



BURNING REFUGE

Panel & Workshop
Biography Booklet

2024

BREAKOUT 1

Race, Capitalism, and Colonialism

Panelist Abstracts
& Biographies

Alexandre Chami Filho (he/ they), Harvard Divinity School
"Can Equanimity become Equality? For an expansive hermeneutics of a prescriptive Buddhist political theory"

Although it is impossible to pinpoint a single and discrete thing called "Buddhism" across time or space, the influence of the "Buddhism" umbrella in Western culture throughout at least the last hundred years is undeniable. In the West, the penetration of Buddhism occurred through the undercurrents – it was not the political powers who endorsed Buddhism as a viable religious path but often independent communities, institutions, and intellectuals. Whereas Asian Buddhism constitutes itself as something of a public nature, Western Buddhism is thoroughly private.

A consequence of this private infiltration is that it reinforced an individualistic interpretation of Buddhism, turning it into something politically deflated. This paper mainly concerns the following question: is there a place for an emerging political discourse amongst Western Buddhists? If so, what would Western Buddhism's political practices and ideas look like? The core of the paper is an attempt to start a conversation around one of the most valued Buddhist qualities endorsed throughout texts and communities throughout history – equanimity, one of the four immeasurable qualities – and articulate it as a potential component of a renovated Buddhist political theory. It draws from the expansive hermeneutics of B.R. Ambedkar as an example of a legitimate effort to expand Buddhist thinking beyond individualistic tendencies. Thus, instead of attempting to explore those questions by resorting to an objective sense of what Buddhism is – in other words, relying on presumed nuclear and objective Buddhism one can set one's foundations – we attempt to do so by asking ourselves what can we do in our current situatedness with the teachings attributed to the Buddha? Or, to put it differently, in what ways can the Buddhist tradition contribute to developing new ways of addressing the social issues of our time?

Alexandre Chami Filho is a Buddhist enthusiast from Brazil who is concerned with the overlaps of Buddhism and Justice. After completing his undergraduate degree in Law in Brazil, he became a follower of the Drukpa Lineage from the Himalayas as a translator, community leader, and servant. After several years devoted to community building and Buddhist practice, he landed at Harvard Divinity School to pursue further academic depth and practical applications to his spiritual interests.



Raja Sekhar Vundru (he/ him), Indian Administrative Service
“Buddhist revivalism and realism in India: Ambedkar’s idea of liberation of the Untouchables and creation of the ideal society”

The practice of untouchability pervaded Indian society through centuries, had a scriptural sanction and was perpetuated through ancient social code written till 3rd century AD. The code centred around laws, social behaviour, duties, punishments, virtues, and hierarchy. Buddhism that spread after 4th century BC in India, started fading away and disappeared from India by 12th century. It was Dr. B R Ambedkar, Indian constitutionalist and leader of untouchables, nine centuries later revived Buddhism as a liberation project and lead untouchables to Buddhism.

This paper analyses Ambedkar’s continuing legacy of spiritual and social reformers such as Buddha, Guru Ravidas, Kabir, and Guru Nanak of India. These reformers primarily along with Buddha, criticised religious oppression and ritualism and dominance. Ambedkar’s idea of Buddhist revivalism in India was combined with the realism to set aside the ritualism. Six years before he embraced Buddhism with five million followers, he finalised the new vibrant the Constitution of India. This study traces Ambedkar’s combination the Liberty, Equality and Fraternity concepts of Buddha and how he handed over Buddhism as a realistic project to the untouchables, now called Dalits. This paper analyses how Ambedkar’s tests for a true religion such as (a) it should be based on morality b) it must in accordance with science or reason (c) it must recognise tenets of equality, liberty and Fraternity and (d) it should not sanctify or ennoble poverty, would fit into the ideal post-colonial India. This paper also reads into Ambedkar’s ideal society which combines Buddhism with a constitutional mandate displacing the social code givers whose texts created religious and ritualistic supremacy and hierarchical social divisions.

Dr. Raja Sekhar Vundru is the author of *Ambedkar, Gandhi and Patel: The Making of India’s Electoral System*, Bloomsbury (2017), and is translated into three languages. He studied at the University of Hyderabad, JNU, New Delhi, and holds a Ph.D. on Ambedkar’s Electoral ideas from the National Law School of India University, Bangalore. He has written extensively on Ambedkar, caste, untouchability, and literature and Edited *Dalit Millennium* for the Pioneer in 2001. He has delivered Ambedkar Memorial lectures and keynote addresses at various Universities and International institutes. He has belonged to India’s Premier Civil Service, the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) since 1990.



Yuen Yee Li (she/ her), Mind Only Institute for Buddhist Psychology/ No Word Zen
“Practicing Empty Speech Acts”

Practising Buddhism and doing academic work at first sight seem to be incongruent. One practice is the letting go of ‘-isms’ while the other one is full of ‘-isms’. What does it mean to write an academic philosophical paper as a Buddhist practitioner? This essay aims to philosophically investigate the suggestion that in order for academic Buddhist language practices in the West to be effective, speech acts need to be empty. Firstly the academic is addressed. Practising means to be engaged: situated in a singular context and not separated from people and daily life. Academic writing then is a way of practising compassionate speech acts, in this case pertaining to social-political topics in the state of volatility.

Secondly Ahmed’s take on the nonperformativity of antiracism provide the points of departure for practice: 1. Hurt that is veiled under the fixity of (anti-)racism as a power structure; 2. Performativity of compassionate speech utterances is actualised between people. It lies in the fact that there is no speaker who intends to bring into existence a new reality. And by laying bare the hurt that was veiled, it provides a way for liberation of the one who ‘does’ the racism and the one who is the recipient, as a subversion of power structures.

To practice compassionate speech means for utterances to be empty of ‘-isms’, empty of a ‘do-er’ and the one being done something to, and contains no fixities. Writing as a way of speaking as situated in an academic discourse requires reading as a way of listening, in such a manner that the fixities that are presented become detached.

