

Understanding Power, Privilege, Intent, and Impact in Catholic-Buddhist and Buddhist-Catholic Social Change Initiatives

Mushim Patricia Ikeda
East Bay Meditation Center

May we be protectors to those without protection
and leaders to those who journey,
and a boat, a bridge, a passage
to those who desire the further shore of non-suffering.
May the pain of every living creature be completely
cleared away.

—adapted from Shantideva’s *Way of the Bodhisattva*

Today, June 27, 2015, along with many in my Buddhist community in Oakland, California, I *rejoice* in yesterday’s Supreme Court decision that made gay and same-sex marriage legal in all fifty states. I *mourn* our murdered spiritual leaders at “Mother Emanuel” AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. And I *affirm* the liberatory power of the #BlackLives-Matter movement for all people.

At East Bay Meditation Center (EBMC), our weekly meditation groups are for self-identified people of color; for members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, questioning, and two-spirit community; and for folks with disabilities, chronic illness, and chronic pain. There is also a weekly group open to all. Our Dharma center is a refuge for many who are excluded from or feel isolated at other Buddhist temples and centers in the United States. Our practice at EBMC is love and inclusivity made real through our Communication Agreements (see Appendix) and ways of being together.

For this Catholic-Buddhist panel at the Mariopolis Center, we are now in our post-dialogue planning session. The various Catholic and Buddhist organizations in urban areas of the United States might be able to readily identify the most pressing manifestations of societal suffering, such as homelessness, hunger, gentrification, poverty, addiction, “the school to prison pipeline” for young men of color, incarceration in general, unemployment, and so on. And, if Buddhists and Catholics are to work together, and if our efforts are to be truly transformative and useful, the social forms of suffering and oppression that we wish to address must first be recognized, named, and described *in how we interact with one another*. Otherwise, we will end up unconsciously, through fear of conflict, replicating “in here” the patterns of domination and oppression

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that are part of the causal conditions of the problems we wish to address “out there.”

It may feel counterintuitive to take time at the beginning of a multireligious initiative to explore “how we want to be together,” to build trust through facilitated and structured activities, and to find communication agreements that have one hundred percent buy-in. After all, people are hungry and dying in the streets “out there,” and there is a reality-based sense of emergency and urgency to get going and “do something” with our combined resources. However, we have discovered at my home temple that unless any project begins mindfully through the process I just described, and unless we reach consensus on how to be together and what to do when (not if!) conflict arises, there is no foundation on which to build our relationship.

Thus, how do we first slow down and agree to do the work that needs to be done internally as socially engaged Catholics and Buddhists in order to be more effective in the long run? How do we create budgets for skilled facilitators and go through the process of finding a time and space that works for the greatest number of people in our busy and often overextended Buddhist and Catholic groups? How do we shift from the sense of *emergency* and *urgency* to building trust and love and emphasizing the *emergence* of friendship and understanding? How do we shift to flexible leadership and to faith in the efficacy of sacred and empowered *presence*?

If we never ask these practical questions about motivation, time, space, and money, or if we ask them and then out of frustration or impatience fail to engage in community-based processes to answer them, we could easily end up with groups from our two religions that are composed of wonderful, energetic, capable people . . . and groups that are reflective only of the dominant culture’s values and ways of doing things. Or we might end up with groups that are

more diverse but in which white men, or members of the owning class, nevertheless end up doing most of the talking and decision making.

Paul Kivel, a leading Bay Area social justice activist and consultant and a white Jewish man, began a diversity training session for San Francisco Zen Center by stating calmly, “Because this organization exists within a racist society, we can assume that racist behaviors and incidents occur here. Would anyone be willing to describe an incidence of racism at Zen Center?” Kivel modeled that these scary discussions can be held with kindness, forthrightness, clarity, and without blaming or shaming. If we want to live up to our highest spiritual ideals, we need to start by naming the ways in which power and unearned privilege play out within our own organizations, and in the alliances we are trying to form with other organizations. And after we recognize and name these non-inclusive dynamics, we need to find ways, once again, to encourage emergent leadership and a culture of co-responsibility so as to invite all to “show up at the table” in the fullness of who we are, including our many talents and skills and our different ways of speaking, thinking, and accomplishing tasks.

Creating this inclusiveness is not easy. It may be one of the most difficult social problems to solve: How can good-hearted people of goodwill and faith make the quantum leap in collective consciousness that is required to work together and interact in radically transformative, new ways? How do we, together, grow to understand that our good *intentions* may have negative *impacts*, that we need to ask the people we wish to serve what *their* needs are, how *they* want to be respected, and by what names *they* wish to be called?

Language and naming are important. When my son was a student in a public high school in Oakland, one day we were out

walking in our neighborhood. A flyer in a bookstore window proclaimed that a literacy program his class was accessing in San Francisco was designed “to help disadvantaged youth.” “Look,” I said, “you’re evidently a disadvantaged youth.” Being placed in this box made my son so angry he began screaming in rage, which was uncharacteristic of him, and I had to haul him down the street. To him, he and his classmates, almost all youth of color and many from low-income and immigrant families in Oakland, were just people.

Many of us, over many years, have developed practices of contemplation, prayer, meditation, and deep spiritual inquiry. These practices can be our strength. In forging Catholic-Buddhist alliances to address social suffering, we can turn to one another first and practice deep inquiry and deep listening, asking, “How do you want us to be with one another? What will create the conditions for you to feel safe, included, seen, heard, and valued? What are good pronouns for you? What supports your spiritual life? How do you self-identify your gender, your sexual orientation, your ethnicity? How can we become good spiritual friends in order to address suffering both inside ourselves and in the greater society?”

Appendix

*Agreements for Multicultural Interactions*¹

- “TRY IT ON”: Be willing to “try on” new ideas, or ways of doing things that might not be what you prefer or are familiar with.
- PRACTICE SELF FOCUS: Attend to and speak about your own experiences and responses. Do not speak for a whole group or express assumptions about the experience of others.

1. Adapted by East Bay Meditation Center with permission from Visions Inc., “Guidelines for Productive Work Sessions”: www.visions-inc.org),

- UNDERSTAND THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN INTENT AND IMPACT: Try to understand and acknowledge impact. Denying the impact of something said by focusing on intent is often more destructive than the initial interaction.
- PRACTICE “BOTH/AND”: When speaking, substitute “and” for “but.” This practice acknowledges and honors multiple realities.
- REFRAIN FROM BLAMING OR SHAMING SELF & OTHERS: Practice giving skillful feedback.
- MOVE UP/MOVE BACK: Encourage full participation by all present. Take note of who is speaking and who is not. If you tend to speak often, consider “moving back” and vice versa.
- PRACTICE MINDFUL LISTENING: Try to avoid planning what you’ll say as you listen to others. Be willing to be surprised, to learn something new. Listen with your whole self.
- CONFIDENTIALITY: Take home learnings but don’t identify anyone other than yourself, now or later. If you want to follow up with anyone regarding something they said in this session, ask first and respect their wishes.
- RIGHT TO PASS: You can say “I pass” if you don’t wish to speak.

Mushim (Patricia) Ikeda teaches at the East Bay Meditation Center in Oakland, California. She was trained in Korean Son Buddhism, and now teaches social justice-informed mindfulness meditation and Buddhism. She is an author, diversity consultant, and social activist Buddhist leader. She is one of three subjects in the documentary, “Acting on Faith: Women’s New Religious Activism in America,” and received an honorary sacrae theologiae doctorate from Starr King School for the Ministry in September 2015.