

Episode 14: Rima Vesely-Flad, Learning about Black Buddhist Dharma Teachers and Healing Justice

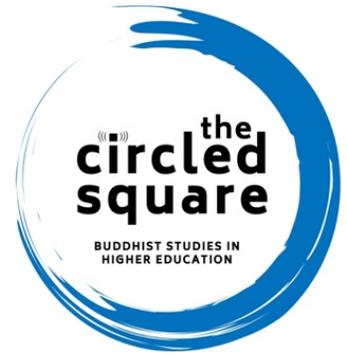
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Speakers

Sarah Richardson

Rima Vesely-Flad



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Rima: And one of the reasons I think these teachings from these black teachers are so profound is that you can tell that they have managed to live in a different way. They're not always moving against white supremacy, they're not changing their patterns, they're not changing their bodies, they're not always in reaction to the degradation that has been part of the waters we all swim in.

00:00:32:23 - 00:01:05:00

Sarah: Hello, my name is Sarah Richardson, and welcome to this episode of The Circled Square, the podcast where we talk about Buddhism in higher education. In this episode, I spoke with Rima Vesely-Flad. She's a professor at Warren Wilson College and a director of Peace and Justice Studies. She's currently working on her second book project investigating teachings and practices of Buddhist teachers of African descent in North American Dharma communities. The manuscript she's completing, *Black Buddhists and the Black Radical Tradition: The Practice of Stillness in the Movement for Liberation*, is forthcoming with NYU Press in 2021.

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Sarah: In this episode, we talked about how North American Buddhism has perpetuated many of the biases of systemic racism. For Rima, her work examines how contemporary black Buddhist Dharma teachers are changing this and actively interpreting Buddhism in new ways, incorporating embodied experiences of intergenerational trauma, building space for queer identities and modeling other modalities of healing.

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Sarah: By listening to this episode you'll hear Rima give many recommendations for books and authors who are working on these topics. So please be sure to check our show notes for links to those. We hear how her students encounter these hard topics in conversations, because part of the status quo is being afraid to talk about race. These are hard conversations. We are eager to hear from you about your experiences with race and racism in your teaching practice with and about Buddhism. Please email us at BuddistStudies@utoronto.ca, Or find us on Facebook at The Ho Center for Buddhist Studies at the University of Toronto.

00:02:03:13 - 00:02:03:28

Sarah: Hi, Rima.

00:02:04:00 - 00:02:05:04

Rima: Hi, good morning.

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Sarah: Hi, thanks so much for being here and talking to us today.

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Rima: It's my pleasure. I'm very happy to be here.

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Sarah: Thank you. So could you tell us about your background and education? What and where did you study, and what and where do you teach now?

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Rima: Sure. Well, I hold a bachelor's degree from the University of Iowa and a master's degree in international affairs from Columbia University, and then I went across the street and attended Union Theological Seminary and did a master's of divinity degree there, and then four years later went back and did both a master's of philosophy and then a Ph.D. in social ethics.

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Sarah: Wow. Very cool. And what and where do you teach now?

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Rima: So now I am in western North Carolina, right outside of Asheville, at Warren Wilson College, which is a small liberal arts college here in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

00:02:57:15 - 00:03:10:15

Sarah: Great. So this is a podcast about Buddhist studies, kind of broadly conceived Buddhist studies, so where and when did you learn about Buddhism, and how did it become a part of your work on race, and mass incarceration, and religious ethics?

00:03:10:22 - 00:03:45:23

Rima: Oh, such a great question. So I am steeped in the Christian tradition, and having done so much coursework at a Protestant seminary and in the midst of all of that graduate work in New York City, I started a sitting practice and just kind of inadvertently was trying different traditions. I sat first in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh, and then moved over to the Zen tradition where I learned quite a lot about rigorous sitting, which was really helpful in terms of discipline.

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Rima: But I ultimately ended up in what is, in the West, called the insight tradition, sometimes also known as Vipassana, and that comes out of South/Southeast Asia, the Theravada lineage of Buddhism, and through my sitting practice I became more and more interested in how that intertwined with grassroots activism.

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Rima: In between the two master's degrees at Columbia and Union, the first round at union, and then going back for doctoral work, I had started a nonprofit organization in New York City that was focused on restoring civil and political rights to people with felony convictions. And in the midst of that grassroots work, both being on the ground and also in the halls of Albany, I became really interested in

how not only the Christian tradition, but also how more contemplative practices could intersect and support and sustain and really inform that kind of grassroots and policy work.

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Rima: So it is to say that this was in my head, and then my first book looked at grassroots work in Ferguson, in the wake of the killing of Michael Brown, and was really focused on liberation theology. In the midst of doing interviews and research and just going out there and being on the ground it was very clear that the church had less to say and less engagement, and that the vanguard activists who were in the streets were really interested in what's called "healing justice".

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Rima: And in that healing justice work, there's room for queer identity, there's room for hip hop, there is room outside of what we traditionally call the black church or civil rights orientation that's heavily theological, and also in some ways, at least for these Vanguard activists, somewhat rigid. There is a kind of dismissiveness, I would say, for this generation of activists, and that the church is seen as a kind of orientation towards respectability politics.

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Rima: And this movement is not that. This movement is - let's take not only black people who are marginalized in society and value their bodies and value their spirits and value their persons, but let's also take the most marginalized folks within black communities and privilege their voices and their experiences, so that in this movement, not only do we have many, many self-identified queer leaders, but we also have an emphasis on transgender persons and the disproportionate violence, especially against black transgender women.