Yuen Yee Li finished a three year course on Buddhist Psychology at Mind Only Institute for Buddhist Psychology, and will start teacher training in 2024. At No Word Zen Center she receives training in following the path towards an invisible monastic. All are under the guidance of Zen teacher Cuong Lu. She is also a part-time master student philosophy at Erasmus University Rotterdam.

BREAKOUT 1

Virtual Presenters

Panelist Abstracts
& Biographies

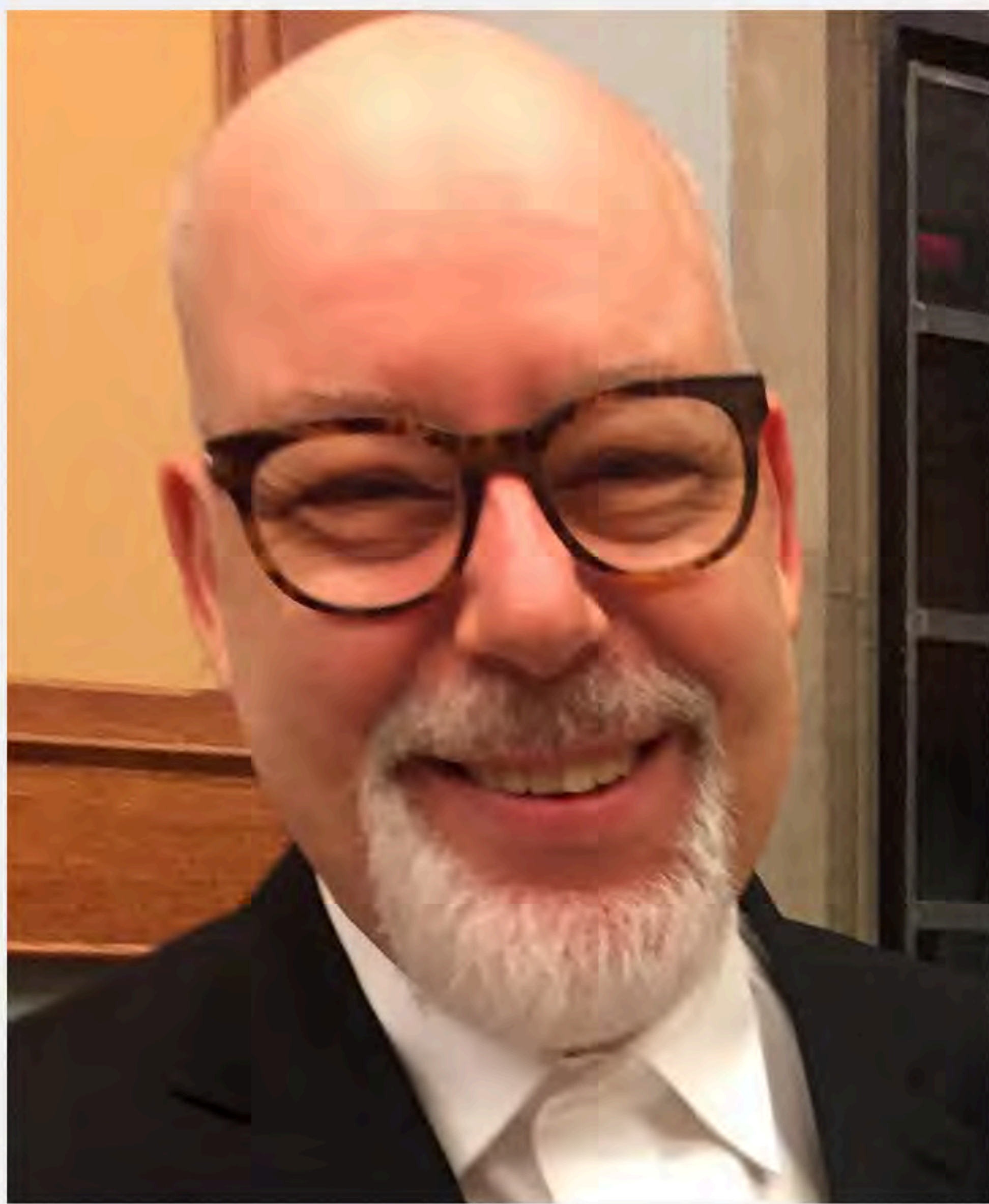


Andrew Jon Bishop (he/ him), Rangjung Yeshe Institute

“The Fertility of Delusion: Collective Liberation as an Innate Reality and Potential”

Abstract: Efforts toward liberation grounded in notions of transformation span the domains of religious and political systems, spirit and matter. This paper follows in the footsteps of contemporary scholars, spiritual practitioners, and activists engaged in discourse that unites the wisdom of ancient scriptures with current efforts to address modern crises. As such, it seeks to engage questions such as: What can ancient Buddhist texts and practices offer contemporary efforts toward liberation centered on justice? How can their frameworks be combined to enrich our understanding of what is present and what is possible? How can we approach liberating transformation in ourselves, with each other, and in relation to the planet? To attempt an answer, I draw from frameworks of transformation offered in Maitreya’s Dharmadharmatāvibhāga, a 4th century Indian Buddhist text, and from adrienne maree brown’s book Emergent Strategy, which explore the potential of collective liberation as a result of embracing our true interconnectedness within a world of perceived and reinforced binaries. The Dharmadharmatāvibhāga offers an understanding of the binaries of dualistic perception, regarded as a symptom of ignorance and the root cause of suffering. Emergent Strategy’s understanding of binaries imposed on individuals and societies further focuses on the ways binaries are both institutionalized and reinforced by practices of separation and abstraction, specifically within movements of social justice. Both frameworks thus offer a diagnosis of bondage as stemming from assumptions and efforts distanced from reality. Both works also offer prescriptions of liberation that presuppose the innate capacity of freedom once engaged in the work of uniting with reality. This paper explores the asymmetric natures of bondage and liberation, inviting us to consider how an understanding of our shared and unshared predicaments have fecundity for cultivating practices of fundamental transformation and actualizing collective liberation.

