



Interdependence and Healing: Natalie Avalos on Practice, Scholarship, and the Liberating Power of Ceremony

by Natalie Avalos
and Eva Seligman

Natalie Avalos sat down with Eva Seligman to talk about the relationship between Buddhist practice and scholarship, her concept of “religious refusal,” and the healing power of ceremony.

Natalie Avalos is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Ethnic Studies at the University of Colorado Boulder. She is currently working on her manuscript titled *The Metaphysics of Decoloniality: Transnational Indigeneities and Religious Refusal*, which explores urban Native and Tibetan refugee religious life as decolonial praxis. She is a Chicana of Apache descent, born and raised in the Bay Area. She was interviewed by our graduate intern, **Eva Seligman**.

Eva Seligman: For folks who might be unfamiliar with you, can you give a brief overview of the kind of work that you do?

Natalie Avalos and Eva Seligman 2022: “Interdependence and Healing: Natalie Avalos on Practice, Scholarship, and the Liberating Power of Ceremony”, *Insight Journal*, number: 48: 15 – 27.

Natalie Avalos: My training is in religious studies. I got my Ph.D. at the University of California, Santa Barbara. My first and primary track was Native American indigenous religious traditions. I was trying to understand the relationship between religious reclamation and revitalization, especially for urban Indians, and healing and decolonization. What were the relationships between all of these things? How was it that religious practice was shaping and informing movements for self-determination, sovereignty, autonomy, and also a sense of restored personhood? As someone who was also a Buddhist and had done some thinking about Buddhism as an undergrad, I decided to work with my advisor, José Cabezón, and do some Buddhist studies training, focusing on Tibetan Buddhism in particular. That led to my dissertation project, which I am now transforming into a book, ethnographic work with Tibetan refugees and urban Indians, Tibetan refugees in Santa Fe and native folks between Santa Fe and Albuquerque. I was applying some of those same questions to Tibetans, trying to understand how they are also coping with practicing what could be understood as a place-based or land-based religious tradition in diaspora. How might they be using this religious life and religious practice in response to settler colonialism, dispossession, and racialization?

ES: You already understood yourself as a Buddhist as you began that work. Could you talk a little about how you came to Buddhism?

NA: I was raised in a fairly conservative Pentecostal home. My father was a Pentecostal minister. He's Mexican and Apache and I think he was very proud of his native heritage. I became somewhat aware as a teenager that Christianity just didn't really resonate with me. I liked some of the ideas but I didn't like the environment, especially because I had an older sister who was queer and was treated very poorly. I

remember feeling fairly young, 12 or 13, that this is not my place. Around that time, I was one of those weird kids deeply entrenched in existential questions. Why are we here, what does it all mean? I got really interested in reading about Eastern traditions, mysticism, Wicca, and learning about astrology and tarot. I was drawn to Taoism and I was drawn to Buddhism, but I didn't really know what it meant to be a practitioner. It was in my 20s that I began to do more serious healing work, go to therapy, think about my health and wellness. I also came across Buddhist community. I had started going to teachings at Tse Chen Ling, which is an FPMT [Foundation for the Preservation of Mahayana Tradition] Tibetan Buddhist center in San Francisco. I really enjoyed the teachings. I was 26 or 27 at the time and I ended up moving into a socially engaged Buddhist collective in San Francisco.

I really resonated with Buddhist concepts. They made so much sense. I think what most impacted me was thinking that any experiences that I had, experiences around violence, dispossession, sexism, racism, all those experiences were a reflection of not necessarily my own personal failure, or anything endemic, but were karmic. I mean that my experiences of violence on a personal and even more collective community level were driven by karmic causes and conditions outside of my own personal control, which I found helpful because I then no longer personalized these events or interpreted them as a sign of my own innate failure.

Thinking in those terms was incredibly liberating for me. I remember wanting to read more and more about the Dharma and what it meant to change my view, my mindset. I found that I was much less stressed, way happier. I think it just shifted my narrative.