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Rima: So it is to say that in this movement, there isn't an interest in, you could say, playing to the powers that be. There's more of a confrontation with the status quo, and that includes the status quo in black communities. And contemplative practices can really foster that because there's, at least in the West, this is not, I would say, true in many societies within predominantly Buddhist communities or societies, but in the West, contemplative practices and traditions such as Buddhism are seen as nonhierarchical, more open, more fluid, more flexible, there's an emphasis on impermanence and non-self, and it is to say that it seems for these activists that there is an ability to embrace something outside of the status quo and still have a religious tradition or a spiritual practice.

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Sarah: Yeah, that's so fascinating. Yeah, I mean, Buddhist teachings are often interpreted in the West as being directed more at individuals than at systems and institutions. Do you find though that that is changing in the kinds of activism you're referencing? This healing justice?

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Rima: I think that's a very salient interpretation, and I would say all of this is brand new. It's just emerging as we speak. It's starting to emerge in the sense that now we have more teachers of colour, and some of the big centres in my tradition, such as Insight Meditation Society and Spirit Rock have done a lot to try to privilege teachers and training for more people of colour spaces, so that I think we're starting to see... What's a good term... We're starting to see, I would say, more of a critical mass of people of color, especially, I would say people of African descent entering into Buddhism and saying

"actually these predominantly white spaces reiterate white supremacy. We have to shift the ways in which the teachings are taught. We have to recognize systemic racism in our broader society". There's a real challenge that's happening, and I would say not across the board, but to a large extent, I could at least speak for my tradition, I don't know if this is true for, say, Zen or Tibetan Buddhism, but certainly being on the inside of many of these conversations, in my tradition, I would say that there is a kind of reckoning taking place and an attempt, anyway, to recognize the truth of what these new practitioners and teachers are saying with regards to the importance of recognizing systemic racism and not being satisfied with predominantly white, middle to upper class Buddhist communities.

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Rima: So in sanghas or retreat experiences there is an attempt to broaden where the teachings land and to whom the teachings are accessible, and so that leads to this question you've asked about working with, you could say, structures or institutions, systemic injustices. I would say that the new vanguard coming in, really again, as we speak... Spirit Rock just graduated a teacher group that was four years in the making and it was 90% people of colour. That is unprecedented. It's never happened in the history of Spirit Rock, and IMS next year.

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Sarah: What an exciting change!

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Rima: Oh, my goodness. So amazing. I know a lot of those folks, I know the teachers who led it, Gina Sharpe and Larry Yang, those were my first retreat teachers many years ago, and they have worked really, really hard to make that happen. And then at IMS, which is based in Barre, Massachusetts, IMS is about to graduate a teacher group as well, and that's 75% people of colour. So that also is a really big change, a really big shift, and there was a lot of intention that went into that, a lot of access to resources, a lot of commitment by leadership. So I say that because I think this new vanguard, this new, you can say, crop of teachers coming out and entering into these retreat spaces, they have a language and an analysis that is not new, but I would say it is new within these predominantly white Buddhist circles.

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Sarah: Yeah. And can you give us also... I was going to ask this later, but I'm going to ask it now because it's come up a few times. For our listeners who don't know names, who are the black Buddhist teachers kind of on this vanguard that we can name in this podcast?

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Rima: Oh, that's a wonderful question. So the names that immediately come to mind are people like, Jozen Tamori Gibson, Lesley Booker, Kate Johnson. Let me think of who else is coming up. Some of the longer term teachers are people like DaRa... What's DaRa's last name... I think Williams, one of the teachers who's worked closely with DaRa, who just finished teacher training, is Noliwe. Oh, Solwazi Johnson just finished teacher training, Devon Barry, Devon is in the IMS training, he will finish next year. Yes, these are just really amazing, profound teachers.

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Sarah: Great. Yeah, Rima, could you go back to the idea of confronting the status quo in black communities and how these teachers are doing that, and using Buddhist teachings to, you know, shine a brighter light on healing, systemic racism? If that's possible...

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Rima: Sure. Also, let me just say Noliwe Alexander, I just Googled her name, so I'm sorry that I forgot that. Yeah, so to go back and to think about confronting the status quo, the two ways that it most strikes me that these teachers are confronting the status quo is, one, that they're like in these activist communities that may not identify as Buddhist, these teachers are also privileging queer identity. When I did the research for my book, which pertains only to people of African descent, both who are recognized teachers, but also who are long time practitioners, it turns out that almost 63% just statistically self-identified as queer. That's a very big deal.

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Rima: And the fact that so many self identify as queer means that there's not only a privileging of a recognition of their racial identity and how to recognize that and how to reckon with that and how to explicitly name the importance of that, but there is also then a recognition that gender and sexuality and any variations outside of, you could say, mainstream norms also need to be recognized and privileged. And what that means practically, is that that gets built into Dharma talks, that there is a recognition, but also a sense that the body matters and our natural instincts, our natural inclinations, how we move in the world, all of that is part of practice, all of that gets named, all of that gets worked with and all of that gets accepted.

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Rima: There is a shifting of those norms then, that is really very important to put out there. And then the second thing that comes to mind is in that privileging of the body, these teachers are saying, we work with the body. The body is our vehicle towards liberation and our social experiences and how we're constructed need to get named as much as they need to be transcended, so that there is within these spaces, then, a recognizing of how racism is internalized, the overt violence that gets enacted, the level of fear with which we move in our broader society. All of that gets named and put out there, and the reason they say that that's a pushing against the status quo is that certain norms that predominantly white communities may just accept and not challenge, you could say you are subverted. Maybe a better way to say it is that those norms aren't taken for granted.

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Rima: The fact that there are these other social realities that do get taken for granted, do get named and do get recognized, and the body is seen as both this vehicle for liberation but it's also seen as something that we need to recognize as potentially damaging for the ways in which we've internalized racism. And so the practice of liberation is not simply to achieve these different states of mind, but it's also to say that liberation means a kind of transcending of those dominant, damaging messages that we have internalized, so that we're not always in reaction to white supremacy. We stand on our feet but all of those damaging messages can be dropped away with a depth of practice. One of the reasons I think these teachings from these black teachers are so profound is that you can tell that they have managed to live in a different way. They're not always moving against white supremacy, they're not changing their patterns, they're not changing their bodies, they're not always in reaction to the degradation that has been part of the waters we all swim in.