Andrew Jon Bishop graduated from Boston College in 2015 with a double major in International Relations and Philosophy. After spending a semester abroad at Rangjung Yeshe Institute (RYI) in 2013, he has since been living between the US and Nepal, now completing a Masters Degree in Buddhist Studies at RYI. His forthcoming thesis unites his commitments to spiritual awakening and social justice through an exploration of collective liberation. Drawing from frameworks of transformative knowledge presented in the Dharmadharmatāvibhāga and Emergent Strategy, his work seeks to highlight the innate capacity for liberation grounded in fundamental intelligence when cultivated by individuals and communities.



John Negru (Karma Yönten Gyatso) (He/ him), The Sumeru Press
“The Rural Buddhist Center Environmental Research Project”

Rural Buddhist centers in North America hold thousands of acres of wild and minimally managed land. This ongoing project involves an environmental audit of those domains, with the goal of documenting best practices for restorative ecology, to be shared with participants and others. The project began in 2018.

Mr. Negru has written a variety of Buddhist books (amongst others), notably in the context of this presentation, *Bodhisattva 4.0: A Primer for Engaged Buddhists*. He is a regular columnist for *Buddhistdoor Global*, and publisher at *The Sumeru Press*, which presents books on Engaged Buddhism from authors from around the world, among other topics such as Buddhist chaplaincy. *Sumeru* has been Canada’s leading independent Buddhist book publisher since 2009. In addition to his involvement in many Buddhist community development projects since the 1980s, he is also one of Canada’s environmental pioneers, having started its first magazine dedicated to that topic, for *Pollution Probe*, in 1976, and helped produce the magazine for more than a decade. Mr. Negru’s teaching career includes six years with the *Ryerson University* publishing program and 15 years teaching technological design to high school students. He has created a variety of innovative curriculum resources for the *Ontario Council for Technology Education*, the *Ontario Ministry of Education*, and other provincial education organizations, including *Specialist High Skills Major* certifications in geomatics and project management.



Rafael Diaz (They/ he), Union Theological Seminary

“Cultivating Seeds of Liberation: Personal and Political Struggle in Baldwin and Vasubandhu”

This paper provides a practical and academic perspective on the struggle for liberation through the lens of James Baldwin’s essay Notes of a Native Son and Vasubandhu’s 30 Verses on Consciousness Only. Blending my personal experience and reflections as a former community organizer with critical analysis, the paper explains and connects the seemingly divergent voices of Baldwin and Vasubandhu to contextualize the work of the 4th/5th century Indian scholar within the setting of modern US racism through one of the Black Radical Tradition’s most prophetic voices. Baldwin’s narrative account of how the accretion of internalized racism borne from life under white supremacy led him to an uncontrolled explosion of interpersonal violence is set in relation to the notion of karmic seeds coming to fruition through acts of body, speech, and mind. Responding to Frantz Fanon’s arguments that the woundedness of the oppressed and colonized must be enflamed to move us into liberatory action, this paper argues that addressing traumatic injustice through the Dharma supports us in acting with more strategy and sustainability to build the sort of disciplined and organized movements we need to win revolutionary change. Ultimately, this paper connects the concept of karmic seeds to generational trauma and internalized oppression in a sincere attempt to counter popular narratives that personal, spiritual practice and liberation and political action and liberation have nothing to do with one another, notions that kept me away from Dharma spaces for too long. Spiritual practice need not be viewed as individualist and decadent, all about personal growth with no material basis; similarly, political organization doesn’t need to be wholly centered on material change with no room for personal spiritual transformation. This work aims to clarify the interdependence between notions of personal spiritual healing and liberation with justice, decolonization, and political liberation.

Rafael (They/He) is a 3rd year student at Union Theological Seminary completing his MDiv in the Thich Nhat Hanh Program of Engaged Buddhism. They’ve been a Chaplain Intern with their sangha, Bhumisparsha, for over a year and plan on beginning a Hospital Chaplaincy Residency program this year. Rafael is a queer Afro-Puerto Rican and former community organizer committed to both political and spiritual liberation. They’re a Vajrayana Buddhist, but continue to explore and practice multiple faith traditions. Rafael was raised in Lancaster County, PA, where they still live with their partner and cats alongside the Susquehanna River.

Eleanor Pontoriero (Upasika Mitta) (she/her), University of Toronto

“The Spiritual and Political Liberation of Puṇṇikā Therī and her Modern Day Dalit Sisters”

The *Apadānapāli: Legends of the Buddhist Saints* is a collection in the Theravada Buddhist scriptures, the Pali Canon, dated from 2nd century BCE. It contains approximately six hundred autobiographical life stories attributed to Gautama Buddha and the enlightened monks and nuns of the early Buddhist community. These are primarily didactic, to instruct in the moral law of kamma and encourage the practice of cultivating wholesome and abandoning unwholesome actions. Among these are the verses of Puṇṇikā Therī, whose path to Awakening confirms the deeply egalitarian and radical nature of the Buddha’s teachings and the potential of all peoples to awaken and be free. Our ancient sister Puṇṇikā

Therī was born a daughter of indentured servants in Savatthi, now modern-day Uttar Pradesh, in the household of the wealthy brahman Anāthapiṇḍika, a devoted lay disciple of the Buddha. Her ancestors were Indigenous peoples of Dravidian descent. Her modern-day descendants include socially and economically disadvantaged peoples, including the Dalit – a self-designation meaning the oppressed and broken people—legally defined as Scheduled Castes and Tribal Peoples. Among them, is the community of Dalit Buddhists founded by Dr. Ambedkar who led a mass conversion to escape their caste stigma (which is intersectional, and includes designations of race, ethnicity, and social economic status). Puṇṇikā’s path to Awakening encourages and empowers women and marginalized peoples, among them her spiritual descendants Dalit Buddhist women, to mobilize grassroots movements for social change based on the Buddha’s teachings. My paper engages the verses by Puṇṇikā from the

Therī Apadāna (*Legends of the Female Buddhist Saints*) within this context. I explore how her path to Awakening is both spiritual and political in challenging intersectional oppressions of gender, race, and caste. This is an impetus to explore how she embodies the deeply egalitarian nature of the Buddha’s teachings and the implications of these for Dalit Buddhist women in the contemporary context. My perspective in this presentation, as Dalit feminist Anandita Pan encourages, is to speak with and not for Dalit women.

