



Triratna ECA Racial Diversity Project

An example journey for a person of colour at a Triratna Buddhist Centre



by Manjusiha

Akin comes to the LBC for the first time, attracted by how consistently inclusive the images on the LBC's website and social media channels are¹. He'd been aware of the LBC since he was a teenager involved with the Eastside Young Leaders' Academy (EYLA)² – the LBC had partnered with the academy to provide free training in mindfulness and emotional resilience, which he'd found very useful, without wanting to take it any further at the time. It planted a seed for the future, though, making him think that the LBC might be a place he might feel at home. Having recently lost his father, he had started searching for something, and remembered the impressive LBC teachers and mentors that he'd met. This is what brings him to the LBC.

When he arrives at the LBC, even though the centre is not as diverse as in the publicity, he is relieved to not be the only person of colour present. He is struck by how friendly the welcome is. His first impressions are that he is not being treated as strange, alien or other. He just feels normal!

He sits next to a young white man in the mural room who seems to be a part of the team for the class. He is relieved when he asks him how to pronounce his name and where it comes from (rather than where *he* is from – he is east London 'born and bred'). His name is Nigerian (or, more specifically, Yoruba) and is a shortened version of a

name that means 'full of valour'. His relief at being asked about it comes from being able to engage with difference without having to navigate the discomfort of immediately being 'othered'. He experiences an openness rather than the shutting down, hardening, defensiveness or avoidance that he so often experiences in these situations.

His intuition, through subsequent interactions with others in the Sangha, is that the issues of race have been worked through more deeply in this community than elsewhere, rather than avoided through a misguided idea of 'colour-blindness'. One week, for instance, at Dharma Night, there is a talk by a white Order member that touches on Sangharakshita's meetings with Dr Ambedkar, the foundation of the Order in India and what this means for us in the west. Akin is struck that it is a white Order member giving the talk, rather than an Indian Order member. It suggests to him that they must have reflected on their own identity and conditioning in the context of the Dharma.

Another week, a black Order member introduces the 'atma kleshas', and describes them as a model of the deep structural patterning of the unenlightened mind. The Order member uses this model to explain why race is such a fraught and difficult area to approach: it can trigger all of the atma klesas at once - the passive and active delusions about self/identity and the associated strong emotional responses of defending our (tribal) self-view, which we so often take to be self-evidently true. 'The



klesas run deep, in other words, to the extent that, when they are rattled or challenged, this may be perceived as an existential threat. This provides an extremely fruitful working ground, potentially, but requires a firm foundation in positive emotion!’ This talk helps Akin commit more fully to the metta bhavana practice, which he has been ambivalent about until this point.

Akin intuitively that instead of polarising around the colonial legacy and its intergenerational consequences, a deeper conversation³ from many different perspectives seems to have taken place. He doesn’t always agree with what he hears from Order members and mitras at the centre: there really is a range of contradictory and sometimes conflicting views! The sorts of views he encounters include the idea that considering race is somehow worldly and should be left outside the shrine room, or somehow instantaneously transcended – that “all you need is the Dharma”. He also encounters various forms of ‘whataboutery’,⁴ such as we should be focusing on X instead (where ‘X’ is any other injustice, real or perceived): “they are the *real* disadvantaged group in today’s society”.

But he is moved to have encountered a community that can contain both ethnic diversity and a wide range of opinion; a community where there are enough people who are actively and skilfully working on themselves in this area; and one that has placed that work so firmly in the context and service of something that transcends it.

All of this he can only articulate much later. For now, it is just instinct and intuition that results in him booking on his first retreat: an open beginners’ weekend retreat at Vajrasana. Again, he is mixing with people he would not normally encounter, as well as those he would normally gravitate towards and feel comfortable with. There seems to be genuine mutual interest and honesty in many of the conversations he has, particularly with those on the team, and not the shutting down, denial and defensiveness

that can often happen when venturing into the territory of race and difference⁵. He felt that other Buddhist groups he had visited had been too quick to dismiss race as a construct. What he was struck by on this retreat was how skilfully the territory was navigated – the acknowledgement, for instance, in one of the talks, that habit, superficiality and vagueness can and do apply at a societal as well as an individual level, and how we can’t transform one without working on the others. Also the emphasis – explored in one of the groups – on blame and guilt as being unskilful. And the humility – the fact we don’t have all the answers. He returns home inspired.