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Rima: It's really amazing to see people who have managed to work with internalized racism and to be freed from it. It's really beautiful.

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Sarah: What a profound way to model liberation too.

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Rima: Oh, yes.

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Sarah: Can we go back a little bit to your teaching? Can you tell us about your school, your students, demographics of what they do or don't know about Buddhism?

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Rima: So I would say first, the students who show up in my classes are self-selected, which means they want to be there. So that's very helpful.

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Sarah: That's a gift, right?

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Rima: It's awesome, and frankly, I would not want it to be any other way. Working with curious students is really the best part about teaching. So the students who come I would say just because of the student body are predominantly white. I actually get a lot of transgender students in my classes. Warren Wilson, where I teach is a predominantly I would say... What's the best way to say? The campus is predominantly self-identified queer with many gender nonconforming and transgender students. So just as an example, this semester I had one gender nonconforming student who is probably going to transition soon and then two students who have already transitioned, and we read a book called *Transcending*, which is subtitled "Trans Buddhist Voices". I think it was really important for them to read those testimonies and to be able to hear what it means to live into impermanence or to not take gender for granted. The other students who come to my classes aren't necessarily self-identifying in such a way, but they are curious about what it means to adopt, or accept, or at least learn about a tradition outside of Christianity, because many of them have grown up in Christian households and find a kind of repression or that it simply doesn't speak to them. So kind of like trying on different traditions, and what they will sometimes say is that they have a crush on Buddhism, that's the language that gets used. And I think Buddhism is compelling because in the West it's seen, as I said, as non-hierarchical, as maybe more friendly towards women, this is not, of course, true in many societies in which Buddhism originated. But, you know, as it's come into these predominantly white middle class communities, it has been lived into in that way. So the students who come tend to, maybe not across the board, I certainly wouldn't say across the board, but maybe have some rejection of Christianity, but some curiosity about how to practice a religious tradition, and Buddhism is compelling to them.

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Rima: Then lastly, I'll say that the students who tend to come into these classes are really interested in practice as well. One thing I did the first time I taught a version of this class and that I did again is start the class with a sitting practice. It was not specifically religious. I just would give a few instructions on

settling into the body and working with the breath. But the students who come really were interested in that, that meditation practice was compelling or is compelling. And so that says something that it could be a secular mindfulness practice with of course, a deeper dive into Dharma, into the tradition of Buddhism.

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Rima: But they were definitely into it more so than for intellectual knowledge, they were much more interested in a kind of embodied approach.

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Sarah: Mmhmm. And I'm curious, did you keep that sitting practice going at the beginning of every class?

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Rima: Yeah, we did it all semester, two times a week. Yes, and then what's also interesting is that my other class, which was critical race theory this past semester, those students asked to start the class with meditation. So that was also, I think, very interesting.

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Sarah: Yeah. And were you on line this semester or was this in person?

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Rima: I was online due to COVID, it was the first time I taught online.

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Sarah: Yeah. Like many of us.

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Rima: Right, exactly.

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Sarah: So that's fascinating. How long did you do the meditation at the beginning of the courses for? Was it short, was it ten minutes or so?

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Rima: We just did five minutes. The first time I taught the class we did ten. This time we just did five minutes. That was me in part trying to adapt to online teaching for sure.

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Sarah: Yeah. And did you get feedback from students that it changed their relationship to the course material and discussion that you then went into?

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Rima: You know, I didn't get that. I'll get evaluations at some point, but what is really interesting is that throughout the semester many students would email me and ask if I could help them find a sangha to connect to. So I wonder if the sitting practice also facilitated a deeper curiosity. That actually happened to many students as the semester went on.

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Sarah: So you recently taught this course, Buddhism, Race and Sexuality, was this the first time you taught the course?

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Rima: It's the first time I taught it with that explicit emphasis. I had previously taught a course called Socially Engaged Buddhism, and about half of the course dealt with the context of the United States in that first rendition, and so I elaborated that having spent a year writing a book on that topic in between the first course and then teaching Buddhism, Race, and Sexuality.

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Sarah: So in this new Buddhism, Race, and Sexuality course, can you tell us about the course? What did you focus on? How did you structure it? You've referred to one book so far, *Transcending: Trans Buddhist Voices*, which I think Kevin Mander's and Elizabeth Marston are the editors?

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Rima: That's right.

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Sarah: Sounds like a fascinating book. We'll link to all of this in the show notes as well. What was the focus for this course, and how did you structure it?

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Rima: So it's maybe interesting for your listeners that in researching my book, what came up over and over, which was very unexpected because I started off asking about activism, but what came up over and over was the fact of historical trauma or what we call "intergenerational trauma", and so actually the first chapter in my book is on intergenerational trauma. When I started teaching this class, I started off teaching a book called *My Grandmother's Hands*, which is by Resmaa Menakem, and in his book, which is really focused on somatic therapy, he talks about how the body holds trauma, but also how contemplative practices can help us to be more aware of how trauma is lodged in the body. And so we started our semester talking about trauma, which was a very intense note to start on for many of my students that I think I didn't quite expect how intense it would be... So many of them are dealing with trauma of different kinds, but they were able to relate.