Dr. Eleanor Pontoriero (Upāsikā Mittā) has been a practicing Buddhist since 1985. She teaches religion, gender, human rights, and peacebuilding in a comparative context, socially engaged Buddhism, and Buddhist and secular mindfulness at the University of Toronto.

Currently, she is the president of the Buddhist Council of Canada, and a member of Buddhist-Christian Studies, Sakyadhita International, and Sakyadhita Canada. As a not-for-profit endeavour, she offers devotional and meditation practices, contemplations, and teachings in Buddhist and interfaith contexts in the community.

<https://www.religion.utoronto.ca/people/directories/all-faculty/eleanor-pontoriero>

BREAKOUT 1

Workshop by
DeVante Love





DeVante Love (they/he/she), Tufts University

“If Buddha Were A Trans Dancer: Meditative Movements to Detach From Hegemonic Gender Ideology”

Gender norms have historically constrained individuals within rigid binaries. Trapped in these binaries, people enact cycles of behavior that perpetuate a sense of separation and disconnection from their enlightened selves. Queerness emerges as a transformative force that challenges these societal scripts and invites individuals to explore alternative modes of expression that resonate with the inner radiance of their souls. Drawing upon principles of Buddhism, Performance Studies, Daoism, and Queer Theory, this experiential session synthesizes these theories into a unique form of Buddhist movement meditation. The aim is to guide participants towards a deeper connection with their intrinsic queerness which reflects the luminous essence of their souls. In contrast to many traditional Buddhist meditation practices that emphasize stillness, this session harnesses the power of movement as a pathway toward inner peace, immanence, and, ultimately, a sense of enlightenment. Throughout the session, participants will be guided through nature-based cues, encouraging them to attune to the inherent queerness of the natural world. By embracing nature's fluidity and diversity, participants align with their own innate queerness. This method has been shown to help folks foster a profound sense of connection and reverence for both nature and their authentic selves. Participants will leave the session empowered with a sense of confidence and genuineness for which they can celebrate the each others diverse identities and promote a more harmonious and inclusive world. Duration: 70 minutes. Maximum number of participants: 20.

DeVante Love is a 9th Generation Buddhist Monk, Olympic Martial Artist and Holistic Movement Therapist and Queer Performer who travels the world teaching folks how to heal themselves and find inner peace through their spiritual martial arts, meditation, and dance. They have a masters in Spiritual Psychology from Columbia University and are working on a PhD at Tufts examining how ritual dances and ritual combat lead to personal and societal transformation.

BREAKOUT 2

Feminist,
Gender, and
Queer/Trans*
Liberation

Panelist Abstracts
& Biographies



Corwynn Wolf Madrone (any pronouns), University of Hawai'i at Mānoa
"Queer Evolutions of Avalokiteśvara"

The passage of Buddhism from Asia to the United States has resulted in ideological tensions and alliances between Buddhist and other marginal communities, including the LGBTQ+ community. Buddhists in the US have largely accepted and encouraged LGBTQ+ practitioners and allies, and LGBTQ+ movements have queered elements of Buddhist mythology and philosophy to operate within Queer iconography. These Queer American understandings of Buddhism do not always line up with Asian understandings of the same concepts, raising questions of cultural appropriation and exploitation. The Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara in particular has been embraced as a trans deity of gender transformation, understood through a transhistorical narrative that arises from Western (Euro-American) interpretation of Asian Buddhist texts, art, and teachings. The liminal mystique of Avalokiteśvara has become a major source of empowerment at the intersections of Buddhism and Queer America, an icon of resistance and resilience within the margins of society. Yet some Buddhists' claims of authentic Asian transmission of Buddhism may be compromised for this cause. Examining cross-cultural dialogues within the academic and public spheres, we consider: How do socially-aware communities oriented towards justice and inclusion handle these tensions? Must one cultural identity be sacrificed or subsumed for the sake of the other? How do the Queers and the Buddhists come together at the crossroads?

Corwynn is the son of Jamie Niani Madrone, Donovan Nin, and Joseph Waters; the grandson of Oceana and Sungnome Madrone; the older brother of Brandon, Joseph, Madison, Hailey, Rashad, Onyx, Téa, Xavier, and Athena; and the uncle of Fletcher and Eloise Mello-Madrone. He was born in Humboldt County in the Pacific Northwest Region of the United States, and has also lived and studied in Nepal, Korea, and Hawai'i. Corwynn is pursuing an MA with the Department of Religions and Ancient Civilizations at University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, focused on intersections of religious and "Othered" identities in Central Asian Buddhism.



