

SHAMBHALA SUN

BUDDHIST WISDOM FOR OUR TIME

JANUARY 2015

If you want to be unhappy,
think of yourself.

If you want to be happy,
think of others.

—SAKYONG MIPHAM RINPOCHE

Compassion Changes Everything

5 Baby Steps to Kindness

Judy Lief's tips to develop
more compassion

Everyone Is Your Guest

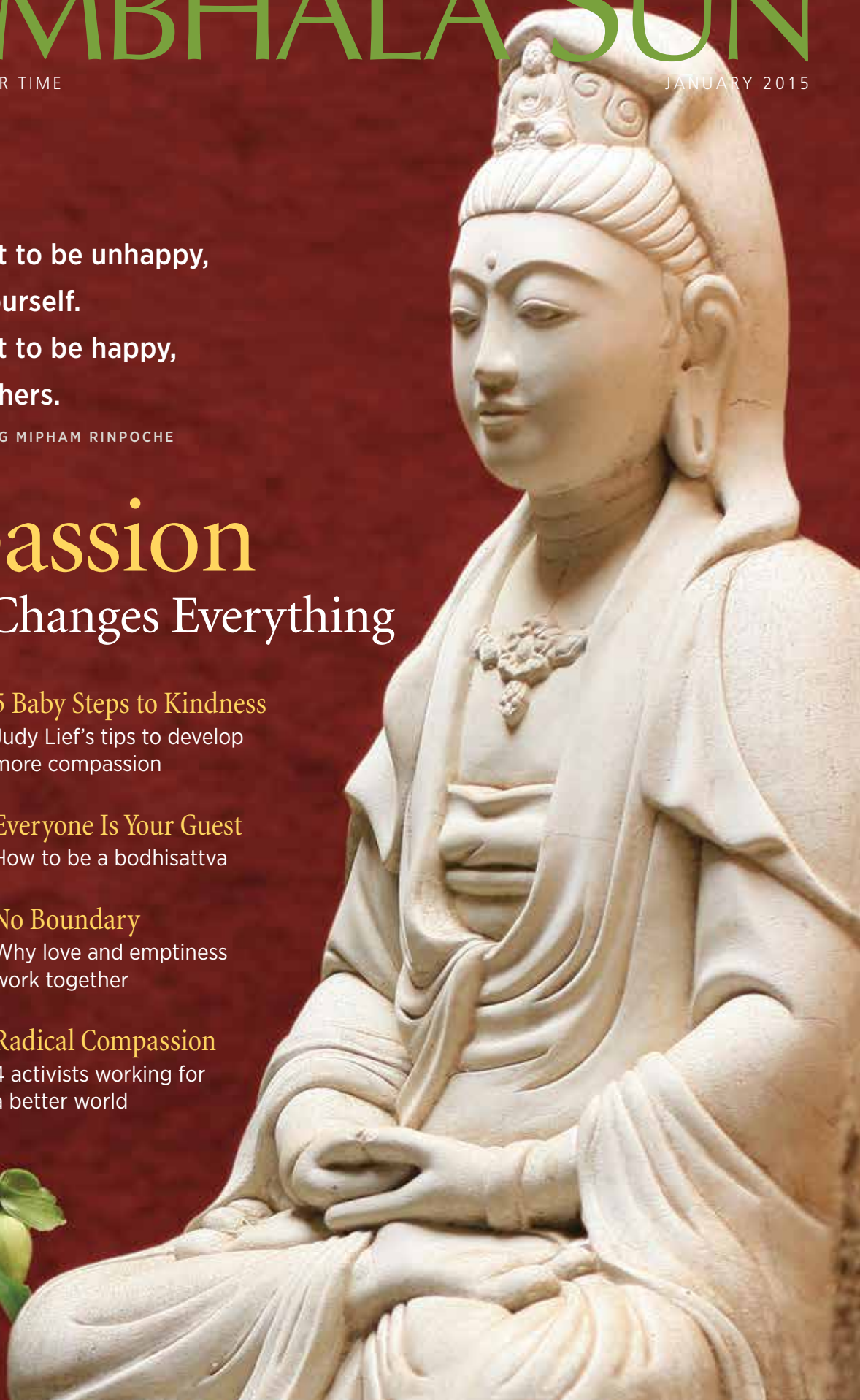
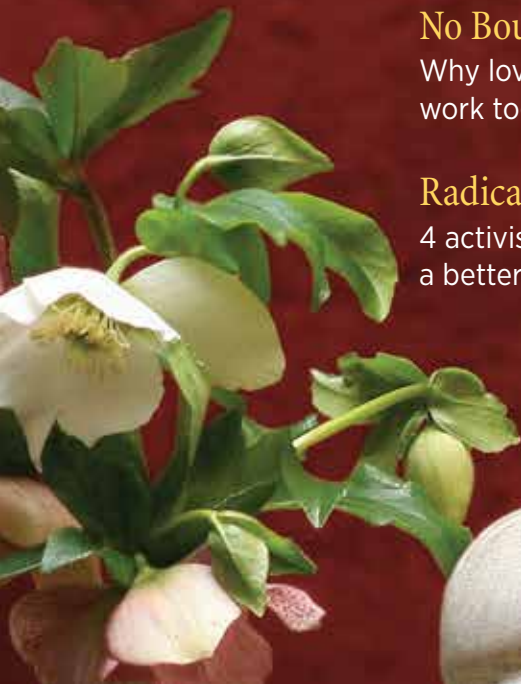
How to be a bodhisattva