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Rima: I think it was a hook that was deeply, deeply personal in ways that I didn't really expect to be honest, because it was the first time I had tried this. So we spent a week discussing my grandmother's hands, which also brought into the forefront the fact of historical racism in the United States, and then we moved on to talk about Buddhism as a tradition. So we talked about the story of Siddhartha Gautama and his enlightenment, we talked about The Three Refuges and The Four Noble Truths and The Eight-Fold Noble Path, and we talked a lot about actually the three marks existence, and in particular, we talked about anatta, non-self, and the reason is because of, some of what we've talked about already, and that it can be very liberating to embrace these teachings, but it can also be very scary if historically your people have been dehumanized, to hear this language of non-self, it can kind of touch upon this idea that you're not important, you don't really exist, or, you know, for people whose ancestors have been told they're three fifths of a human being, it can be very triggering, and so we talked a lot about

how the Buddha meant that teaching, but also how it was interpreted by people of African descent who find liberation in that teaching.

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Rima: So we laid some foundation and then we talked about a book called *The Way of Tenderness*, which is written by Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, and it's really a very beautiful book. It's kind of poetic prose, and in it she talks about multiplicity and oneness, and the body as nature. And she's really talking to white audiences about the fact that we have to recognize difference, difference within Sanghas, how important it is to say that people have different embodied experiences. So that book, it was really interesting, that book was very resonant for my students and a lot of them decided to write their mid semester papers on that book.

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Sarah: Can I just ask what what was it about the book that you think really compelled them the most or made it an effective reading for them?

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Rima: I think Zenju's writing style is very evocative, and I think, not only for clarity, but also the fact that it's very deeply personal really helps students to be able to enter it. I do think teaching about Buddhism as a tradition, but through these personal voices was really meaningful to students this semester, and also, of course, we're talking about systemic racism in the wake of the George Floyd protests. To have mass protests this past summer in which tens of thousands of white people across the country took to the streets and said "racism must stop, violence against black bodies must stop". This is not simply black communities, as what happened in Ferguson, coming out and saying, "stop the violence, black lives matter". This is now, not only multigenerational, but very, very multiracial. I think Warren Wilson gets a kind of activist student body, a student body that's very committed to racial justice, even if the students don't exactly know how to talk about it or what to do, there is, I think, broadly speaking, a commitment, at least definitely with the students I get in my classes. So I think to be able to enter The Dharma through the voices of black, queer practitioners was really meaningful, and the personal stories about not only experiencing racism, but also claiming a kind of marginalized sexual identity and talking explicitly about gender.

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Rima: And that was also a way that they could really hear people like Zenju. Then our next book, our next author, who is Lama Rod Owens, who just wrote a book called *Love and Rage*. It came out right before the semester started. Of course, Lama Rod is talking about anger, embracing anger, and how to work with grief, and how to work with shame. It's a very also personal and evocative book. And so the students are reading all of this in the wake of these protests and saying we need a way to work with that.

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Rima: One student actually said at the very end of the semester how grateful she was that we could read these particular authors this semester, because not only were there the mass protests in the streets, but there were protests on campus and they needed ways to be able to talk on campus about this as well. So it seemed like these authors gave them a kind of language and perspective that was really important, I think for students of colour, and I also think for white students.

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Rima: We also read a book called *Radical Dharma*, and there's a series of conversations in which these authors, who are black authors, Reverend Kyodo Williams, and Lama Rod, and then a co-author, Jasmine Syedullah, and especially Lama Rod would just come out and say, "white people, stop avoiding your stuff, work with your stuff, and don't just go in the streets and protest, like work on what's going on with you. Make space for that. That's important for you too, don't just put this on, you know, the racial justice struggle, like really work with what you're coming into the struggle with". And that gave, I think, the white students a lot of space to say, "look, we have our own work to do. It's important to go out and protest. It's important to join, but it's not enough". That's what these teachers are emphasizing.

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Sarah: Exciting. I'm actually teaching next term with the *Love and Rage* book from Lama Rod Owens.

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Rima: Oh that's great.

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It's ostensibly, of course, about Buddhist meditation. But we're going to read that book, too. So I'm excited to read it with students for the first time.

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Rima: And I'm sure he would be happy to come and be a guest lecturer.

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Sarah: Yeah, that would be great.

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Rima: He's very accessible.

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Sarah: Anti-black racism has really been the status quo in North American society for a long time, and, as you've said, kind of in the last six months, eight months, there's been a sort of wider waking up to this deep seated division and bigotry, right? I mean, certainly black lives matter, black people have been well aware of the violence, systemic violence for years. But what really changed, I think, after George Floyd was this kind of broader, white people joining in the streets saying, "wait a second, this can't go on". So as it relates to Buddhism, do you think Buddhist practitioners in Western societies have reflected and perpetuated these divisions and bigotries? I mean, possibly accidentally, but do you think that this is so?

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Rima: Now, that's certainly the critique, and the black Buddhist circles that have formed, and I'm especially thinking of teachers, multi-lineage teachers, have explicitly said that numerous times. There can be sometimes a dismissing of black teachers, a kind of myopia, many micro aggressions that have taken place, so that is certainly the critique, that white, predominantly white Buddhist sanghas, and retreat centers, and maybe we could say governing structures in the United States have not taken seriously the fact that racism can flourish within those communities and that that needs to be named and confronted and worked with through Dharma practice as well.

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Sarah: Mm hmm. Yeah, what are the things that those sanghas then can recognize and change? What are they, and what are the black teachers pointing to as the necessary change?

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Rima: Well, maybe the second part of your question is a good place to start in terms of answering the first part of the question, which is to say that leadership matters, like who's in front of the podium or who is on the platform or, you know, who is holding the mic, that that voice or those set of voices matter quite a lot in terms of trying to shift a culture, that to simply invite more people in but not shift the power structure is really not enough, and that's where I think the teacher training programs that IMS and Spirit Rock have committed to are really important, and I am starting to see...

00:33:55:15 - 00:34:03:12

Sarah: Sorry, what is IMS and Spirit Rock? Ims means "Insight Meditation Society", right, for listeners who may not be familiar, and what is Spirit Rock?