Hongmin Ahn (he/ him), Harvard Divinity School

“I Can Only Marry You in the Military’: The Military as a Last Refuge for Married Chogye Buddhist Clerics in Post-Colonial Korea”

This study examines the journey of clerical marriage in twentieth-century Korea, focusing on the Buddhist military chaplaincy. It explores how the clerical marriage practice was introduced, adopted, and contested and how the Korean military became the last refuge for the married clerics who belonged to the pro-celibate Chogye Order. Introduced during the Japanese colonial era, clerical marriage quickly gained popularity among Korean clerics, hailed as a symbol of Buddhist modernity, promising to bring back marginalized Buddhism into the center of Korean society. However, in post-colonial Korea, it became one of the most condemned legacies of Japanese rule, accused of tarnishing and Japanizing Korean Buddhism. Seizing political and public support, the celibate Chogye Order initiated the "Purification Movement" to expel married monks from Korean Buddhist traditions. The Chogye Order eventually prevailed in this "war on marriage" and successfully established its identity as the guardian of the true Korean Dharma lineage. Nevertheless, when the Chogye Order dispatched monks to the newly established Buddhist military chaplaincy in 1968, not only did the Order condone the marriage of its chaplains, but it even granted them special permission for it in 1981. This exception persisted until the Order revoked it in 2009, resulting in a conflicted identity for the married monastics within the Order, torn between their vows of celibacy and their personal desire to form families. This paper delves into the origins and history of this complex, conflicted identity among monks in the Jogye Order who initially vowed celibacy but later married as Buddhist chaplains. It argues that amidst negotiation and contestation over the Order's sectarian identity and institutional interests, military chaplaincy emerged as a refuge for married clerics within the Chogye Order.

Hongmin Ahn is a second-year Master of Theological Studies candidate at Harvard Divinity School from Seoul, Korea. His research interests encompass Korean/Japanese Buddhism, Military Chaplaincy, Militant Buddhism, and Buddhist Nationalism, among various other subjects. Prior to joining Harvard Divinity School, Hongmin worked as a student intern at the chaplaincy office at Bard College, where he earned his Bachelor of Arts degree in Interdisciplinary Studies of Religion. Additionally, He is a former member of the Republic of Korean Air Force, where he served as a Buddhist chaplain's assistant between 2019 to 2021.



Padmalanchana Raveendran Rehnamol (she/ her), University of Allahabad

“Ambedkar, Buddhism and Gender: Re-visiting the Question of Women’s Liberation in India”

B R Ambedkar has interpreted and internalised Buddhism as a means to emancipate the marginalised who were under the subjugation of caste hierarchies and graded inequalities for centuries. His reinvention of Buddhism is popularly known as ‘neo-Buddhism’ in India. He understood Buddhism as antithetical to the basic tenets of Hinduism and advocated it as a way to resist the unequal and unjust structure of Indian society. He has drawn a cyclopaedic and comparative analysis of Buddhism and other religions in his magnum opus, ‘Buddha and his Dhamma’. The text has opened enormous opportunities and ways with which one can challenge any form of subjugation. For instance, Ambedkar's emphasis on scientific temperament and reason is helpful in deconstructing several conventional norms and traditions that legitimised women’s subordination and gender inequalities. Though many have interpreted women’s relegated position in traditional Buddhism, several cues can be taken from Ambedkar’s reinterpretation of Buddhism in order to advance feminist arguments and consolidate feminist standpoints, especially in the context of contemporary India. In this context, this study analyses the instrumentality of Ambedkar’s Buddhism in women’s liberation and gender equality. The study adopts a textual analysis as its methodological framework to re-visit the women’s liberation discourse in India by a textual reading of Ambedkar’s ‘Buddha and His Dhamma’. This study argues that the textual reading of the book gives an insight into the modern ideals that can be a template for resistance movements including anti-caste assertions and feminist mobilization in India.

Dr. P R Rehnamol is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science, University of Allahabad, Prayagraj, India. She previously taught in various colleges of the University of Delhi including Janki Devi Memorial College, Kamala Nehru College, SPM College, Bharti College et.

She completed her M.Phil. and Ph.D. from the School of International Relations, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India. She has published articles in peer-reviewed and UGC CARE-listed journals. She has extensively written opinion articles on contemporary issues of caste, gender and Indian politics in various newspapers including The Indian Express, The Economic Times, Deccan Herald, Telangana Today, News 18, India ahead news, The Outlook etc. She has also reviewed manuscripts for the journals of SAGE and Taylor and Francis. Her area of interest includes gender, caste and Indian politics.

BREAKOUT 2

Transnational Liberation Movements

Panelist Abstracts
& Biographies



Tania Triana (she/ they), East Bay Meditation Center
“Ceasefire! Practice for Liberation at East Bay Meditation Center”

When we center solidarity with Palestine and BIPOC activism for social liberation in our dharma centers, what is possible? A praxis of love. This paper considers how the February 2024 online class series “Ceasefire! Practice for Liberation” provided a refuge of healing, connection, and resourcing for social activists working to stop the genocide in Palestine. This presentation explains the inspiration for the series, how the team of three queer teachers (all trained in East Bay Meditation Center’s Spiritual Teacher and Leadership Program) framed the five weekly sessions, and lays out teachings and somatic practices from multiple lineages that we offered. No matter how well one crafts the container, however, it is the sangha that truly holds the water; therefore, this presentation also reflects on how the sangha co-created this powerful and brave space. The success of the series (as seen from registration totals, participant feedback, affinity groups, and the kindling of new spiritual-activist friendships), and the success of EBMC as a BIPOC centered space sustained by gift economics, is a sign of the urgent need for US dharma centers to change their ways. It serves as a call to move beyond the tired racial inclusivity model and do the important work of aligning our institutional actions with our liberatory principles to advance social justice.

Dr. Tania Triana is a member of the inaugural class of East Bay Meditation Center’s Spiritual Teacher and Leadership Program, and has served on the Oakland, CA center’s Leadership Sangha (board of directors) since 2019. Tania is grateful to have found a spiritual home and social justice community at EBMC.



