



UNION

Religious Worlds of New York • *Curriculum Development Project*

Black Buddhists in America

Monika Johnston, Packer Collegiate Institute, Brooklyn, NY

Abstract

This project uses a Socratic Seminar (a student-led discussion format) and a wide range of digital resources (see links below) to explore the lived religious experiences of African-American Buddhists.

When teachers explore African American spirituality with students, we often view it through the lenses of Christianity or Islam. While large numbers of African Americans continue to follow these traditions and the legacy of these religions are historically and culturally significant in black life, some black people have migrated toward the spiritual philosophies and practices of various forms of Buddhism. Many black Buddhists want to integrate their historical experience and orientation toward social justice with their practice of the dharma. They see an integral connection between the Buddhist aim of alleviating all suffering with social and political activism to end forms of structural and cultural violence. Black practitioners in Buddhist communities can sometimes find themselves marginalized in dharma communities where the suffering caused by racism and attachment to privilege (sometimes within the sangha) might go unacknowledged and unexamined. Within American Buddhism, Black Buddhist teachers are at the forefront of advocating for deeper awareness and engagement with identity and diversity from a dharma perspective.

As a collective, the following lessons work to develop a skill set and a knowledge base for engaging in civil discourse about a topic related to American Buddhism. The first lesson introduces a discussion format to help students deepen their understanding of a text about race, gender, and sexual identity as social constructions and how Buddhist communities are engaging with diversity. The second lesson provides tools for quickly establishing the norms and preparation strategies for student-led discussions. The final activity in this unit, the Socratic seminar, offers an opportunity for juniors and seniors to learn about the lived experiences of African-American Buddhists through engagement with digital resources and student-led, text-based discussions. In each of the following lessons, the teacher serves as a facilitator to clarify instructions, help redirect/focus the group, encourage deeper thinking, and invite students who have not spoken to contribute to the discussion. Additionally, teachers might track the conversation and record the number of times each student spoke, interrupted, asked a question, referred to the text, or mentioned another student by name to respond to directly.

Context

The intended audience for the following lessons is eleventh and twelfth grade students enrolled in a religion elective at a college prep independent school. Students will have had some introduction to the premises of religious studies referred to in the [AAR Guidelines for Teaching About Religion in K-12 Schools](#) and a foundational introduction to Buddhism. The lessons also presume student experience with close reading and analysis of multiple types of sources. Student-led seminars should take place after the students have a firm understanding of agreed upon discussion norms and have had some practice developing questions and comments from written and multimedia texts. Ideally, these norms would be co-developed at the beginning of the year and would be characteristic of the classroom culture. However, they can be co-developed before you prepare for the final discussion. Keep in mind that this is a developing practice that will deepen as students get more experience. The pedagogy that informs much of the style and format of the final Socratic seminar assignment comes out of my study at the Harkness Summer Institute at Phillips Exeter Academy.

Lesson Objectives

1. Engage with lived religion through digital media resources.
2. Disrupt assumptions about who is a Buddhist in America; provide an alternative lens to look at African-American spirituality.
3. Explore internal diversity and the interconnections between religious identity and culture within the Buddhist tradition in the United States
4. Practice generating text-based questions and comments, listening, self-monitoring and civil dialogue with others.

Establishing a Culture for Student-led Discussions

Student-led, deliberative conversations need to take place within a context of agreed-upon norms and an atmosphere where students feel safe enough to take a risk. Set aside at least one period to help them think about the qualities of the atmosphere they need to create and maintain. Ask students to think about the following questions and write down their answers:

What kind of classroom community do we need to create to generate the best environment for our learning? How will we deal with opposing points of view? How will we ensure everyone can contribute? How do we address dominant and silent students?

In a popcorn style, ask students to share their suggestions and write them on the whiteboard. After you have elicited an appropriate list of guidelines, ask students if there is anything on the list that requires clarification or refinement in order to be understood and accepted by everyone. Ask the group how they will hold each other accountable. Get a group consensus on the agreements and underscore that students will need to self-monitor and hold each other responsible for maintaining

the group agreements. Communicate that part of your job as facilitator is to help them do that when necessary.

The following handouts provide some guidance that may help to establish a safe/brave environment to engage in civil discourse.

[Sample Student-Generated Group Agreements](#)

[Guidelines for Student-led Discussions](#)

[Reading Actively and Formulating Questions & Comments From Texts](#)

Unit Sequence

Day 1: Small Group Discussion: The Final Word (50 minutes)

Assign students to highlight a section of the assigned homework text (Chapter 10, Buddhism In America) upon which they want to comment. They should also select a backup in case someone else in their group choose the same one.