No Boundary

Why love and emptiness
work together

Radical Compassion

4 activists working for
a better world





Open Hearts, Open Doors

Buddhist centers cannot be separate from the communities around them. **ROD MEADE SPERRY** takes us to Brooklyn Zen Center, a model of urban dharma and love in action.

PHOTOS BY JESSE JIRYU DAVIS & LUKE HOLLAND

Guest teacher angel kyodo williams addresses Brooklyn Zen Center.

The tale of Brooklyn Zen Center, like so many good coming-up stories, starts in a dingy basement.

After practicing at San Francisco Zen Center, BZC co-founder Laura O’Loughlin moved to Austin, Texas, where she met and fell in love with one Greg Snyder. The two planned to move together to San Francisco to practice Zen, but family emergencies instead grounded them in Brooklyn: O’Laughlin’s sister was dying there, and after she passed away, they stayed to take care of her father, who was in his final years.

“We visited other Zen centers in the area,” she remembers, “but I had a heartfelt connection to San Francisco Zen Center, which felt like my family too.” Together with friend Ian Case, O’Laughlin and Snyder decided to get busy building something in Brooklyn that would feel like home.

They created a space first, with the *sangha*, or community, to follow. It was humble. Laura, Greg, and Ian spent the summer of 2005 scraping the walls of a small basement space on 11th Street in Park Slope. It was right next to the building’s boiler room. “We put a little sign out and, incredibly, people slowly started to find us.” The community that would come to be known as the Brooklyn Zen Center was born.

The group grew, guided by visiting teachers like Norman Fischer, the late Darlene Cohen (who had ordained O’Laughlin and encouraged the creation of BZC), and Teah Strozer, who would eventually become the group’s head teacher. By 2009, the sangha relocated from their basement to a one-bedroom apartment on 9th Street, whose living area became a dedicated zendo.

“We would do retreats of thirty people on top of each other, with the kitchen and the bathroom right there,” O’Laughlin recalls. Cozy though it was, the group would again move two years later, to its current home at 505 Carroll Street in Brooklyn’s Gowanus neighborhood. Strozer led the community in its inaugural five-day retreat at its new home.