Sara Shapouri (they/she/he)

A Spiritual Failure: Buddhists' Silence on Gaza

At the time of writing this abstract, over 28,000 Palestinians have been killed along with over 67,000 injured since the start of Israeli air and ground operations in Gaza in response to the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023. Based on the severity of Israeli military actions and statements made by Israeli officials, there is growing alarm around the illegality and immorality of Israel's actions, with the ICJ ruling that it is "plausible" that Israel is committing genocide against Palestinians. Despite this, prominent Buddhist centers and teachers in the United States have been silent about the ongoing death and destruction in Gaza, or instead have offered statements taking a neutral stance. This has led to ever mounting frustrations in some communities, leading to collective efforts to get teachers and centers to issue a call for a ceasefire. This paper offers a critique of the various reasons offered by teachers and centers who are silent or neutral with regard to calling for a ceasefire. In particular, this paper suggests that these Western Buddhist institutions and teachers are partial to or benefit from the status quo that continues to dehumanize people from Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA) and/ or who are Muslim. Additionally, this paper points to the deeply embedded mistrust and hatred of SWANA peoples and Muslims in the United States, and that American Buddhist centers and teachers have taken no steps at interrogating their internalized hatred. White run Buddhist centers and teachers must look at the way they are bypassing the reality of systemic oppression and interrogate their complicity in the ongoing dehumanization of marginalized peoples in order to honor the moral and liberatory power of the Dharma. Indeed, because the Dharma is a powerful voice of ethics and non-harming, teachers and centers must address the horrors in Gaza, not just for the wellbeing of Palestinians, but for the liberation of all as we continue to be caught in cycles and systems of violence and war.

Sara Shapouri is an Iranian-American meditation teacher, artist, parent, and lawyer. A lover of maps and guides to help understand the wildness of human experience, their path and offerings are influenced by Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism, Depth Psychology, Therapy, relational mindfulness, esoteric mystical traditions, and performance art.



Jess Navarette (he/ him), Boston College

“The Liberative Power of Traditional Chinese Buddhism in America”

Liberation theologies in religion are often critiques of the root traditions with modernist and post-modernist narratives, while social and race topics in academia and religion tend to focus on appropriation and right usage. For example, plenty can and has been said about White-Americans co-opting and watering down traditional Buddhist practices; or about how gender roles in religion are oppressive and enforce traditional norms. This paper and presentation aim to balance these narratives with a pure appreciation of traditional strands of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism, based on experiences and longtime involvement with two sects in Southern California, which have their headquarters in Taiwan – the Fo Guang Shan Hsi Lai Temple and Middle Land Chan Monastery (a branch of Chung Tai Chan Monastery). The narration of the author follows a gradual conversion from liberal-new-age tendencies to a formal academic study of religion, in tandem with arranging and performing music for the Abbot of Hsi Lai Temple, and later leading the chanting for Dharma courses and being on the community board of directors for Middle Land Chan Monastery. The narrative is liberative in several directions – highlighting the all-female monastics to whom the male author took mentorship under, and how traditional religion can be a positive alternative to modernism. The author’s specialty in comparative religion and comparative theology will be utilized when analyzing identity issues of a ‘spiritual-seeking’ American, including comparisons to Christian denominations, Hindu sects, and other strands of Buddhism – including the ‘pop-Buddhism’ prevalent in Southern California.

Jess Navarette is a current PhD student in Comparative Theology at Boston College, with a previous MA in Comparative Religion from the Claremont School of Theology. Jess focuses on issues of hybrid religious belonging, interreligious dialogue, education, spirituality, and music and religion. Jess has extensive academic and personal involvement with Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism.

BREAKOUT 2

Workshops

Workshop Leaders
Abstracts &
Biographies



Susan Yao (she/ her), Vermont Village School
“Reimagining School Through a Buddhist Lens”

Meditation has become a common practice in K-12 schools, but we are using Buddhist practices to uphold rather than to transform existing educational systems. The school day continues to reinforce individual performance and productivity, introducing children from a young age to the capitalist treadmill.

Schools have failed to harness the main teachings of Buddhism: lessons about human suffering, interconnectedness, and a path to liberating ourselves and others from that suffering. Schools need to incubate new possibilities, rather than reproduce the cultures they are created within. How can Buddhism help us reimagine school in radical ways? How can school be a space for personal and collective liberation? Come join a collective brainstorm of these questions. Susan will offer some experimental practices from her workshops with educators and from the Vermont Village School, which reimagines school as a liberatory space for people of color. Let us reimagine school in radical ways so that we can create the interdependent and compassionate world we need. Duration: 60 minutes. Maximum number of participants: up to room capacity.

Susan Yao has been a middle school educator for 13 years, including teaching and administration in New York and Massachusetts. She has a BA from Harvard College and an MA from the Bank Street College of Education. She is the founder of the Vermont Village School, which reimagines school as a liberatory space for people of color and draws from Buddhism and other ancient wisdom traditions. She has practiced Buddhism for 19 years in Korean Zen and Insight traditions. She lives on a homestead with her family in Southern Vermont.



Bobbie Kite (they/ them) & Tracy Joosten (she/ her), Iliff School of Theology
“Amache Japanese Internment Camp: An Interfaith Social Justice Pilgrimage”

A new NPS National Historic site, the Amache Japanese Internment Camp, provides an opportunity for interfaith social justice pilgrimage. Amache was elevated to National Historic Site status after 30 years of grassroots efforts by several local organizations. This site encompasses both Buddhist and Christian liberation approaches to the legalized confinement of these populations during WWII. Social justice pilgrimage, as a spiritual soteriological technology, can be a premeditated effort affecting one's spiritual maturity, is an important virtue for spiritual practitioners, and explores the teachings and practices to offer insight and solutions to similar challenges occurring today. After an introduction on our own motivation for embarking on such a project, and an introduction to Amache Internment Camp through multi-media approaches, we will guide workshop participants through an experiential exploration of the Amache camp from 1942-1945 and various experiences of its residents. This 90 minute activity includes an introduction and motivation for social justice pilgrimage, examining expectations and setting intentions, a virtual journey, a social justice pilgrimage, and re-examining expectations and revisiting intentions. Participants will be presented with the opportunity to relate to Amache internees, increase their knowledge of the historical and social context of World War II Japanese internment efforts through their experiences, and reflect upon the importance and meaning of social justice pilgrimage.