00:34:04:04 - 00:34:08:00

Rima: Spirit Rock is its sister retreat center in Northern California.

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Sarah: OK.

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Rima: So they're both in the lineage out of the Theravada tradition of Southeast Asia and the people who helped to found it were in India and Burma and Thailand studying and training, sometimes with forest monastics, and then came back to the United States and founded these centers. So what these centers have needed to do in terms of shifting the culture or the dominant cultural aspects of, for example, what it means to go on retreat, is to shift who the teachers are very explicitly, to also respond to maybe small things that are not small things, like having accessible hair conditioner for black hair, being very attentive to pronouns, and the fact that we're talking about systemic racism, but as I said, we're also talking about a multiplicity of identities and being really intentional about addressing that as well. So I think with these larger bodies, organized bodies, at least in my tradition, and I really do hesitate to speak about American Zen or different Tibetan traditions, I hesitate to speak because I feel like I just don't know very much.

00:35:36:23 - 00:36:20:25

Rima: But at least in my tradition, there's been this kind of attempt to privilege certain voices, to help with resources, if resources, both in terms of time and money, are not so available, to be attentive to that. I know that, for example, when Gina Sharpe and Larry Yang wanted to start a teacher training that was predominantly teachers of colour, that they asked for resources and that Spirit Rock was able to meet them and to make accessible a 4 year teacher training program. Things like that are really important in terms of making the Dharma accessible and then also raising Dharma practitioners to the level of teachers.

00:36:21:16 - 00:36:41:13

Sarah: I wanted to talk a little bit about your book forthcoming that's come up a couple of times. This is a book, it's not published yet, right? But it's *Black Buddhists and the Black Radical Tradition: The Practice*

of Stillness in the Movement for Liberation. It'll be forthcoming with NYU Press in 2021. So, soon, congratulations.

00:36:41:18 - 00:36:42:06

Rima: Thank you.

00:36:42:12 - 00:36:47:02

Sarah: So in this book, what did you investigate about Buddhist teachers of African descent?

00:36:48:25 - 00:37:51:06

Rima: So as I mentioned, I started off with a chapter on historical trauma, or intergenerational trauma. I really did not expect that to come up, but it came up over and over and over, really unprompted in interviews. I also have a chapter on socially engaged Buddhism and a chapter on the Black Radical tradition, which I teach on and write on fairly regularly. But I also have a chapter on teachings and the fact that black teachers are interpreting the Dharma in really unique ways. So that takes on everything from the Sattipatthana Sutta to the teaching on Anatta that I was mentioning, and that to me is a really powerful chapter because it incorporates so many different voices that talk about liberation, not just as achieving ultimate reality, but as I was saying, liberation from these dominant social messages, liberation that allows these kind of compulsive energies to drop away, liberation from white supremacy.

00:37:51:08 - 00:39:14:18

Rima: It's really very beautiful. There is also a chapter on queer identity, which I'm in the midst of writing right now, gender and sexual identity, and then there is a chapter on what it means to live in a community. So it is to say that the voices I've incorporated, which are 40 teachers and long term practitioners, all of African descent, are talking about liberation in these unique ways, in very personal ways, and also talking about the importance of sangha. I think so often in, maybe we could say North America broadly, certainly in the United States, these Buddhist communities are very focused on solitary sitting. You know, you will go on retreat and you'll sit for 8 to 10 hours a day and really not talk with other people. And one thing that these teachers, these black Buddhist teachers and long term practitioners have said over and over is that we need each other and we stand on the shoulders of our ancestors, so that ancestral traditions are being incorporated very directly, and there's a recognition of the importance of honoring ancestors that are known and unknown, so that's something that's brought in, the aspect of community and of honoring ancestors.

00:39:14:27 - 00:40:26:26

Rima: And then I think I'm going to title the conclusion, which has yet to be written, I think I'm going to entitle it, "Decolonizing Dharma", and that is a term I've been working with more and more at, this concept of decolonization. And I'm hearing this term decolonizing Dharma more and more, and what I think it refers to is that we have to recognize that historical harm was done. We want to name that the land we live on was taken, was stolen. We want to recognize the fact of historical slavery and how that especially impacted now contemporary generations of people of African descent. We want to name this all and we want to now work towards honoring other ways of being that incorporate indigenous practices. So the book itself kind of takes on these other iterations of Buddhism, some of which I think you do find in different Asian countries that are majority Buddhist countries, but that did not get incorporated in western sanghas that have emphasized the individual, and have emphasized solitary sitting.

00:40:27:10 - 00:40:55:05

Sarah: Wow. That was really beautifully put. Decolonizing the Dharma, decolonizing our many kinds of practices and institutions begins with recognition that historical harm was done, just naming and recognizing and observing, but not necessarily fixing, is that what you're saying? Not necessarily having the next step, immediately being "here are all the solutions", but the first step being holding that awareness?

00:40:55:27 - 00:41:43:07

Rima: I think so. One of the things I struggled with with the concept of decolonization is that we're not talking about reclaiming land. We are talking about reclaiming rituals and we're talking about implementing new rituals, and there is a lot to be said for symbolic power. I think that that can be very powerful. But I struggled with the idea that if we're talking about decolonization, we're not talking about reclaiming land, and still, I think it's important to start off with, as you say, that recognition that harm was done, that that harm continues to be done, and that we want to strive as much as possible to mitigate or to alleviate that harm, and the Dharma is an amazing vehicle for that.

00:41:43:11 - 00:42:29:03

Sarah: Can we also go back a little bit to your work on socially engaged Buddhism that came before? So you have an article from 2017 in the Journal of Religions called "Black Buddhists in the Body: New Approaches to Socially Engaged Buddhism". We're going to put the link in the show notes. It's a nice, short article, so one that's also approachable to read with classes. And in it you point to how in socially engaged Buddhist movements there's often been a kind of focus on ideals like anti-war or environmental healing, but that has been put up against a kind of silence around oppressions based on embodied identities. Can you tell us more about that research and how we could teach with it in our classes?