Today, Brooklyn Zen Center’s principals and members contemplate the sangha’s ten-year anniversary, and its future. The community continues to grow, practice, and do a lot of great work, but how do you really gauge strength and success when

you’re a Zen center, whose values have little to do with so many of the usual worldly concerns?

Perhaps it all comes down to people.

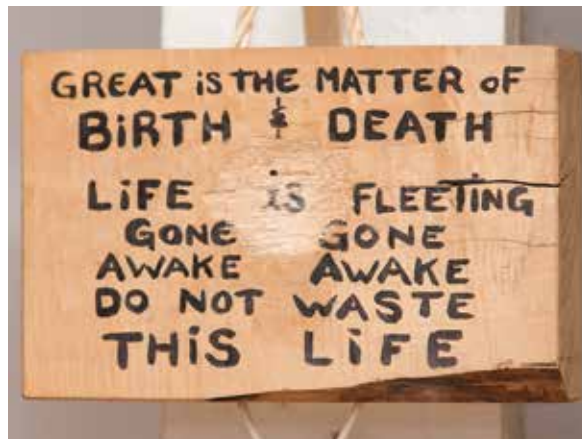
TAKE LOYALTY JEANAIMÉ, for example. She seems, at first, to be rather shy. When I met her on my first visit to BZC, I knew she’d been an important part of the center and asked her to consider talking to me. She *did* consider it, for a good long moment or two, and then, smiling broadly, demurred. Greg Snyder, BZC’s executive director (and JeanAimé’s boss/champion), laughed: “That was pretty good. You got real close!” Apparently, I wasn’t the only person who’d hoped to pick JeanAimé’s brain and failed.

But to say that JeanAimé is “shy” is in no way sufficient. As Strozer says, “She’s quiet a lot of the time, but she asks really interesting questions.” And she gets things done. “I’m an artist,” JeanAimé affirmed when I finally did earn an audience with her. “I’m a singer and a rapper.” Notions of “shyness” now out the window, I ask her that impossible question: *How would you describe your music?* “I’m going for something that’s really effortless, something that’s raw and true. Meditation-like, always being in the moment.”

She’s working on a new mixtape release, she says, and she lights up a little as she talks about it.

JeanAimé also lights up when she talks about BZC. When she first came here at age sixteen, it was by way of an internship through the Brooklyn College Arts Lab. She had only meditated once before, but this time it stuck. “We meditated, we did music, we did mindful cooking, all that good stuff. It was different from other places I’d usually be at in my everyday life.

Clockwise from top: The Brooklyn Zen sangha gathers before the People’s Climate March; Loyalty JeanAimé (right) who helps lead the Awake Youth Project, with fellow AYP grad and gun-violence panel organizer Dajeon Aiken; BZC members march (that’s Board Chair Alex Sierck with little one in tow); Yeshwant Chitalkar helps lead the inclusivity committee and people of color group. He’s also “an amazing cook,” says executive director Greg Snyder; meditation time in the zendo; spirited and friendly discussion in the Friday Night Zen group, which caters to younger practitioners.



Members are called to practice by the striking of the han, adorned with a classic Zen reminder.



Everything was very aesthetically pleasing. It was really quiet and peaceful and open.”

But while it felt natural to be at the center, getting there was another story. “Location is important,” JeanAimé tells me. “I think BZC is secluded in a sense. I’m black, and so I live in Brownsville. Greg can just walk down here, but it probably takes me an hour to get here.”

While many meditation centers charge little or nothing for programs, even the subway tickets can make participation impossible for many people. “Meditation,” JeanAimé says, “can be expensive! If you’re black, if you’re young, meditation is a very different thing to do, so your mindset already has to be somewhere else to decide to come here. Then, physically, you’re actually *going* somewhere else. And

when you get here and everybody is white, it’s harder to call this your own.

“We have to somehow make things work where everybody can be a part of it and it’s not just some middle-class thing that white people do. It’s important to see your face represented. Meditation centers should keep that in mind.”