The next retreat he goes on is one exclusively for people of colour. This enables him to relax in a very particular way, to take a certain level of shared understanding and experience as read, even from those whose background (e.g. Chinese or Indian) is quite different to his. After the retreat he continues to engage with POC activities, which he appreciates, although it is only a loose connection for him. It is in all-male contexts where he feels he really deepens his practice (and not exclusively ‘of colour’ ones – although other men of colour in these contexts are important). This was not what he would have said he was looking for when he first encountered the movement i.e. male friendship! The men’s intensive retreat, in particular, is a touchstone, particular as this is where Akin meets Nick, a white working-class Frenchman, who goes on to become one of his best peer friends in the movement.

Akin’s conversation with the LBC’s men’s mitra convenor on becoming a mitra is both inspiring and challenging. The conversation is more open than it would otherwise have been because the mitra convenor has thought about his own identity, has spent time learning at least some of the language⁶, and is honest about not necessarily getting everything right. He is able to be more challenging with Akin about his Dharma life because he is comfortable in this territory and versed in its language. He is also open



to learning from Akin – for example, about the ‘Three Cs’ of colonial history: Christianity, civilisation and commerce⁷, and their effect on his parent’s country.

Akin joins the Monday ‘Dharma Night’ team, and continues getting to know others, including Order members. One evening Natasha, who he’d known at EYLA, arrives at the class. She is surprised and pleased to see him there, and he tells her something about his journey and experience at the centre. Natasha also gets involved – particularly in POC events.

Akin’s experience continues with the other Triratna institutions he encounters, including a pilgrimage to Adhithana. Before this trip, his mitra convenor lets him know that there are likely to be few people of colour (if any) at the (non-LBC) Triratna retreat centres. Akin responds by saying he’s not spent much time in rural parts of the UK – he always feels so visible and out of place there. His mitra convenor reassures him, and also (without mentioning this to Akin) talks to the team at the retreat centre to ask them to look out for Akin, and to see if any other people of colour have booked on the retreat.

Akin’s training for ordination is not without its ups and downs, and there are some difficult race conversations, misunderstandings and difficulties along the way. But at every step he feels like there is more than enough understanding, and always a critical mass of people to turn to who are open, supportive and encouraging. He has peer friends in the Sangha who share some of his interests (including martial arts and even including some of his musical tastes!⁸), as well as Order members he respects and trusts. This, combined with the humility and honesty displayed by all involved (including himself) and the genuine deepening of friendships within the Sangha really support him in eventually joining the Order.

After ordination he and ex-Nick (who was ordained on the same course) are both involved in the LBC and work to set up a new right livelihood business together teaching aikido, and Akin becomes a trustee of EYLA, where he is respected as a young men’s mentor and guide, as well as starting to teach meditation on his annual trips to Lagos, visiting family. Natasha joins the Order a few years later and – unlike Akin who is no longer involved – takes on to lead the POC team.

¹ The London Library is a good recent example of an institution making a positive change in this area. In 2016 the library held the ‘Words in the Square’ festival, celebrating its 175th anniversary: <http://www.londonlibrary.co.uk/images/WITSBrochure.pdf>. I provided feedback, as a member of the library, at how monochrome the festival line-up was. Judging by the website for this year’s festival, they seem to have listened!

<https://www.londonlibrarylitfest.co.uk/> More recently the library has partnered with the Jhalak Prize for writers of colour, which I think is a wonderful initiative: <https://www.londonlibrary.co.uk/about-us/latest-news/2292-announcing-our-new-partnership-with-the-jhalak-prize>

² ‘EYLA exists to nurture and develop the leadership potential, health and well-being of children and young people, especially Black and minority youth, empowering them to become the next generation of successful leaders. <https://www.eyla.org.uk/>

³ Eugene Ellis’s book ‘The Race Conversation’ is very helpful on this. (Eugene is an LBC GFR mitra and is married to Jayakara.)

⁴ Noun, British: the technique or practice of responding to an accusation or difficult question by making a counter-accusation or raising a different issue.

⁵ Akala provides a ‘Guide to denial’ in his book ‘Race & Class in the Ruins of Empire’, under headings including the following: ‘If we just stop talking about it [racism] it will go away,’ ‘Why can’t you just get over it. It’s all in the past,’ ‘But what about [insert any injustice here],’ ‘I don’t see colour,’ and ‘It’s not about race’.

⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-30999175>

⁷ https://library.princeton.edu/visual_materials/maps/websites/africa/livingstone/livingstone.html

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D-zdHo4LJJ>

