



Honoring Our Ancestors: A Buddhist Response to Anti-Asian Violence

by Chenxing Han

Writing in the wake of anti-Asian violence, Chenxing Han positions naming as a ritual act of mourning and a necessary step on the path to liberation. In “Honoring Our Ancestors: A Buddhist Response to Anti-Asian Violence,” she honors the lives of those who so often go unnamed, whether the nineteenth-century Asian immigrants who played a pivotal role in establishing American Buddhism, the Japanese Americans incarcerated during World War II, or contemporary victims of anti-Asian racism and anti-Black police violence.

I. Names

What is your name and what does your name mean?

This was the first question I asked each of the eighty-nine young adults I interviewed for a project on Asian American Buddhists. The question opened up conversations about people’s connections—or lack thereof—to their cultural heritages and family tongues. Interviewees shared about the Asian languages they learned—or didn’t learn—growing up.

When I embarked on these interviews back in 2012, I could think of many famous white Buddhists, several well-known Black Buddhists, and virtually no prominent Asian American Buddhists. [Two-thirds](#) of American Buddhists are of Asian heritage, yet they—we—have been largely invisible in mainstream representations. Far too often, I’ve witnessed the casual, careless erasure of a century of contributions by Asian American Buddhists in the arrogant and erroneous claim that white converts of the 1960s and 1970s founded American Buddhism.

I’m glad to see that Harvard University’s Pluralism Project website acknowledges nineteenth-century [Chinese and Japanese immigrants](#) for their foundational role in establishing American Buddhism. I’m troubled, however, to find only generic captions for the accompanying black-and-white photos: *Early members of Fresno Buddhist Church – Chinese woman at her log cabin – Asian railroad workers*. By contrast, the page on [East Coast Buddhists](#) is a roll-call of Euro-American names: Adams, Arnold, Bigelow, Blavatsky, Carus, Fenollosa, Gardner, LaFarge, Olcott, Thoreau. Though surely not the Pluralism Project’s intention, I can’t help but think how common it is to portray Asian people as a nameless mass: as hordes of heathens, swarms of disease-bearers, superstitious immigrants imperiling a white Christian nation.

Duncan Ryūken Williams’s groundbreaking book [American Sutra: A Story of Faith and Freedom in the Second World War](#), published on the Day of Remembrance in 2019, disabuses us of the notion that Asian American Buddhists are an unremarkable and undifferentiated mass. The stories of Nyogen Senzaki, Masatoshi Nagatomi, Masumi Kimura, and many other Japanese Americans—people with names and families, aspirations and fears, traumas and triumphs—leave no doubt about the centrality of Asian Americans in stewarding and shaping American Buddhism.

We aren’t just figures of the past. Asian Americans continue to steward and shape American Buddhism, as my

interviews with Aaron Lee, Andy Su, Cristina Moon, Dedunu Sylvia, George Yamazawa, Larene Woo, Noel Alunit, Shubha Bala, Thao Phi, and many others attest. Their stories form the warp and weft of my book [*Be the Refuge: Raising the Voices of Asian American Buddhists*](#), which came out in January of this year.

I've been asked a number of times what it's like to publish a book during a global pandemic. Short response: *Be the Refuge* being my first book, I don't have any points of comparison. Longer response: It's difficult to answer questions about fruition without tending to roots. I may have done my interviews on American soil, but most of the writing happened in Cambodia and Thailand, countries where I had a taste of something unfathomable to me in the United States: being part of a racial and religious majority. I sent my completed manuscript to my Bay Area-based publisher from Bangkok on the night of March 4, 2020. The next morning, I boarded a plane for what I thought would be a monthlong visit to the US. I landed to a text message from a friend in Thailand warning me to [stay safe from the virus and the racism](#). Fourteen months later, I'm still heeding his warning here in California. Indeed, as more people get vaccinated and as reports of anti-Asian violence continue unabated, I fear the racism more than the virus.