It quickly became clear to the leaders at BZC (many middle-class whites themselves) that the then-nineteen-year-old JeanAimé offered a very different point of view on what BZC could and should be. So they asked her to be an intern instructor in BZC’s Awake Youth Project, which brings guidance about mindfulness and meditation to young people in underserved Brooklyn high schools. Then, they asked her to join the center’s board of directors.

If the inclusion of someone so young on the BZC board seems like an unusual move, well, that’s the point. As Greg Snyder puts it:

“A community is as strong as the voices that are heard in it. We wanted to have a young person’s voice on the board, to hear questions they would ask, like ‘Why would you make this fee policy? Nobody my age is going to come near that.’

“After all, when you have a board made of professionals, all at a certain level, guess who the policies are going to lean toward? I came from a pretty poor family, and that was painful for me—it’s very lonesome, no feeling of community. But I’ve been middle-class for a while now, and it’s easy to forget how I grew up, and what it’s like to really struggle, not to have the money for the subway to get to this place. Now, we have a voice on the

board of somebody who’s intimately familiar with the struggle of nineteen-year-olds and others around that age.”

The Awake Youth Project at BZC has been a gift for everyone involved. It started with a phone call, Snyder remembers: “After maybe two months in this new space, I heard from Denise Page at Brooklyn College Community Partnership: ‘We’re working with some great teens coming from tough circumstances. They’re having a lot of anger issues that we don’t know how to deal with. Do you think meditation would help?’

“I had to smile, because the whole reason I came to meditation was an uncontrollable rage that I could not get a hold on.”

Snyder remembers what he calls “the garbage bag incident” as his own turning moment. “I used to explode and throw furniture. I was twenty-seven or so, taking the garbage out. The

Connecting with Your Community

Whether you’re part of a full-scale Buddhist center or the humblest of sitting groups, there’s always more you can do to share your energy and practice with others. Brooklyn Zen Center executive director GREG SNYDER shares four tips for a deep and helpful relationship with the community around you.



Partners and co-founders Greg Snyder and Laura O’Laughlin.

1. Service. The first of Buddhism’s *paramitas*, or perfections, is generosity. It is first because it opens us up to all the other perfections. It opens us up to life, and we begin to resonate with the way life naturally is. Engage generously with the community around you. Care about what matters to the community you want to be a part of—and that you’d like to be a part of you.

If you’re concerned about diversity, you need to talk about the bias that results in things like the high incarceration rates of African-American men. If I’m a person of color and I walk into a Buddhist community and they’re not talking about the grasping that fuels racism, why should I give them *any* credibility at all?

If we’re just talking about the concerns of the people who are already in our center, then those are the type of people who will come in the future. If everybody in the group is middle-class and white, then the mirrors are limited—you’re only seeing certain aspects of life reflected. We need *all* the mirrors.

2. Take a good look at what’s right in front of you. In the 1980s, San Francisco Zen Center started a major hospice initiative. They did that because they were in the middle of an AIDS crisis. They didn’t say, “Oh we’d rather do union work.” There was a crisis in front of them, so they built a hospice. Whatever’s right in front of you, that’s what you work on.

3. Understand that your space is not neutral. Someone once commented that BZC’s space was welcoming and neutral. So I asked,



At February 2014’s panel on gun violence (left to right): angel Kyodo williams, Greg Snyder, Clarisa James, Stefani Zinerman, Shaina Harrison, Mike Tucker, Chris Foye, Suicide RU, and Marlon Peterson.

“How many people here have completed an undergraduate degree?” Everybody raised a hand. “How many people have a graduate degree?” Half the group, maybe more, raised their hands. “How many went to an Ivy League or comparable school?” Again, half the room.

If you think that’s a neutral environment, you’re out of your mind. The way people talked, their expectations, the conversations they had over lunch—these things don’t add up to a neutral environment.