Organize students into groups of three or four and give them the handout for the conversation format called the [Final Word](#). This conversation format is highly structured to balance speaking equity with listening and responding. As the facilitator, your role is to make sure students understand the instructions and to time the various sections of the rounds. (I use this [round tracker](#) to help manage the various segments of the protocol as I keep time and indicate the speaker transitions.) Once the groups have completed the Final Word, have each group share out some of the highlights and insights that emerged from the small group conversations. In the whole group discussion, clarify any wonderings or misunderstandings around the theoretical concepts from the reading. Elicit any key points they might have not emerged from the small group conversations. Finally, debrief the experience of using such a highly structured conversation format. What did they like about it? What was challenging? Why?

Day 2: Norm Setting and Preparing for Socratic Seminar (50 minutes)

If you have already established discussion norms for your class, you may only need to review them. If you haven't done this ahead of time, you will need about 20-25 minutes to do so. Go over the format and expectations for the Socratic Seminar. You also might want to take some time to model generating questions and comments from texts. I would suggest using some paragraphs from one of the texts that you will not use assign for the Socratic Seminar. Have students practice crafting questions and comments. Talk about what makes one question or comment clearer or more effective than another. Encourage students to begin their questions by providing some context from the reading. If you have the time in your curriculum, you may want to dedicate an additional full period to this activity.

Homework for the Socratic Seminar: Assign selected readings or excerpts from no more than five or six of the primary and secondary sources on the last pages. Try to assemble a set of texts that include different types of sources. If possible, balance text with images or videos. For example, I might select the following texts for students in my context, which is a religion elective in a private school in Brooklyn, New York.

[“Power & Heart: Black and Buddhist In America,”](https://www.lionsroar.com/power-heart-black-and-buddhist-in-america/) Lion’s Roar.com, March 2019.

Earthlyn Zenju Manuel, [“What Does Buddhism Have To do With Black People”](http://zenju.org/what-does-buddhism-have-to-do-with-black-people/)

Naima Mora, [“Naima Mora: Buddhist In America”](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3rrmvyO506I),

Sunara J. Sasser, [“Why Are There So Many Black Buddhists?,”](https://tricycle.org/trikedaily/black-buddhists/) *Tricycle*. October 16th, 2018

[“Our Commitment to Inclusivity”](https://brooklynzen.org/) Brooklyn Zen Center, <https://brooklynzen.org/>

The reading focus questions might be: How do the experiences of African-American Buddhists shape their understanding of the dharma and their practice? What are the tensions inherent in practicing Buddhism in the US while black? How are African-American Buddhist leaders and lay people influencing the larger communities of American Buddhists?

Ask students to read for patterns and themes that emerge out of the readings and tie the texts together or provide insight into the lived religious experience of African Americans. Ask them to prepare at least one question or comment for the student-led seminar. Students should lead into their question by providing some context and note the page and paragraph to which their question or comment refers.

Day 3: Socratic Seminar (50 minutes)

Question: How do the lived experiences of African-American Buddhists shape their understanding of the dharma and their practice? What are the tensions inherent in practicing Buddhism in the US while black? How do you think African-American Buddhist leaders and lay practitioners are making an impact on American Buddhism?

Unlike the Final Word, the Socratic Seminar is a free-flowing conversation format. However, students need to demonstrate that they have internalized norms such as monitoring air-time, listening, not interrupting, referencing the text, and disagreeing respectfully. The seating arrangement should be such that students can make eye contact with everyone in the room. As a warm-up before opening the large group conversation, have students partner up for five minutes to share out some

of the emergent themes that connect the different sources from the homework texts. Have each pair write a theme on the whiteboard. The theme can be a word or a phrase. Have the class look at the themes the pairs identified. Ask for a volunteer to begin the conversation by relating themes to one of the texts they read. Remind students that they should make eye contact with each other—not just the teacher—when they speak. They should refer to the text by paragraph and page number. Students may call on one another, or they may speak popcorn style. Students should aim to respond to each other's questions and build on their comments. Ideally, the teacher's role is that of a facilitator who helps to clarify instructions, redirect the group, encourage deeper thinking, or invite students who have not spoken to contribute to the discussion. Your interventions should be judicious and model the civil discourse, critical thinking, and habits of mind you want to help develop. (Remember, the emphasis here is on student voices and leadership.) Additionally, teachers might track the conversation and record the number of times each student spoke, interrupted, asked a question, referred to the text, or mentioned another student by name to respond to directly. You may want to leave five minutes to debrief the conversation in terms of their engagement in the process.