00:42:30:11 - 00:44:37:28

Rima: Oh, that's a great question. You know, that analysis really came out of looking at a plethora of books on socially engaged Buddhism and noting what was highlighted and what was absent. So, as you said, there is so often a focus on environmental damage that is wrought in our modern society, and I think so often these communities can applaud themselves for being on the right side of different social issues. These are more liberal communities, for the most part, politically liberal communities, and yet not dissimilar to, for example, having a group of white students in my classroom who self-silence around race and racism, I think these communities can often be intimidated by taking on the plight of people of colour who are naming racism, because I think there is a fear that talking about racism and not knowing exactly the right thing to say, the right words to use, maybe not having an expansive or cogent analysis can lead one to worry about being labeled racist or being dismissed. So, often white students and white people generally will self-silence around racism, and yet one of the things that I think is really important, and especially I see this at the end of Radical Dhama in the conversations that take place, is that that is precisely where white people need to do some work and to really work with that fear and that self-silencing and that inhibition. And again, I think the Dharma is such a great place to start with that, because you have tools to sit with discomfort, tools that need to be cultivated for sure, practices that need to be cultivated, but they're there. They're accessible. There is a way to work with really hard feelings, and to face those fears and to move through them.

00:44:38:00 - 00:45:54:25

Rima: So what I think is really exciting about the challenge brought by black Buddhist teachers, but explicitly through the Dharma, through Dharma practice, is that they're not just saying, you know, "white people wake up or white people do your work". They're saying, "everyone needs to do this work. We're all at different vantage points. You are people who are embodied as white. You have a different level of historical context", and some people like Reesma Menakem will say "white people have their own trauma and have to recognize that too". But what these teachers are saying is that we have the tools, we have the capacity to work with it. We actually can make huge shifts by employing the Dharma and the practices of the Dharma. There isn't this dismissiveness or a castigation. There is really a kind of openness. And so the challenge is, will white people take that challenge then and live into it, and work with those inhibitions and those fears and those unknowns? Will they kind of take, I don't know, take the gauntlet... What is that phrase, I'm not sure... Take the mantle and, you know, pick it up and start running with it.

00:45:54:27 - 00:46:00:04

Sarah: Right. Because silence, continuing silence is its own violence, too, right?

00:46:00:24 - 00:46:02:02

Rima: That is so true.

00:46:03:04 - 00:46:09:00

Sarah: I mean, it's in the silence that all of this stuff has flourished for years, right?

00:46:10:08 - 00:46:33:24

Rima: Yeah, silence can be oppressive and silence can be liberating, and I think it's on us to recognize the difference. I actually just wrote an article that's coming out in a book, I don't remember the name of it, but I think it's called something like *Black and Buddhist*. There are a couple of collections that are coming out fairly soon, and I can look them up if that's helpful.

00:46:33:26 - 00:47:03:22

Sarah: Yeah, we'd love to link to them in the show notes. That'd be great. So back to a few nuts and bolts about teaching. I mean, you're obviously embracing difficult topics, but in really personal ways, in embodied ways, where you're working even with mindfulness practices in your class. You told us about books that they responded well to... What worked or didn't work so well in the new online formats that we all had to embrace this year? And we may still be in for a while...

00:47:04:13 - 00:47:49:16

Rima: The nice part about teaching online is that my students in some cases were all over the country because not everyone came back to campus, and we were able to stay together as a group and journey as a group, and it felt like they were very respectful with each other and wanted to hear each other, and I liked the fact that we could continue, even though some folks were in different states, it didn't feel like they had to have a separate conversation and then we had a different conversation on the campus, so I liked that. But what's hard about online teaching is that so often students will turn off their cameras, and I'm a teacher who reads faces and I read expressions. It's really hard.

00:47:49:18 - 00:47:50:24

Sarah: I found it really alienating.

00:47:50:26 - 00:47:53:02

Rima: It's really hard. Oh, yes.

00:47:53:04 - 00:48:12:16

Sarah: I found myself begging them to turn their cameras on, but they didn't always. Which I totally respect as their choice also, and their comfort level. But I found it really took a new level of energy from me to pour my face onto a screen and then look at a bunch of gray boxes.

00:48:14:00 - 00:49:10:19

Rima: It's really hard. I didn't always know how the material was coming across, and I had a couple of students be very engaged, and then I worried that, you know, for example, like Lama Rod talking about grief just hit them in a deeply personal way, and they didn't really know what to do with that, but they didn't feel like they could talk about that even in a more abstract way, not so much their own experiences or their own story but even what he was saying, like it was just very hard and very personal. And the reason I bring that up is that I know for a couple of my students who also happen to be students of colour, that some of that material really did hit them hard, and I only know that because I followed up with them, but because their cameras were off, I couldn't tell during the class how they were doing. And that was very, very hard.

00:49:10:21 - 00:49:15:06

Sarah: Of course. Yeah. So you follow up after on email, I assume? Just personally?

00:49:16:19 - 00:49:20:27

Rima: Yeah. Or have a Zoom meeting, but I would initiate, I would ask for that meeting.

00:49:20:29 - 00:49:36:11

Sarah: Yeah. I feel like that's got to be so important though with this stuff because, absolutely, if we're talking about processing grief and trauma, for our students, that's, I mean for all of us, of course those are real lived experiences that many of us are still navigating.

00:49:37:01 - 00:49:37:20

Rima: Yes.

00:49:39:14 - 00:49:45:27

Sarah: Yeah, I think that would be an essential part, right, to have a compassionate teacher like yourself reaching out afterwards.