Many of us take entitlement and privilege as “neutral.” So the first thing that we need to do is become aware of that. We might not see that it’s actually not neutral because entitlement and privilege are what we’re accustomed to. It’s the water we swim in.

So start seeing the environment you’re actually creating. See

the way people are communicating, how they lean, what their assumptions are. Don’t take for granted that the environment in your center is neutral. It’s not.

4. Stop expecting people to come to you!

Why should they come to us? Just because we want a more diverse sangha? Who cares if we want a more diverse sangha? So that we can feel good? No! If communities matter to you, then serve those communities and don’t serve them as *other* communities. Understand that they are *you*.

Our liberation is completely entwined with everyone else’s liberation. Everybody needs to be in the room for all of us to wake up together. It’s not about helping anybody. It’s about us waking up together. ♦

bag broke in my living room and I just started attacking myself: *You stupid idiot, what's wrong with you?*

"When I calmed down, I thought, there's no one here, nobody to *blame* it on. There's only your mind. Around that same time I was reading *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* by Shunryu Suzuki and I thought, this sounds right! So I found a Zen group and started sitting every day, eventually doing a five-day retreat.

"I was furious at anything that moved," he remembers. But at the end of the fourth day, the rage broke. "I still get emotional thinking about it. At that point, I was like, 'Okay, I'm *devoted* to this,' and just kept going and never stopped.



Post-meal cleanup at BZC's kitchen, where everyone pitches in. "I love them," says practitioner John Asreslky (right) about BZC's founders. "It's like when a really good rock band finds itself. A magical blend."

"So, I was able to say to Brooklyn College, 'Yeah, actually I *do* think meditation could help these kids with their anger!'"

They tried a four-week workshop and the kids were into it. "They'd had trouble keeping their attention for thirty minutes," Snyder says, "but with us, they were staying for two hours, having discussions around mindfulness and emotion. It was suggested that we start a Tuesday-Thursday group so that kids from all of the schools could come together."

When Awake Youth was born, he says, that started changing the flavor of Brooklyn Zen Center right away. "Loyalty joined the Board, and we installed Clarisa James as coordinator of community relationships. Now we had somebody specifically asking, 'How are we really going to be in this community in a way that we're actually bringing meditation and mindfulness to life in the city? How does a Zen center bring its strengths to the issues around us that are actually causing suffering?' There's a tremen-

dous amount of gun violence around us here. So out of what were just little events here and there came a fully fleshed-out anti-gun-violence program, with fifteen partners and speaker panels."

Snyder has a long background as an activist, having been active in (for example) labor organizations and the Zapatista Indigenous Rights movement, working directly with the Maya. He recalls a sobering moment of clarity about bringing that passion to bear in his work at BZC:

"What really turned me toward focusing my energy on implicit bias and race was the Renisha McBride case. She was a young woman of color, outside of Detroit. After wrecking her car, she went door-to-door looking for help and a guy shot her through his locked screen door. She was nineteen.

"We had four women, including Loyalty, who had graduated from Awake Youth and were that age, and I was awake for two nights after that happened. I couldn't take the idea of any of these women being shot because of what was in the mind of the person looking at them.

"The second night, I realized that as a Zen practitioner I was in a faith whose specialization is unconscious bias. *That's what we do as Buddhists!* That was when I said to myself that tolerating this kind of thing was not an option anymore. This isn't something that Buddhists should be half-hearted about taking up. We need to get on it. Do we want to continue living in a country where young people of color don't get jobs, or are even killed, because of the way they look?"

Yeshwant Chitalkar, who's instrumental in BZC's Inclusivity Committee, reiterates the

need for different thinking: "I consider ours a very friendly and welcoming sangha, but even here factors like race, color, and privilege come into play. You have to notice it to do something about it. It's an inescapable fact that there are obstacles for persons of color to jobs, to housing, to a good education. As a Buddhist institution, we shouldn't be part of that problem. If we're leaving people out, what does that say about us?"