■ **Maximum number of participants: 20.**

Bobbie Kite (Ph.D., Public Health; MHS, Health Sciences, and current MDiv student at Iliff School of Theology) is a professor with a focus in the Healthcare Management and Health Informatics Programs at University College, University of Denver. Before working at the University of Denver, Bobbie was jointly appointed in the Department of Biomedical Informatics and the Ohio State University Health Plan at The Ohio State Wexner Medical Center. Dr. Kite's research brings knowledge in population health informatics, competency-based education, social justice pilgrimage, and AI and ethics. Tracy Joosten builds intentional communities and cohesive teams. Her work in the field of experiential education encourages authentic expression and the ethics of service. At Kathmandu University's Centre for Buddhist Studies, she taught development theory and Buddhist ethics while directing the centre's summer intensive and online learning programs for Buddhist philosophy and Himalayan languages from 2009-2017. Tracy has been studying and practicing in the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism since 2001. In addition to completing numerous contemplative retreats, she has studied extensively with scholars and adepts of Tibetan Buddhism. She is currently pursuing a MDiv at Iliff School of Theology in Denver.

BREAKOUT 3

Animal Liberation,
Environmental
Justice, and Deep
Ecology

Panelist Abstracts
& Biographies



Henry Shiu (he/ him), University of Toronto

“Re-evaluating Buddhist Animal Releases Practices: Towards Sustainable Practices and Environmental Harmony”

For this panel discussion, the presenter conducts a comprehensive re-evaluation of a 2012 study that first shed light on the non-Buddhist origins of Buddhist animal release practices (fangsheng), illustrating the history of its development and the ecological impacts of the rituals. This re-evaluation aims to look deeper into the multiple forms and origins of the practice and how it was eventually adopted by Buddhist traditions as a means to cultivate compassion (karuṇā). Paradoxically, this intended compassionate practice has led to ecologically devastating impacts through the introduction of invasive species into foreign ecosystems. The presenter will engage in a conversation with other panellists about the impact of recent scholarly research on Buddhist communities and investigate ecologically benign alternatives that allow for the continuous expression of compassion towards animals without compromising environmental ethics. During the presentation, methods and strategies will be introduced to ensure that the compassionate expressions of the Buddhist faith do not result in environmental degradation. It also hopes to advance the reconciliation of spiritual cultivation with environmental responsibility. The presentation aspires to raise awareness and advocate for environmentally sustainable practices within Buddhist rituals and enhance awareness of the interconnection between faith-based customs and environmental stewardship, such that the Buddhist principle of non-violence (ahiṃsā) is applied universally and meaningfully towards all sentient beings and their natural habitats.

Henry Shiu is Shi Wu De Professor in Chinese Buddhist Studies at Emmanuel College of Victoria University in the University of Toronto. Shiu has a keen interest in the study of Mahāyāna Buddhism in India, China, and Tibet, particularly in the historical and doctrinal studies of the Madhyamaka and Yogācāra traditions. His area of research specialization lies in the theory of the tathāgatagarbha or Buddha nature. He also has a research interest in contemporary Buddhist movements, Buddhist Chaplaincy, and the development of Buddhism in Canada. Besides Buddhist studies, Shiu has also taken on research in Western classical music. He is equally enthusiastic in the study of Daoist texts such as the Laozi and the Zhuangzi, and other Chinese classics like the Yijing (Book of Changes).



*“Julia Cassaniti (she/ her), Washington State University
“A Burning Issue: Buddhism and Spirits in the Cosmopolitical Ecologies of
Thailand's Haze Crisis”*

In this paper I take the conference’s call for work on ‘burning’ quite literally: I ask how the agricultural fires and resulting haze pollution that regularly engulf large parts of Southeast Asia reflect changing Buddhist and spiritual cosmopolitics in the region. Using an ethnographic case study of a farming district in Northern Thailand, I show how the spiritual landscape has been altered through the recent introduction of contract farming, and how farmers use past spirit rituals, Buddhist practices, fertilizers, and fires to help keep up demands for increasingly high yields. Through interviews with Northern Thai and upland minority group farmers I show how the logics of capitalism, Buddhism, and spirits are creating new approaches to land management in Thailand, with the aim of sustainable environmental liberation.

Julia Cassaniti is Associate Professor of Anthropology at Washington State University, and an upcoming Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Virginia. Her research is on the co-construction of local ontologies and the interpretation of Buddhist ideologies, and the implications of these for social movements, body practices, and mental health in transnational Southeast Asia. She is the author of "Living Buddhism: Mind, Self, and Emotion in a Thai Community" (Cornell U Press 2015) and "Remembering the Present: Mindfulness in Buddhist Asia" (Cornell U Press 2018).



Maisie Luo (she/ her), Rutgers University

“Art as a Guide to Seeing the Joy and Suffering of Animals as Our Own”

Acknowledging animal suffering in captivity is the first step to ending this suffering and cultivating a more caring relationship with animals on earth. Many animal activist campaigns show photo and video documentation of animals in captivity. But these direct depictions are hard to closely look at, and their explicit nature might lead some people to avoid looking altogether. In this paper, I suggest that a fine art representation of animal suffering, especially through its materiality, can “soften” the explicit portrayal of animal suffering without diluting the content. Thereby, it is easier to look at and can help the viewer process the shocking reality of animal suffering. Furthermore, I argue that the materiality of an artwork can reveal the artist’s effort and intention, as well as their understanding of the animal’s experience. Thus, materiality can guide the viewer to imagine the experiences of the depicted animals. To illustrate my argument, I draw on my experience as an artist making work on pressing ethical issues related to animals. I also analyze Sue Coe’s paintings, focusing on her mark-making and colors, in guiding the viewer to imagine and gain a deeper understanding of animals’ experiences in captivity. Engaging with animal suffering through art offers concrete details for the viewer to practice “the exchange of self and other,” an exercise discussed in “A Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life” (Bodhicaryāvatāra), by Buddhist Philosopher Śāntideva. Doing this exercise for animals would motivate us to consider their welfare in our daily lives and to help them find freedom and joy.