00:49:48:14 - 00:50:14:19

Rima: To varying levels of success... Like sometimes it worked, but then sometimes it really didn't. Unlike teaching in person, I just didn't know how I got through, but I also just didn't know how that student, or in this case, a few students, how they were resourced. And with COVID and the isolation during COVID and in the wake of the protests this past summer, and the fact that these were students of colour, I was really concerned.

00:50:15:09 - 00:50:34:09

Sarah: Yeah, there's so many levels of complication that people are navigating all the time right now that it's so hard to know which ones, it's also so hard to know which ones we're responsible to as their

teachers, right? I mean, we can invite them to share with us, but they don't always, right. I mean, that's up to them as adults, whether they want to.

00:50:36:12 - 00:50:54:02

Sarah: You've also worked in prisons, running programs for teaching with incarcerated students. So can you tell us a little bit about that experience and how, is it maybe on hiatus due to COVID right now?

00:50:56:08 - 00:51:54:09

Rima: The full program is on hiatus. So for the past four years, it may actually be a little bit longer in terms of non-credit bearing classes, we've offered two classes a semester at a minimum security women's prison that's just about seven minutes from our campus. So it's a fairly easy connection to make. We ran those classes with the idea that students could build college credits and maybe ideally get either an associate's or a bachelor's degree. But because it's a minimum security and because we're a four year college, a security prison and we're a four year college, it didn't really work to try to have a degree program within the prison because we don't offer a two year degree, and a lot of those women are kind of in and out. They're going to that facility to start working towards release. So they're not there for a very, very long period of time.

00:51:54:19 - 00:52:58:29

Rima: But, they could be there for the duration of a semester, for 16 weeks, and so we had great success, then when COVID hit very quickly, we had to step out. It just wasn't safe to go into the prison to take students into the prison. I was actually on sabbatical at that time, and so I was privy to many of the conversations, but not actually in charge of the program. And then this semester we ran two book clubs that were four weeks each. So the students were together for a total of eight weeks and they read two books, and all of it was by correspondence. The teacher didn't meet the students face to face, but would collect responses to her prompts, and then would write back and engage with them. We did that actually over the summer, and then we did it this past fall, and we're trying to gear up to go back into the prison and take undergraduates into the prison in the fall 2021 semester.

00:52:59:12 - 00:53:19:23

Sarah: So can you tell us a bit about those courses? Like how many students do you take into the prison? What do those courses, when you can do them, with taking your college students into the prisons... How do the two groups mesh in the courses, and what changes for both of them? Because it sounds like such a fascinating and potentially transformative learning experience.

00:53:21:19 - 00:54:48:07

Rima: I do think of it that way. We've typically taken eight outside students, students who are registered at Warren Wilson, and then we also accept eight inside students for each class. So each seminar generally consists of 16 students, and there's sometimes some variation, depending on the number of applicants, but that's usually what we aim for. There's some talk of raising the cap to 20 students, but so far in the first few years of running the program, we've had seminars of approximately 16 students. The students who come in from Warren Wilson campus are much younger. As I mentioned, they tend to be more fluid in terms of their gender and sexual identity, which I think is very, very different from what I would call a conservative culture within the prison, and they would say are kind of cutting edge around the use of pronouns and self-identity. What's very, for me, beautiful about the dynamic is that the women who are incarcerated seem to drink it all in and to want to know, and a lot of them have

teenagers who are living in this kind of new context, and, you know, it's a way for them to get to know more of what's happening in society through the eyes of undergraduates.

00:54:48:20 - 00:56:16:05

Rima: I think for the undergraduates, meeting women who are in a state of incarceration, who have been locked up for whatever reason and who have very, very different life experiences and who are open to sharing those life experiences, has been, as you say, transformative, because there is a kind of equalizing in the classroom. Everyone is a student. Everyone gets academic credit. I would actually say the incarcerated students set the bar in terms of academic rigor. They are very, very focused on doing well. They do not take for granted the fact that they have access to this liberal arts education. This is something I would say across the board that is new for them. Maybe they have a college degree, we've had a couple of students who have had that. Maybe they have gone to community college, and we do have a couple of students who have done that. But the vast majority have not gone to college and maybe got what's called a GED or a HiSET years ago, and have not engaged academically and who are very proactive around learning, but also recognize the extraordinary privilege of that. So I would say for the incarcerated students that there is a kind of rigor and a kind of expectation and a kind of drive within themselves to do really well.

00:56:16:07 - 00:57:00:26

Rima: So the culture of these classes is not a kind of, "oh, no, I have to write a paper". It's "you tell me what I need to do. Please read this draft. Please read the second draft. Tell me what you think". There's this intensity that lets us know how extraordinary it is to actually be able to step back and read and think and process and reflect and ruminate and converse. To say that there's a kind of sacred space within the classroom setting is, I think, something we can all live in too, but so often college students just feel a lot of pressure and they're really exhausted and they don't think of it that way. But in the prison, it is that way. It's that way.

00:57:01:12 - 00:57:20:10

Sarah: Right, it reframes the experience to what it could be and should be, really. Yeah, that's so exciting. And then have you had the chance to teach in prisons with Buddhism? Have you ever brought Buddhist practice or any of these kind of readings that we've referred to in this episode into the prison teaching space?

00:57:21:26 - 00:58:30:05

Rima: I have not. I taught years and years ago at Sing Sing Prison, where the class was not mixed, it was just incarcerated students, and those classes were religious studies classes. So we talked quite a lot about practices, but not explicitly about Buddhism, and then in my new position and as director of this InsideOut program at Swannanoa Correctional Center for Women, we've had religious studies classes taught. We had a class on Islam taught, and we had another a class called Exploring Religions taught, and both of those were very appealing to the inside students, the incarcerated students. But in both cases, I served as the administrator, not as the actual teacher. I do think it would be exciting to teach Buddhism with a kind of practice component within the prison, but especially because of this year with COVID and just not really being totally sure what happens next we haven't introduced that.