That sense of responsibility and responsiveness has permeated BZC through and through, causing the sangha to spearhead a host of helpful initiatives in the community around them. In addition to the Awake Youth Project, the gun-violence awareness gatherings, and the inclusivity committee, there's a people of color group (of which Chitalkar is a leader) that meets for practice and discussion. There's a Friday-night "25-35" group that allows younger people to gather socially in a decidedly *non-bar-like* setting and discuss what vexes and interests them. There's a Buddhist twelve-step program



Beyond privilege

To make diversity real, says Zen teacher ANGEL KYODO WILLIAMS, Buddhists must look deep into their own hearts.

BZC executive director Greg Snyder has spoken of a mind-meld that's gone on between you and he, and BZC guiding teacher Teah Strozer. Let's talk about that connection.

I'm a New Yorker. I lived in Fort Greene and had a little sitting group, an offshoot of my main practice home of Village Zendo. Coincidentally, I called it Brooklyn Zen Center because I believed that the practice could arise in the community, from the community. Most places of practice that I saw didn't feel like that. They had a feeling of separateness. I knew that in order for Buddhist practice to take root amongst peoples not defined by a particular Western, white, middle-aged, middle-to-upper-middle-class construct, the practice had to go and meet people and not just expect them to come and find it.

I eventually went to California, and coming back and finding that *this* Brooklyn Zen Center was really doing the work of welcoming was an incredible relief to me, especially because they were doing it in such a compassionate, humble, present, and transparent way.

How does that way manifest?

Many centers say, "Oh, we want to include people so let's invite them to come." But because we, as Western-worldview, dominant-paradigm folks have not done our work, we actually don't know how to be welcoming. An invitation is a gesture. Welcoming, though, is open-armed hospitality. It's in

the heart. I think that what Brooklyn Zen has that many places don't is in its leadership: people who continue to truly examine their own hearts and are willing to address the barriers and the hindrances to being welcoming.

How can we make fundamental changes in ourselves so that we can be welcoming, not just inviting?

Meditation is awesome, but it's not fast enough. People need to get trained. Training amps up the intensity, bringing things intentionally into our view so that we can work on what's there to be worked on.

What will that training help address?

The paradigms and the worldviews of white Western privilege, which have been developed for no other reason but to bestow privilege on a very small group of people and to create separation. That's what the construct of whiteness was for right from the beginning.

This is not about bashing anybody for who they are or for their skin color. This is about a construct that was developed purely and solely in order to create separation and now that construct needs to be deconstructed. If we don't do that, that separation will live on and it will do so, shamefully, in the midst of teachings that are so profoundly gifted with a language, with an approach, with a methodology, to unseat separation. >

It's been some fifteen years since you presented these issues in your acclaimed book, *Being Black*. Are you writing?

I am. One thing I'm working on, that speaks directly to all this, is a book about my own shocked recognition that I have spent many years—in the vernacular of black folks back to the days of slavery—keeping my head down.

How so?

By trying to stay smaller than was organic to the situation and to my experience, because I didn't want to draw the ire of folks in the dharma world. And even though we don't have any singular institution of Zen or Buddhism, there's a power structure, one that is often unspoken. We can recognize it if we look at the Buddhist media and see who's there—who are we being told to look at and listen to, and who is wielding those structures and who seeks to influence them. Many people I've spoken to say they don't feel free, particularly folks of color and, in some traditions, women—each tradition has its own stuck place.

The apparent hierarchy that exists in some of our spiritual structures is there to support us but it's being leveraged as a mask for power structures and privilege. In some places of practice it's very male or heterosexual; in some places it's other things. But pretty much all over the place, it's pretty white.

So is what you're writing part memoir, part guidance for feeling empowered enough to no longer be quiet, or, as you put it, "small"?