Maisie Luo is currently finishing her Master of Fine Arts degree at Rutgers University. She makes paintings, animations, and sculptures about the impact of current systems of consumption on animals and the environment. She holds a Master of Theological Studies degree in Religion and Ethics from Harvard Divinity School and an honors BA degree in Studio Art and Religion from Swarthmore College.



Rebecca Carrol (she/ her), Harvard Divinity School

“Intoxicants... or Medicines? Why Buddhists Should Consider Psychedelics”

Many Buddhist practitioners shun psychedelics, and for good reason. The fifth precept, which prohibits us from consuming intoxicants, is critical to the path. However, scientific trials over the past several years are indisputable: psychedelics can be immensely healing. For example, MDMA, also known by its street name “Ecstasy” or “E,” is extraordinarily effective for treating PTSD. After the trial, more than two-thirds of PTSD sufferers no longer met the criteria for PTSD. In other words, they were healed. In this context, the role of MDMA was as potent medicine, not as intoxicant. But how about for the average person, who may not suffer from PTSD but who wishes to turn to MDMA to experience its heart-opening effects? In this case, is the drug an intoxicant? This paper makes the radical claim that psychedelics, including MDMA, are not only medicinal for most people, in many contexts—but also, that Buddhist practitioners ought to embrace these medicines as powerful tools for liberation. Naturally occurring psychedelics, including psilocybin-containing mushrooms and mescaline-containing cacti, have been used by many indigenous groups as liberating, healing medicines for millennia. It’s time that the world, including Buddhists, respectfully looks to this wisdom for ways to heal our world. If we are to do the work our world desperately needs—of decolonization and reparation, of halting climate change, of distributing resources equitably, of building a bright life for all—we need a massive change of hearts and minds, and we need it quickly. Buddhism is all about such a change. And psychedelics, with their ego-dissolving and compassion-inducing qualities, fit right into the Buddhist toolkit, alongside meditation and other practices. When used skillfully, they are powerful tools for liberation.

Rebecca Carrol is a graduate student at Harvard Divinity School, where she studies Tibetan Buddhism, ecotheology, and chaplaincy. She grew up in Las Vegas, where she was a serious theater kid, and she still sort of wishes to be an actor when she grows up. But for now, she intends to become a psychedelic chaplain, working with clients who wish to approach psychedelic journeying from a perspective of spiritual growth. Rebecca’s current obsession is shapeshifting. How can acting training, Buddhism’s philosophy of “no-self,” and indigenous psychedelic wisdom come together to train us to shapeshift? Please, talk to her about shapeshifting.

BREAKOUT 3

Workshop by
Marika Maypop
and Syd Yang





Marika Maypop (she/her) & Syd Yang (they/them), University of the West
“Dharma of the Entangled Embodied Erotic”

Feeling the weightiness of flesh. Placing attention on the body’s contact with the Earth. Becoming aware of sensation that arises through you right now.

We assert that the pursuit of liberation is birthed from an erotic longing. As practitioners we hold the loving desire to have more contact with, and more exploration of, a boundless heart and an opening to, and a penetration of, wisdom. We practice opening to a connection that enlivens us and deepens our sense of intimacy with ourselves, the world, and the unknown. The energy necessary for liberation is an energy that is aroused, fluid, dynamic, awake, erotic. The body is instrumental to practice and yet, simultaneously, our dharmic interpretations--just as in larger society—are too often deeply suspicious of the body. We emphasize embodiment as expressions of wholesome desire and energy to be deeply inhabited in physical form rather than to denounce the physical body as solely destined for illness, old age, and death. Phenomenal reality is the buzzing of the erotic. Attuning to the erotic will stretch and sometimes break our habitual ways of seeing and being, challenging institutions in us and outside of us. The erotic is a breaker of barriers and of status quo. We, as committed companions on this path, must touch into the erotic of life if we are to break free. In this workshop we will practice attending to (vitaka), and dwelling in (vicara), the erotic field to develop range and capacity in our experience of embodiment. We will give permission for creative, sensuous energy to surge through our being without meeting the friction of dry, singular interpretation of “distraction.” Where is the flame and the turn-on in your life? How do you allow it to fertilize the path of freedom? We engage these questions as queers who take the dharma as a lover and as activists in the struggle for the sexual liberation of all. These questions are present in our practices as Buddhist spiritual care providers most often for those on the margins. Join us in exploring them together.

Duration: 60 minutes. Maximum number of participants: up to room capacity.

Rev. Marika Maypop (she/her) is a queer counselor, bodyworker, autonomist organizer, and dual-lineage lay Buddhist minister born, raised, and living in the American South. For 17 years her primary ministry has been in the erotic service industry. She serves as a Spiritual Advisor on Louisiana’s Death Row and has brought Buddhist teachings into jails and prisons, probation and parole programs, hospices, addiction treatment centers, and movements for justice. Marika is currently pursuing a MA in Buddhist Spiritual Care at University of the West. She is inspired by flowers that grow in the cracks of sidewalks and dharma-informed anti-capitalist community organizing for a better world we know is possible.

Rev. Syd Yang is a mixed race/Taiwanese American queer trans/non-binary lay Buddhist Minister, spiritual counselor and writer who weaves together magic, possibility and intention as an energy healer in the world through their practice, Blue Jaguar Healing Arts. Syd is a certified Movement Chaplain through Faith Matters Network, and in their final semester of their MDiv at University of the West. Syd's work finds its resonance in the stories we each hold at the intersection of memory, body, sexuality and mental health.

Syd works primarily with queer and trans BIPOC individuals as well as regularly leads workshops and facilitates community based healing for over two decades, with a specific focus on grief, healing ancestral trauma, sexuality + spirituality, body liberation and eating disorder recovery. Their memoir, Release: A Bulimia Story, re-imagines what spiritually based recovery for marginalized bodies could look like without shame.