I had been involved with activist circles, artists circles. A lot of my friends were artists and musicians, bohemians. I was really steeped in the punk scene in my teens and early twenties. It was a great place, but it could be very toxic and dysfunctional. And I felt like spiritual communities... maybe they're a little too vanilla. But people were doing things [in these spiritual centers], healing work that I found really productive. I wondered if that could be combined with anti-racism and feminist activism. I started to think about that more on a personal level and then more formally in grad school. How was it that religious life was helping people navigate liberation, not just in terms of a sense of inner peace or calm, but helping them navigate racialization, helping them navigate structural violence, and come up with an understanding of it where those of us who are racialized were no longer to blame, no longer personally indicted in the same way, or complicit in the same way. I found that incredibly liberating.

ES: I'd be curious to hear about other Buddhist concepts that you found helpful for yourself or saw helpful for others in the processes of shifting narratives or healing from structural violence?

NA: Interdependence. The idea of dependent origination was really profound. This self that I think is a stable self is not a stable self. There are multiple prior selves, multiple lives. And so all the things that feel so acute and intense, and so very real, are in an ultimate context, in ultimate reality, in the context of two views, they're not so real. It just shifts the charge. And that was really profound for me.

I felt this sense, especially in my teens and twenties, this fear that you're so static, that you carry these things, and you're going to have these terrible feelings and these stressors, and difficult dynamics in your life, and they're just inevitable and permanent. That was so horrifying to me. Thinking in terms of the impermanence [was helpful] and our ability to become increasingly aware of more subtle states of envy, deep attachment, understanding that this is human nature, and we're all struggling with this. Everyone else is suffering, too, but it's not static, we can play in that space and allow it to be totally transformed. That was so huge to me.

ES: Did you come to Buddhism as a practitioner or a scholar first, or did that happen simultaneously?

NA: As I was reading and just curious as a young person, it had planted a seed in my teens to circle back to in my twenties. I think it was kind of simultaneous. I transferred to Cal when I was 25 or 26. I started taking meditation classes there. One was student-run. I loved it. It was huge, like 200 people. It was so fun. It was a combination of undergrads and grad students who were facilitating and they gave these talks, kind of like Dharma talks, coming from different perspectives. I just loved it. And then I started taking additional courses. It was in an academic context, but it really did open up the door, and I think that's what made me feel comfortable enough to start going to teachings.

ES: Does your Buddhist practice inform your scholarship? And does your scholarship inform your practice?

NA: Definitely to the first question. I started to feel like if I want to benefit not just myself and focus on my own personal healing, how can I benefit others? Well, maybe it's researching healing, and how religious agency and religious life can empower others. Again, not just individually but structurally, collectively. How might we think of it as a potential place of even paradigm shift?

I think I probably put more time and energy into being a scholar. I realized that my practice was suffering a little, partly because academia can pull you in and convince you that working 80 hours a week is fine. And it's really not. I had to struggle with that in grad school and my first position. Even though being a scholar is important, and it can be beneficial work, even Bodhisattva work if you have the right intention, it made me realize that there are folks who get so caught up in doing their academic work that they lost sight of who they are as practitioners.

I think, as scholars, we have a tendency to be critical and to hedge. You can't make universal blanket statements or oversimplified statements. You're trained out of that. When [fellow practitioners said] this A is like B, and so they're the same, I found myself bristling. Maybe that's for me to think about and struggle with in my work, and I don't have to bring that into a practitioner's place. I don't have to impose that on others.

You see the complexity of religious life too. That was part of what I found delightful about doing comparative work where some things are resonant, like concepts of interdependence, but the practices are so distinct, and they're doing such different things. The scholar part of me brought that into my practice. Whether I'm in the native space of

being a sweat lodge or a [Buddhist] meditation retreat or with the Sangha, these are different things. They don't need to be the same. How might we respect and see the integrity of their differences, while still engaging them, seeing them as profound and beautiful? We don't have to collapse them into sameness.

I realized that as scholars we can start to police belief. That's not our job as scholars. I'm not here to police anyone's belief. It's kind of arrogant to do that.

ES: A lot of your work is about healing. You're currently working on a manuscript titled *The Metaphysics of Decoloniality: Transnational Indigeneities and Religious Refusal*.

Can you talk about this idea of religious refusal?