Part memoir, part guidance, and a lot of critique. I'm also working on a collection of observations on our society, through what people would call a Buddhist lens. I would just say a lens of liberation. I look at what gets in the way, including the parasitic capitalism that we have not just as an economic structure but also as a religious structure. Capitalism has become a religion—many religions actually deify it at this point—and because of that, we're letting it run amok with no real thought about how to change it.

Does something like the People's Climate March, which BZC was quite involved with, suggest that things are starting to turn around?

Hopefully the climate march is a disruption of a system that is consuming itself and all of us with it. The march *did* come from "the people"—it originated out of environmental justice organizations, not out of typical green groups and NGOs. It came out of brown and black and economically disadvantaged white communities, and indigenous peoples. It's about across-the-board disruption. It's about understanding that climate change is a leverage point for us to look at

all of the failures, limitations, and places of separation and breakdown in our society.

What does "disruption" mean? Does it mean voting with our dollars? Does it mean that if we don't like what's going on in the media, we become the media? What kinds of forms will disruption take?

Yes. Everything. First and foremost we need to take back our power, and our power exists in our participation in all of these structures. It will be a challenge because we were weaned on this system. We are bred to consume. And, so, for us to break our own chains is just as difficult as it was for blacks to resist the slavery that they'd been born into for generations and was all they'd ever known. The idea was that that system would continue forever because, once you had bred someone into the system, they didn't know anything else.

Are you hopeful?

Not in the sense of *tomorrow*, but I'm hopeful that the seed has been planted, that the irrelevance of the systems that continue to privilege small groups of people is laid bare now. We're in this wonderful moment of going, "Oh, this doesn't work. There are no winners in this."

How are we going to convince the captains of industry that they're not winners?

I don't think we need to. It's like, "How are we going to convince the plantation owners to let go of their slaves?" We didn't. We had to snatch the slaves from their arms.

There's no such thing as being neutral. You're either playing along with how things are or you are disrupting them and turning them on their head. Those are the only options.

Pursuing the possibility of a new monastery, as BZC is doing, seems like a major step forward.

I don't think I've ever been excited about a monastery before. [Laughter].

Why you are excited about *this* monastery?

Because I can see myself there, whether that's my physical body or not. I think that Greg and Teah and the leadership will plant the seeds for a deep practice home. The Western Buddhist world has spent too much time saying, "Oh, if we want people of color to participate, we can't expect them to do real, deep practice." With that attitude, people of color will never be fully accepted. As soon as *Being Black* came out, I was completely chagrined that I had invited people of color, through the book, into a place that was not welcoming. The good news is that BZC rings true. And the monastery, if it happens, will also be a place that is welcoming, and that's a start. ♦

affiliated with the Buddhist Recovery Network. (Visit LionsRoar.com for an exclusive interview with that program's director, Luke Holland.) And this January, the center will host a workshop called "Undoing Racism."

But don't think it's all such serious business. "Spiritual awakening can be painful as hell," Snyder says, "so it should also be fun! I think of that quote from Emma Goldman: 'If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution.' I feel the same way: If I can't dance, who wants awakening?"

So it follows that the center is a lively place, filled with laughter and creativity, thanks to innovations like their "Jazz Mindfulness" night, or the use of the center's kitchen and eating area as a social hub and gallery for art created by BZC adults and kids alike. During my weekend visit with them, members were preparing to walk as a group at the massive People's Climate March in Manhattan. They were excited to be a part of something so big and important—there would be 400,000 marchers in all—but they were also just *happy to be together*. And even when things are quieter, there's a noticeably joyous, friendly charge in the air and an informality that may seem incongruous with the common idea of Zen temples as bastions of austerity.

That's no accident. "We're always asking ourselves, to what degree do you release the trappings of what Zen looks like so that everybody feels comfortable coming in? There are a lot fewer robes around here than at most Zen centers," Snyder notes. "We reserve them for high ceremonies but don't necessarily wear them day-to-day. We circle cushions during talks instead of keeping them in straight lines. We try to do whatever is appropriate for the day, and who's actually in the room."