00:58:30:07 - 00:58:37:23

Sarah: Yeah, I know many of us now have to just dream of the things we will do when and if the world goes back to normal, whatever that is.

00:58:38:19 - 00:58:39:25

Rima: Whatever that looks like.

00:58:41:09 - 00:59:05:03

Sarah: Our listeners are largely people who teach with and about Buddhism in university and college classrooms. So what advice would you give to other professors who are trying, maybe for the first time, to integrate and do better to teach and learn about Buddhism and anti-racism? What advice would you give them of things they could introduce into their class?

00:59:05:17 - 01:00:22:21

Rima: Well, I think we have a number of books, and books actually that are coming out very soon, books that have just been published that are more personal, books that are anthologies where in some ways, I think, the writers speak very clearly and cogently and almost... I mean, they speak so clearly and cogently, they're really speaking in a way that is deeply accessible so that I think even if professors feel unfamiliar with, let's say, critical race theory or a systemic analysis of race, they can read these texts and be able to hear the clarity with which these writers are speaking. So to introduce those writers, and I would say what does seem very important, and this is where even having that week on intergenerational trauma and talking about the history of racism and how to work with it in a somatic way, I do think it's important to have some kind of contextual analysis or introduction so that these voices aren't speaking out of the blue, but they're responding to a broader context.

01:00:23:00 - 01:01:58:04

Rima: But I would say, you know, in some ways these texts really do speak for themselves, and it's not so much being deeply versed or broadly versed in systemic racism as much as being able to hear what these writers are saying, and to be able to really privilege those voices and to try to surface as much as possible what they're responding to. So some of the books I've named, I think, are really important. There are some other books like Jan Willis' *Dreaming Me*. Reverend Kyodo Williams has a book that's now 20 years old called, *Being Black*, that might be useful. A couple of books have just come out, Sebene Selassie has a book called *You Belong*. Seb is an amazing teacher and irreverent and funny, I highly recommend that. I think that there's a lot that is there, and I think there is a lot that's coming out very soon. It's just important to be steeped in those voices and then to decide on which which voices are most resonant. The other thing, though, is because these books are really personal, I think students can access them in ways that are not intimidating to be able to engage and to hear clearly, you know, what Dharma means in terms of the practice of liberation in a highly racist context.

01:02:00:06 - 01:02:13:00

Sarah: Yeah, well, thank you so much, that's really great advice. Is there anything that you wanted, anything we didn't get to say, that we didn't get to talk about that, you feel we skipped over in this podcast that you wanted to say?

01:02:15:04 - 01:02:17:28

Rima: I guess I should say my books should be on that list.

01:02:18:00 - 01:02:18:24

Sarah: Absolutely.

01:02:19:01 - 01:02:37:11

Rima: I'm just kidding. This is the first academic book of its kind, which I think is why NYU Press picked it up so quickly. But I think it'll come out in the summer of 2021, that's some self-promotion, I don't know, just a little self-promotion.

01:02:37:13 - 01:03:06:17

Sarah: Self-promotion is welcome here, this is fine and good... And yeah, your book sounds really exciting and I can't wait to see it in the flesh. Well, we had one little other question that we thought we wanted to integrate... The work of Bell Hooks, a well-known black woman who also practices Buddhism. Has it been important to you, and do you think Buddhism has this way of helping us better understand black feminist philosophy?

01:03:06:24 - 01:03:55:29

Rima: Yes, I really recommend reading Bell Hooks, I actually am including her in my black feminist section in the chapter on the black radical tradition. I think she's a really, really important voice. In terms of Buddhism incorporating black feminism, you know, the other person I would highly, highly recommend, I actually think this is my next book, is The Work of Audre Lorde. I actually have a very long section looking at how much Audre Lorde talks about Dharma, even though she's not saying that explicitly, just what she's saying is Dharma. So, yes, I think if you are steeped in Dharma and then you read these black women who self-identify as feminist, you will see a kind of congruence, you will hear a kind of congruence in terms of what they're saying.

01:03:56:11 - 01:03:57:14

Sarah: Yeah, great.

01:03:59:00 - 01:04:05:03

Rima: And James Baldwin too, who's not, of course, a black feminist, but absolutely speaks the Dharma. Absolutely.

01:04:06:07 - 01:04:11:03

Sarah: Wonderful. Well, thank you so much for taking the time today to speak with us on The Circled Square.

01:04:11:20 - 01:04:18:04

Rima: Oh, it's my pleasure. Thank you. This was really provocative, especially as I go into this next period of writing. So thank you for that.

01:04:19:04 - 01:04:35:24

Sarah: Well, good luck to you then. In this time, may it be, you know, as focused and productive as you can make it amidst these impossible conditions that sometimes support that, but I wish you so much courage and strength in the finishing of this book, because it sounds really great.

01:04:37:13 - 01:04:40:21

Rima: Thank you so much. I really appreciate that very much.

01:04:46:01 - 01:05:31:27

Sarah: You can find more information about Rima's teaching and research on her web page at Warren Wilson College. We'll post a link in the show notes. Notes and a full transcript can be found on our website, teachingbuddhism.net. We invite you to subscribe to this podcast through Apple, or Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts. We would especially like to hear from you about what you think about today's episode. Please get in touch with us however you prefer. Send us an email or send us a message on Facebook where we're The Ho Center for Buddhist Studies at the University of Toronto. Thanks to our multitalented creative director, Dr. Betsy Moss, for managing the technical details, and our contributing producer, Dr. Francis Garrett. This podcast is supported by The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Center for Buddhist Studies at the University of Toronto. Thanks for listening and be well.