Homework: Use the writing prompt “I used to think...now I think...” write a 250 - 350 word response about your insights and reactions to the conversation that emerged from the texts and the conversation.

***For information about the Religious Worlds of New York
summer institute for teachers, and more resources to enrich your teaching
on religious diversity, see: www.religiousworldsnyc.org.***

Suggested Resources

The following digital resources represent a variety of digital resources that provide information and insight into the lived experience of practicing African American Buddhists. Depending on your students' ability, you may want to assign less texts or use excerpts. Try to select texts for their ability to connect or contrast with one another. How might the texts be in dialogue with each other?

Primary Sources

“[Black and Buddhist in America](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cWeOKjU9F6o).” YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cWeOKjU9F6o>
Accessed 7/21/19 (Video of panel discussion with 15 Black Buddhist Teachers at Union Theological Seminary)

“[Power & Heart: Black and Buddhist In America](https://www.lionsroar.com/power-heart-black-and-buddhist-in-america/).” Lion’s Roar.com 1/19/19 Accessed 7/22/19.
<https://www.lionsroar.com/power-heart-black-and-buddhist-in-america/> (print version of panel discussion at Union Theological Seminary with African-American Buddhist lay and ordained leaders)

Manuel, Zenju Earthlyn. “[What Does Buddhism Have to Do With Black People?](http://zenju.org/what-does-buddhism-have-to-do-with-black-people/)” Accessed 12/9/19. <http://zenju.org/what-does-buddhism-have-to-do-with-black-people/> (Blog of ordained Zen priest, Earthen Zenju Manuel)

Mora, Naima. “[Naima Mora: Buddhist In America](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3rrmvvO506I)” YouTube. Accessed 7/23/19.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3rrmvvO506I> (Video of model & pop culture figure speaking about her experiences growing up as a Buddhist)

Turner, Tina. “[Nam-Myoho- Renge-Kyo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yf1YfZefBrk)” YouTube. Accessed 7/22/19
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yf1YfZefBrk> (Video of Tina Turner chanting Nam Myoho Renge Kyo)

Walker, Rebecca. “[Black Buddha](http://www.rebeccawalker.com/black-buddha)” RebeccaWalker.com. Accessed 7/22/19
<http://www.rebeccawalker.com/black-buddha> (Interview with Choyin Rangdrol, Buddhadharma Magazine, 2005.)

Secondary Sources

Atwood, Hayleigh. “Meditation App By and For People of Color Launches on The App Store” Lion’s Roar. May 22, 2019. Accessed July 15, 2019
<https://www.lionsroar.com/meditation-app-by-and-for-people-of-color-launches-on-the-app-store/>

“Black Folk Don’t: Practice Buddhism” YouTube. Accessed 7/22/19.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1G0_braCS6M

Jenkins, Jack. “The Black Queer Buddhist Teacher Who Is Smashing Stereotypes And Leading An Awakening on The Left.” Think Progress. 8/28/17. Accessed 7/15/19

<https://thinkprogress.org/angel-kyodo-williams-0357aa186187/>

Johnson, Charles. [Why Buddhism for Black Americans Now? An Excerpt From Taming the Ox.](#) Shambhala Publications. Accessed 7/15/19

<https://www.shambhala.com/buddhism-black-america/>

Kaleed, Jaweed. “Buddhist ‘People Of Color Sanghas,’ Diversity Efforts Address Conflicts About Race Among Meditators” HuffPost. 11/18/12. Accessed 7/23/19.

https://www.huffpost.com/entry/buddhism-race-meditators-people-of-color-sangha_n_2144559

McNicholl, Adeana. “Being Buddha, Staying Woke: Racial Formation in Black Buddhist Writing” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Volume 86, Issue 4, December 2018, Pages 883–911, Published: 13 July 2018. Accessed

7/22/19. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfy019>

Mitchell, Scott A. “Buddhist identities: Race, gender, and sexuality,” *Buddhism In America*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.

Sasser, Sunara J. “[Why Are There So Many Black Buddhists?](#)” *Tricycle*. October 16th, 2018

Accessed 7/15/19. <https://tricycle.org/trikedaily/black-buddhists/>

Seagar, Richard. “[Soka Gakkai: The Next Ten Years](#)” *Tricycle*. Fall 2001. Accessed 7/22/19

<https://tricycle.org/magazine/soka-gakkai-next-ten-years/>

Willis, Jan. “Scenes From A Spiritual Journey” Spirit Rock.org Accessed 7/22/19

<https://www.spiritrock.org/file/Jan-Willis-Scenes-from-a-Spiritual-Journey.pdf>