This attitude also allows Snyder to enter more rooms, as it were, himself. "I'm a priest, but I don't look like one, except for my hair. That means I can do mindfulness instruction in public school systems, which I'd be unable to do if the approach weren't totally secular."


Head teacher Teah Strozer, who divides her time between San Francisco and Brooklyn, mentions two teachers she studied with as clear influences in this regard. "Suzuki Roshi was very radical when he came to the U.S., because he let men and women practice together right away. That was almost unheard of in Japan. He wanted us to turn toward what American Zen was going to look like, to have a real curiosity and openness, a readiness of mind. And Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, when he first came, didn't introduce the traditional forms and initiation practices he knew until years later." Likewise, Strozer says, "We want, first, to listen: What can the community handle? What can it not? What does it need?"



BZC head teacher Soshin Teah Strozer splits her time between Brooklyn and San Francisco.

AS IF THEY DIDN'T HAVE plenty to do already, the BZC leadership is in negotiation to purchase a property in Connecticut that would serve as a dedicated monastery and retreat center. It seems like a shocking amount of growth for a center that's just ten years old, but it's not mere ambition that's driving BZC to found a monastic place of practice. It's really about balance, says Strozer,

"Our vision is to have it all be permeable. For example, with the monastery we can have an ongoing schedule where laypeople can come for a weekend and join in. Everybody needs to put in time on the cushion, and ongoing continuity of mindfulness is easier to do in a monastery than with the distractions of the city. Then they take that practice back to the city. And their presence informs our monastery, so that the greed, hate, and delusion we can see so clearly in the city are not forgotten by the monastics." > page 72



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Brooklyn Zen Center

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Strozer, like Snyder and the rest of the BZC team, can envision other payoffs, especially for underserved individuals. “I get ideas,” she smiles, and tells me about one. “I’m a foster mom and also taught high school. I love teenagers—they’re capable of much more than we give them credit for. You can go deep with them.” In the proposed monastery land, she says, “there are very run-down cabins. I want to put together teams of teenagers with some carpenters. Teenagers have all this energy and don’t know what to do with it. They’re all over the map. I want to tell them, ‘Okay, you have two weeks. These are your tools, this is your mentor. Your job is to learn to design and build a cabin.’ They’ll learn teamwork, and while they’re doing it, we can talk about mindfulness or emotions.” (Her vision for keeping the monastery running is notably progressive, too: “Off the grid. Solar, water, everything,” she says.)

There are similar ideas for back in Brooklyn. Noting the San Francisco Zen Center’s “foodie lineage”—Edward Espe Brown’s famed *Tassajara Bread Book*, Greens restaurant, the organic gardens at Green Gulch—Snyder hopes to work hand in hand with local restaurateurs to place young people into food-service training opportunities that lead to good, rewarding jobs in the field.

Are any of these young people, or anyone who benefits from BZC’s programming for that matter, likely to become Zen Buddhists?

“It happens,” Snyder says, “but it’s not a huge percentage. They may not love meditation, but they love it *here*. The feedback that we constantly get is that it’s one of the only places in life they feel safe.”

That’s the main thing. “I’m not concerned with proving Buddhism,” Snyder offers. “I just want it to be practiced in such a way that a kid on a skateboard in a Brooklyn park who feels alone can hear it.” After all, he says, “the bodhisattva’s vow is to save all beings. I can’t imagine anything more revolutionary.” ♦



SERENITY RIDGE RETREAT CENTER
LIGMINCHA INTERNATIONAL HEADQUARTERS
IN RURAL NELSON COUNTY, VIRGINIA




photo by Janine Guldener

TENZIN WANGYAL RINPOCHE, founding director of Ligmincha Institute, is renowned for his ability to convey the ancient wisdom of Tibetan Bön Buddhism in a highly relevant way to Western students. He is the author of numerous books, including *Awakening the Luminous Mind*.

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