NA: This idea, I became familiar with it initially through the work of Audra Simpson, who is a Mohawk scholar. In her book, *Mohawk Interrupted*, she talks about ethnographic refusal. This was a concept that folks like her and Carol McGranahan, who's a Tibetologist, an anthropologist here at CU Boulder began to talk about. For Audra Simpson, she was essentially saying ethnographic refusal is an opportunity for us to shift the gaze. Ethnographic work and anthropology traditionally has focused the gaze on the "primitive," right? That is its foundational catalyzing reason for being, to understand ourselves as moderns by studying these "othered" societies and these perceived stages of cultural evolution.

How might we shift that radically? Audra was saying, I'm not going to put the gaze on my community and tell you

this lurid story that peeks into my community. I'm going to talk to you about all these other dynamics around identity and Mohawk citizenship that I think are more important. So that's the way she uses refusal. For Carol McGranahan, the way that she uses refusal is to think about Tibetan refugees refusing citizenship in India, the way that refusal acts as an assertion of self-determination, an assertion of sovereignty. I started to see the folks that I was working with expressing a refusal to give up their religious life in diaspora, trying to persist, urban Indians, people who had been living in diaspora from their communities for one, two, three, maybe more generations. I also saw Tibetan refugees persisting in their religious life. That's a refusal that speaks to the urge and the coercion around assimilation, around settler-colonial values and worldview.

For me, religious refusal is refusing to give up who you are, give up your epistemic life, your philosophical, ontological life, sensibilities, articulations, expressions, refusing to adapt and assimilate. That's actually something that I think is quite prevalent in the US. I think that folks assume that urban Indians are fully assimilated. [Urban Indians] may be able to live in a white settler reality, but it doesn't mean that your way of being and way of navigating it is totally transformed and aligned with it. Religious refusal is a way of grounding down deep into your identity, a refusal to give up who you are.

ES: In a talk you gave at Princeton in October 2020, you spoke about ceremony and ceremonial practices that are integrated into both indigenous and Tibetan organizing. How does that connect with religious refusal?

NA: March 10 is a major event, a date of commemoration [for Tibetans]. This was the day that Tibetans really revolted against the takeover of their land. It's a day that they commemorate because it's their uprising. I began to understand that in addition to something like Losar, their New Year, Tibetan Uprising Day was also a day of ritual and ceremony. And then there were these community ceremonial dimensions. Before they would go out and have a march commemorating the Uprising Day and have all these banners and all these signs, walking through Santa Fe, over a mile walk downtown to the main plaza, holding a rally and passing out fliers. They were doing all this incredible pedagogical work. But in order to do that, they grounded themselves first. They had collective meditation, prayers, and mantras together. In this dedication, they were dedicating all the merit from those prayers and mantras to the liberation of Tibet. I heard this again and again and again for any event. This is not just religious praxis for the sake of it. They are trying to intervene in the social-political via the karmic realm. They're trying to make material change because they understand that with the kind of work that they're doing together in the community, dedicating that merit together, they're essentially coalescing spiritual power towards that end. That was my big takeaway. There's some kind of spiritual warfare going on. They're pushing back against whatever karma is operating. I was told by several folks that I talked to that part of what we're dealing with China is our collective karma with them. What's the solution? Prayers, mantras, rituals, being in a ceremonial context together and doing the pedagogical work. It was seamless. All those components were contributing towards the liberation of Tibet. They were working on a kind of metaphysical, ontological level, and then going out and doing the material work. All of it was towards that single goal.

ES: That speaks a lot to this idea of a relationship between ceremony and its relationship with both spiritual and political liberation- and integrated spiritual and political liberation. What have you seen in your own life or your research regarding the relationship between ceremony and healing?

NA: There's something about a psychology of ceremony, the way that it's been described by some indigenous theorists. There's one Lakota scholar, Vine Deloria, Jr., who talks about ceremony like it's kind of a special sacred space that you enter. I began to think about ceremony as a metaphysical field of power, of immaterial power, where you're engaging with the immaterial world, you're building a conversation with the immaterial world. This happens in a Native context, this happens I think in a Tibetan Buddhist context. When you step in, you are asking buddhas, you're asking other deities, these other powers to intervene on your behalf, to assist. You're engaging with the spiritual world, and even sometimes with more chthonic powers, land deities, and so on. You're aware that the immaterial is always present. Ceremony is so important because when we're stepping intentionally into that field, ultimately, I think we know that we are altered by it. Just stepping into it you are very vulnerable. The immaterial is working upon you. There's an understanding that in that immaterial space, the immaterial powers that you are engaging and navigating and interacting with, they're more powerful than you are, they know more than you do. You go in with humility, with a sense of reverence.