A decade ago, I set up a Google alert for “asian american” + “buddhist.” For years, radio silence. But in the past year, so much has come through, too much of it related to violence. Vandalism of Buddhist temples: Higashi Honganji in Los Angeles, six temples in LA's Little Saigon. Attacks that leave home altars desecrated: Roseni and her seven-year-old-daughter Amy, Vietnamese immigrants in Oakland, California who were robbed at gunpoint of their life savings and are afraid to share their last name for fear of retaliation. Attacks that leave Asian American Buddhists dead: Vicha Ratanapakdee of San Francisco, Yong Ae Yue of Atlanta.

Before the Atlanta shooting victims were officially identified, as the suspect's name and image circulated ad nauseam, it hurt to think of the victims as a nameless and faceless mass. For many Asian American women, the shootings brought up traumatic memories of all the times we've been the targets of racialized sexual aggression, all the times we've been reduced to a blank screen for the projection of unwanted fantasies.

A name is a starting point. A name suggests there's a story to tell. The Jataka tales that relate the past lives of Gautama Buddha often end by connecting the stories' characters with their future incarnations—Maddi was Princess Yasodhara; Vessantara was Prince Siddhartha. As if to remind us: there are bodhisattvas in our midst. As if to intimate: we are more interconnected than we know. As if to say: *we* might be the very bodhisattvas we've been waiting for.

II. Ritual

WE RECALL AND HONOR

Sachiko Tanabe

August 1944 – 11 year old Japanese-Peruvian child, drowned in the water at the Crystal City Internment Camp, Texas

TOGETHER WE RECALL AND HONOR Angela Valeria

Martinez, June 2019 – El Salvadoran 23 month old, drowned in the Rio Grandé with her father during a border crossing

BELL RING

The remembrance ceremony was held on [June 6, 2020](#) at Higashi Honganji Temple in Los Angeles. In keeping with COVID precautions, the service was led by five masked priests and attended by a small group of Buddhist clergy. Rev. Duncan Ryūken Williams, Rev. Wendy Egyoku Nakao, Rev. Noriaki Ito, Rev. William Briones, and Rev. Shumyo Kojima recalled the names of Japanese Americans incarcerated during WWII alongside the names of those who

have suffered from unjust deportation, anti-Asian racism, and anti-Black police violence—a reminder that our karmic connections transcend boundaries of geography, ethnicity, and time.

Another set of names, paired together on the *ihai* (memorial tablets) and recited during the ceremony: Kanesaburo Oshima and George Floyd. Killed in May 1942 and May 2020. Killed by a shot in the back of the neck and a knee to the neck. Fifty-eight years old and forty-six years old. A father of eleven children, a father of five children. A Japanese shopkeeper, a Black truck driver. Their final breaths drawn at a fence enclosing Fort Sill Internment Camp in Oklahoma and on a sidewalk in front of a Minneapolis convenience store in Minnesota. Witnesses shouting “Don’t shoot!” and witnesses hearing “Mama... Please... I can’t breathe...”

BELL RING

Though I was not there to hear the bell after each recitation of paired names, I sense that remembrance ceremony reverberating still. Ritual has the power to simultaneously hallow and haunt our lives—to turn us toward wholeness and disturb us from complacency.

I have heard many a practitioner in predominantly white convert communities wonder: Where are the rituals and holidays and music in my sangha? How can we make our communities feel more like an inviting home and less like an intimidating school where only the elite can access Buddhism? When I die, what rituals from my meditation center will comfort my family and friends?

In popular American representations of Buddhism, ritual and meditation are often conceived as polar opposites. The dichotomy is then juxtaposed with other questionable binaries: religious and secular, East and West, Asian and white, immigrant and convert, feminine and masculine, devotional and rational, superstitious and scientific,

American Buddhist and “merely” Buddhist *in America*. In a related rhetorical move, Buddhism gets collapsed into meditation, meditation gets reduced to mindfulness practice, and mindfulness becomes the hallmark of the “true” practitioner. From here, it’s not hard to understand how temple ladies working their malas, chatting about their kids, shucking peas, are seen as not *really* practicing.

To which I want to ask: but is this not how enduring community is formed? One ritual, one conversation, one meal at a time?

