, “People practiced with individual teachers, mentored with them ... and then started teaching ... all very ambiguous and loose. In this way it could be very selective on a personal level and didn’t consider the community or larger social needs. Ralph Steele was the first teacher of African descent to go through the ‘official’ Spirit Rock Teacher Training ending in 2002. After that, the next fully authorized teachers of color were Anushka Fernandopulle, Gina Sharpe, Spring Washam, and myself in 2010.” Fernandopulle, Sharpe, Washam, and Yang were unauthorized teachers long before they became authorized. Yang continues, “currently there are only 10 teachers of color, who both self-identify as a POC and are fully authorized to teach. That will change radically in 2020 when another 32 get added to this list of 10. Amazing. We will have 42 Teachers of color in 2020. Amazing” (personal communication, August 21, 2017, via email).