Feeling Held
Claribel Wu

Genesis:
For me, being held in a community, being held in a space, means showing up with everything that I have and being welcomed, and that people are gonna show up with me and we're gonna show up for each other and just be supportive of one another throughout our individual sort of unraveling as we kind of like peel back the layers of ourselves individually, but then also be able to kind of come together as a group.

Narration:
This is Genesis, and we're sitting in the campus center, speaking about what it means to feel held in a space. The room we're in is quiet and cozy, a lounge for returning undergraduate students. Genesis took five years off after high school before she came to Brown, where she's now a sophomore whose work focuses on the intersection of race, class, and society in contemplative science.

Genesis:
I experienced severe trauma in my last year of high school, and part of my directionlessness was a result of the trauma that I was just trying to ignore and move on from.

I started doing yoga and meditation the same year that I graduated from high school in 2009, and it was helpful but I never felt held. No one ever looked like me? I was pretty sure at that time, and I don't know if it's just because I was like eighteen and I thought like my life was the worst, but like convinced that no one in the room had experienced anything like what I had experienced in my life, growing up, you know, first generation Mexican-American in Texas.

I moved from Texas to Arizona the same year that the law in Arizona was passed where you could get pulled over just by looking Mexican, and the police could ask you for your identification to prove that you were a legal American citizen.

I just decided like it didn't matter whether or not someone thought I belonged, I was here and I was going to do my thing and get what I needed out of it regardless.

But I still wasn't being held in any kind of way.

So I kept going west! I don't know why, I just—I don't know, maybe being from the South you just think of the West as being some kind of golden, progressive place. So I went up and down the California coast just kind of wandering around going to different yoga studios or meditation centers.

Narration:

In Buddhist tradition, a Sangha is a community of meditation practitioners with a shared sense of empathy, healing, and safety—a sense of holding space. But walking into a meditation room that's homogeneously white and upper-middle class, when you are someone who does not share those identities or privileges, can compromise your trust in that space and in that community's ability to really see you and carry you.

Genesis:
I don't know that I was really aware at the time what I was looking for, I just knew that I hadn't found that thing yet, which I now know was a space where I wasn't the only brown person in the room, or a space where there wasn't any sort of like blatant cultural appropriation.

Narration:
Meditation, yoga, and mindfulness are on the rise in popular culture—from glossy self-help books to expensive retreats, ten-week courses to enlightenment, and yoga with bonus gimmicks like beer or bunnies or lasers. Many of the people leading or participating in this popularized form of American convert Buddhism are white and/or class-privileged, and additionally, not engaging in critical discussions on their positionality.

After Genesis came back to Arizona, she did some research during a lunch break at her office job and found the Contemplative Studies Initiative at Brown. She'd been searching for a place that seemed to prioritize inclusivity.

Genesis:
I ended up applying without thinking that I would get admitted, and when I showed up here I was really kind of shocked, I wasn't expecting it to be, um, as white as it is and as problematic as it has been.

It's only been recently that I've started to do the work of putting myself in a position in the yoga community on campus, the meditation community on campus, and the Contemplative Studies Initiative as a whole to ask questions about who is in the room, and who isn't, and why may that be? And what can we do to make sure that we are creating a space where people feel held?

Narration:
The problem often starts when we create a separation between who we are on the cushion with who we are off the cushion—it's the imaginary binary between our spiritual bodies and our sociopolitical bodies. A Buddhist investigation of the self requires that we gather up every piece of our identity to embody the dharma, a word that refers to the teachings of the Buddha, but also to ultimate truth, to the essential nature of reality.

So, what is a *radical* dharma?

Jasmine Syedullah, currently teaching at Vassar, co-authored *Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation* with Reverend Angel Kyodo Williams and Lama Rod Owens. Like Genesis, Jasmine explores questions of race, privilege, and practice in her work.

Jasmine:
As somebody who has seen a lot of synergy in between the work of abolition and my practice in the dharma, being able to teach at the intersections of both has been really really important and the project that I was working on with Rev. Angel is called *Radical Dharma: Talking Race Love and Liberation* with Lama Rod Owens, and that project really came together as a culmination of conversations primarily between Lama Rod and Reverend Angel about the role of American Buddhism in the wake of the killings of Mike Brown and Eric Garner by the police and really feeling from their own experience and practice, the lack of welcome within the American Buddhist community to people of color and Black and Queer folks in particular. And so this is a way of starting a different kind of conversation about the dharma that really centers anti-racism work, and puts the unfinished work of abolition at the center of a radical dharma.

Narration:
So how do we start this different kind of conversation?

Jasmine:
I think part of the journey requires that we step into our own truths and the truths of our own testimony to the impacts of racism and US empire and white supremacy in our own lives. And that's really hard, because I think for some of us who are marked by racial difference we've been doing that for a really long time, you kind of have to as a Black person in particular.

Narration:
Jasmine has noticed with her students that those with varying proximities to whiteness, who've been off-the-hook from that same kind of self-interrogation, sometimes find these conversations intimidating. And as a result, have difficulty centering themselves in a narrative about racism.

Jasmine:
A lot of times we're taught, particularly white folks I think, are taught that racism is somebody's problem that's not them, that the most up to date information that they can get about how racism works is from a person of color. And I really push back on that in order to see how everyone is affected by white supremacy, including white people, and some of the work I've been doing with Rev. Angel has been really centering healing, and with Lama Rod, has been centering healing, and the work that we need to do in ourselves in our own practice in our own stories of ourselves, to heal the wounds that white supremacy and US empire and settler colonialism and heteropatriarchy, to understand the harm that they've created in our own lives.

And I think until we have confronted and named and mourned and grieved for the injuries that we actually have incurred at the altar of white supremacy, we can't actually hold space for other people.