For many Asian Americans like myself who were not raised Buddhist and who do not have native language proficiency in an Asian language, predominantly white convert meditation communities are a gateway into the Dharma. We feel gratitude for these sanghas—many of us find refuge especially in BIPOC affinity groups therein—even as we grapple with dynamics of erasure and appropriation that feel especially poignant for us as people of Asian heritage practicing a religion with deep Asian roots. My yearning for rituals and holidays and music led me to explore Buddhist communities beyond the vipassana and Zen centers that served as my early introductions to meditation practice. I am indebted to the many sanghas that have welcomed me over the years; each one has expanded my understanding of Buddhism in its vast and varied manifestations.

As Robert Sharf writes in his contribution to the edited volume *Critical Terms for the Study of Buddhism*, “Ritual recreates the situation of early childhood play in all its enthralling seriousness and intensity... In ritual the form/content, subject/object, and self/other dichotomies are intentionally confounded, creating a transitional world... [R]itual exposes the transitional nature—the betwixt and betweenness—of social reality.” Reading this quote, I am reminded of a mentor whose coaching and leadership are steeped in decades of vipassana practice. A childhood memory recently resurfaced for him, a memory that differs from the ones where he is cowering with his parents and

siblings as bombs explode outside their home in Saigon. What he remembers is a moment full of movement, a ritual at once sensorily rapturous and gloriously liminal: Running across rooftops with his friends, flying kites. The patter of feet on corrugated tin, laughter lifting to the open sky. Military helicopters overhead. The absolute conviction that their kites would touch the helicopters. They knew: our kites will triumph. They knew: this is how to end the war.

On May 4th, 2021, forty-nine days after the Atlanta shootings, forty-nine Asian American Buddhist leaders will gather at Higashi Honganji Temple in LA's Little Tokyo for a special ceremony. In keeping with COVID precautions, only a small number of us will be in attendance to support the memorial service, though we will be joined by participants around the country—and perhaps around the world—as they view the livestream and join us in chanting sutras, reciting the names of our ancestors, and making offerings of flowers and light. As you read these words, [May We Gather: A National Buddhist Memorial Ceremony for Asian American Ancestors](#) will be an event of the past—but I hope its message of healing and solidarity is reverberating still.

In a [video honoring his mother Yong Ae Yue](#), Robert Peterson relates: “I’m Black and Korean... My mother was very adamant about knowing both. I didn’t have to do one exclusively without the other. One was not more valuable than the other... She also recognized that we grew up in America, and discrimination against African Americans and Asians is part of the American fabric.”

Yong Ae Yue’s other son, Elliott Peterson, adds: “But my mom was always an advocate of treating people right. Always letting us know not to be embarrassed of who we were. Always ready to stand up and speak about discrimination if she saw you actively discriminating. Now you can see how great my mother was.”

A ritual is a continuation point. A ritual suggests that healing is possible. The Buddhist teaching that we’ve all been each other’s mothers—in some lifetime or another—invites us

into a ritual of establishing kinship even with those we'd rather ignore or dismiss. As if to remind us: disavowal isn't an option. As if to intimate: we are all family. As if to say: the path to liberation is paved with spiritual friendship.

III. Dedication

Soon Chung Park, Hyun Jung Grant, Suncha Kim, Yong Yue, Delaina Ashley Yaun, Paul Andre Michels, Xiaojie Tan, Daoyou Feng, Vicha Ratanapakdee, Thien Minh Ly, Kanesaburo Oshima. I want to ask them all, *What is your name and what does your name mean?* I want to imagine a future where the list of twenty names in my copy of Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*—beginning with Jordan Russell Davis, Eric Garner, John Crawford, and Michael Brown—does not lengthen with each subsequent print run. I want us to recite these names and make offerings in their honor. I want us to imagine a future where lives are not cut short by racial violence, religious violence, sexual violence, gun violence, or any other kind of violence. I want us to imagine that future, and then I want us to remember we are co-creating that future in this very moment. As we reckon with the perplexities and perversities of America's racial karma, we are guided by countless ancestors, named and unnamed. When you and I die, we too will become ancestors. May we conduct our lives in ways that merit the veneration of our descendants. May we be fortunate enough to have these future generations recite our names.