It can be so transformative, I think, for multiple reasons. One is that it can shift your sense of identity again, this sense of stable self. You become experientially aware that you don't really have a stable self, that your self can be altered and transformed in that immaterial ceremonial space,

and that it's done so dialectically with these other immaterial powers. And there's something about that that I think is very life-affirming and calming. You realize that you're not alone. All the responsibility isn't entirely on you. I've heard people say things like, when they come out of ceremonial space, they felt held by the universe. And I've had that experience too. I've had that experience in sweats, I've had that experience using plant medicines, I've had that experience in group meditation, where you feel so held in this togetherness. It's incredibly empowering, calming. You just feel like you're in it with others, whether it's human others or spiritual others.

ES: The way you speak about ceremony and ceremonial spaces speaks so much to this idea of some kind of collectivity. You use this phrase "held in togetherness." It sounds like both a metaphysical togetherness and a very literal material collective.

NA: That is part of how ceremony can be so profound and healing. Part of what trauma does is it estranges you from yourself, it breaks the positive healthy relationship you have with your own spirit. Some Native theorists have called it a soul wound. I began to theorize it as this kind of ontological wound. That's what violence does, it renders you ontologically, so that's where the restoration comes in. You can restore your relationship with self partly in and through others, building that relationship with this larger community, of human and other-than-human others. It's that restoration that kind of just puts us back together again. I don't want to simplify and say it's overnight. No, I think it's incremental and it happens over time. But in those spaces something is operating that is beyond words. I think that ceremonial spaces are doing things for us that we can't really articulate. Words fail. We feel a shift though, we feel as if our bodies have

changed, our sense of self shifts, maybe our sense of personal stress and anger, frustration, and hurt begins to subside. I mean, it's those incremental changes that I think can be very, you know, cumulatively profound.

ES: If I'm hearing you correctly, it's not necessarily that one ceremonial space is the "end all" that fixes everything, but rather there are shifts that can happen in those spaces that over time and in community can allow for other possibilities.

NA: Yeah. I think in a Buddhist view, you would say the ultimate violence is thinking of yourself as separate from others. And it makes so much sense when you are having that visceral experiential journey of being in deep intimacy with others through ceremony. There's nothing like that. It's something that is so incredibly agentive when you realize that you're just not in it alone. You really are with others and that your actions and behavior and attitudes are impacting and the people around you that are also mindful of that, that you are in your togetherness working towards something.

I think that's why I was so moved to see Tibetans do that. In their collective mindedness around this, putting their collective hearts and minds together. Towards the end. It was so beautiful to me. And I felt so moved, you know, I just remember coming away from some events and just being in tears. Because you can otherwise feel so powerless against imperialism what I think many of us feel is so totalizing, so powerful. But you can make an intervention through that collectivity, and that can be so restorative to your personhood and to your whole view. You're liberated enough to function and maybe even do incredible political work.

ES: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

NA: Something that I have been thinking a lot about, speaking as a practitioner, is the ways in which Sangha spaces are trying to navigate racism and colonialism, sexism, homophobia, all these things. There's a lot of backlash, right? And then the criticisms of the criticisms... but if we can begin to build a better vocabulary and even an intellectual framework, even in Sangha spaces, around the ways that structural violence impacts us, bodily, and on a subtle body level, and that we're all carrying that. How can we be more compassionate to one another, no matter our positionality, and be patient and really try and listen and witness? Healing is relational. Until we can understand that we need to be witnessed and present with one another we're not going to have the healing that we want.

I am working on an article for Sacred Writes about how BIPOC sangha spaces can help ameliorate the alienation of the everyday racism of living in the U.S. since healing is relational. I also discuss how the continued dismissal of racist harm actually compounds racial trauma. If we want to heal the deep wounds of racism in Buddhist contexts, we have to have honest conversations about its impacts.