Narration:
These conversations about identity and difference usually need to happen in communities that don't feel risky. An affinity group is a space of apparent sameness that allows for the nuances of individual experiences to become more visible.

Jasmine:
Part of the challenge is really identifying what are the assumptions that we make about our identity and its relationship to racism and how true are they really? You know? Do those narratives actually hold water? And how can we see what really obstructs our understanding of what's really happening? And I think that part comes from my practice, to be able to really embrace what's happening means that you have to be rooted in your body not in your head.

Narration:
A meditative practice can help you be more aware of what is happening to you in real time, like noticing your breathing, tensed shoulders, but also the physical symptoms of stress and trauma, sometimes so normalized that they're imperceptible as we move through our daily lives.

Jasmine:
And I think people, particularly students, academic trained people, are really incentivized towards disembodiment and incentivized towards privileging what they know from their brains and not necessarily the kind of knowledge that comes from your other senses.

I think it's difficult to reorganize your mode of attention to notice how your actual embodied experience may counter what you've been trained to say or learn to know or believe to be true based on what we've learned in school or what we've learned through our culture, but that's really the big leap I think, is noticing where the injury of white supremacy impacts you in your body and not just as a story or a critique or an abstraction, but in your actual lived experience.

Narration:
Once you find a sense of home within your body, the big leap is becoming a caretaker for this home. Clear the weeds and wipe away the dust to see what is underneath, to see what work needs to be done to heal from the wounds of racism, colonialism, and heteropatriarchy. For Jasmine, it took deep practice within a community to realize that her biggest mode of aggression is actually niceness.

Jasmine:
It took me a while to figure it out and definitely a lot of people had./ to reflect it back several times before I actually even understood what they were talking about, but one of the ways that I move in the world as the daughter of a preacher, and as a black person who has had a lot of access to the academy and to education, is to be non-threatening, agreeable, and a pleaser, and while that's not in itself bad, what it does is mean I have a tendency to be far more externally

focused than I am aware of how things are impacting me in real time. So something can be happening that I really don't like, in a friendship or in a direction I'm taking my life, and I might not notice for a really long time, and then all of a sudden I'll notice that I left myself behind a long time ago.

I mean this has happened in so many small ways all the time but this happened in a really big way for me around sexuality, because I was really interested in and invested in heteronormativity in ways that I didn't really even understand. And there had to be a lot of y'know reflection back that that might not be the case before I actually woke up and was like aha! I'm not interested in guys at all.

Narration:
We leave ourselves behind in big and small ways, all the time. But if we're to hold space for other people too, for a community, it's important to really be present with each person and all their lived experiences. We can't leave anyone behind.

Sebene:
One of the terms that really resonated for me when I heard it and began to understand it more deeply was this term spiritual bypassing which was coined by John Welwood.

Narration:
This is Sebene Selassie, a meditation teacher at the New York Insight Meditation Center, who understands spiritual bypassing as a way that people leave themselves and others behind.

Sebene:
In the 80's he coined this when he recognized a tendency in western practitioners in particular to bypass difficult personal experiences, often strong emotions and trauma, and tend to favor the transcendent teachings of letting go of not self of transcendence of nirvana, these idealized states

And when I heard that it really resonated for me that that is a lot of what's happening, the tendency to want to culturally bypass issues of race, bypass issues of difference, bypass issues of identity and oppression and go to this big place of transcendence where we're all one.
A lot of times it's not understanding other people's experience, or it's aversion and not wanting to really have to face the pain or the challenge of someone else's experience or your own experience in relationship to someone else.

Narration:
For example, you might see comments on Facebook saying that we're all human, and that talking about issues of race and identity are divisive. Similarly, white western practitioners often skip forward to enlightenment or not-self. But you can't really get there without first recognizing all aspects of the self you are addressing, and you can't reach collective societal healing without realizing that racism and other oppressive structures exist.

Sebene:
So you have all of this diversity and richness of experience lumped under this label of people of color and so there is something that's almost in opposition to the labeling that's defensive almost, the thing that makes us different is that we're racialized separately from white people who are not racialized in the same way, so the acknowledgment of that diversity and the various power dynamics that play out within that diversity.

So on the other flip side of that is the importance for white people to gather and do this work and to understand all of what has been unconscious and unnamed and begin to investigate and to do that for and with each other. And I like that quote of Ram Dass that we're all just walking each other home.

Narration:
A radical dharma is a commitment to radical truth, love, and community. More than ever, it's important to really listen to our own bodies in order to learn how to listen to each other.

Jasmine:
What does it mean to center testimony, what does it mean to center somatic practice, what does it mean to upend scientific ways of knowing and privileging our sense memory?

I think that there's something really radical when you get people out of their heads, when they're so fucking smart and get them to channel that intellectual energy towards other aspects of wisdom, and other aspects of knowing, because particularly in this political moment it's going to be really important for us to have an internal sense of what's good at all times.

No one gets out unscathed from this life. Unfortunately, it's not the way to wake up: to be perfect, or blameless, to never inflict harm or to never perpetuate harm, and if we're stuck in our heads and stuck in this disembodied mode of just going through our loop of the day, we're gonna be in big big trouble. But if we actually have the wherewithal to notice what's happening and change course on a dime, in the moment, in real time, we can really interrupt some of these incredibly vicious cycles of violence in our lifetime, but it's going to take collective action and collective awareness and we need each other to get there.

Narration:
By holding accountable the ways in which racism and white supremacy have played out in our stories, in our lives, in our practice, we can then begin the work of holding space for ourselves and for each other. And maybe, learn how to walk each other home.

Q's:

- Is the narration still too academic-voicey?
- How is the music / pacing / transition?
- Are there still moments that are difficult to understand or digest?

- R u engaged w/ the content :^o