

Why People of Color Need Spaces Without White People

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[Illustration by Alicia Brown](#)

I'm breathing deeply as I write this. What I'm writing about is charged. I feel this energy in my body. It's a heat in my throat and a rumbling in my belly. It's an intensity that's frustrated that these words must even be written. It propels me through my fears of backlash and worry about not getting it exactly right. What I say may anger you. You may disagree. You may feel more confused, and this, I would say, is good. It means the work can begin.

Breathing.

People of color need their own spaces. Black people need their own spaces. We need places in which we can gather and be free from the mainstream stereotypes and marginalization that permeate every other societal space we occupy. We need spaces where we can be our authentic selves without white people's judgment and insecurity muzzling that expression. We need spaces where we can simply be—where we can get off the treadmill of making white people comfortable and finally realize just how tired we are.

Valuing and protecting spaces for people of color (PoC) is not just a kind thing that white people can do to help us feel better; supporting these spaces is crucial to the resistance of oppression. When people of color are together, there can be healing. We can reclaim parts of ourselves that have been repressed. We can redefine ourselves and support one another in embracing who we are. The necessity of these spaces is obvious to me as a woman of color learning to embrace layers of my own identity by being in community with other Black and brown bodies.¹ This has been especially important in my spiritual community, Shambhala Buddhism, where we are taught that surfacing vulnerability is the path to creating a more fair and just society. Yet, in my own organizing of a PoC meditation in Oakland and in conversations with other people of color in my sangha across the United States, I have been angered and baffled by the responses of white people to these spaces.

Though people of color are creating and envisioning spaces in which we may be together, our efforts are continually questioned, attacked, and made invisible within our communities. Spaces

for people of color are ignored, even when they attract large numbers. They are marginalized from other community events and programming. Community leaders find reasons to question the legitimacy of PoC groups and may interrogate organizers about what exactly we're doing when we get together. Some white people insert themselves into PoC spaces with reasons why they believe they should be included such as, "I identify more with people of color than with white people." There are people who accuse PoC spaces as being racist and segregationist.

Even if white people can't access an embodied understanding of why PoC spaces are needed, they can still cultivate genuine compassion for our experience of needing them, and they can trust our voices enough to support these spaces. If the presence of spaces for people of color engenders discomfort, insecurity, or anger, I hope those emotions will be seen as an opportunity to look deeper within oneself to ask why.

This article is being written in service of helping to clarify confusion about the value of PoC spaces. I do this by answering some of the questions that I and other PoC have received when organizing these spaces.

Why do PoC need their own spaces?

In integrated spaces, patterns of white dominance are inevitable. These patterns include things like being legitimized for using academic language, an expectation of "getting it right" (i.e., perfectionism), fear of open conflict, scapegoating those who cause discomfort, and a sense of urgency that takes precedence over inclusion.²

These patterns happen even when white people are doing the work of examining their privilege. They can happen even when facilitators design and model more inclusive ways of being together. Why?

The values of whiteness are the water in which we all swim. No one is immune. Those values dictate who speaks, how loud, when, the words we use, what we don't say, what is ignored, who is validated and who is not. Unless we are actively and persistently dismantling these constructs, we are abiding by them. In integrated spaces (where we are less likely to be ourselves given the divisions that white dominance has created), we fall into the roles society has assigned us. As a person of color, and perhaps the only one in the room, it's exhausting to always be swimming upstream. To survive in this society, we learn to hold our tongue, to "code switch" to fit in. This is about survival and the basic human need to feel that we belong.³

People of color are often so familiar with navigating white spaces that even when there's a possibility of bringing more of ourselves into a room, we simply don't know how. We've assimilated to white cultural conditioning, and that assimilation has become part of our identity. While this can help us "get ahead," the compromise is that we forget what it feels like to be our whole selves.

"It wasn't until I was in PoC-only spaces that I realized how much of myself I had cut off to fit into white culture," one person of color in Shambhala recently told me. "So being in PoC spaces allows me to reclaim those forgotten parts of myself."

For other people of color, an unfamiliarity with the unwritten rules of engaging in white spaces means we simply don't know how to show up. We've received feedback verbally and nonverbally that we just don't fit in. We're too loud. We're too quiet. We're too direct. We're too verbose. We're too passionate. We're too restrained. Label after label—*difficult* or *emotional* or *meek*—are put on us to fit the social order.

I value the efforts of those consciously working to challenge the dynamics of our social conditioning by considering the [conversational architecture](#) in groups, inviting myriad forms of

knowing and creating opportunities for PoC leaders. I believe these efforts are essential for addressing the inequities in our society and necessary before inviting people of color in the door, but they do not replace the need for PoC-only spaces.

As a person of color in integrated spaces, my radar is constantly scanning for insensitivities and the potential for harm—not just the standard warding off of pain that we all seek to avoid, but racialized harm that essentializes me as different or serves to re-exert oppression. When something is detected, I reflexively reassemble the scraps of armor that were tentatively put down. There is good reason for this caution: To be a person of color means to experience discrimination regularly.⁴ If you're Black, the lowest on our racial totem, that experience is daily—being feared simply for being, the objectification of difference such as the texture of your hair, people who use [performative blackness](#) and a “blaccent” when relating to you, etc.

If you're white, you have a choice about whether or not you engage in uncomfortable conversations about race, and you have a choice about how much you feel the racial inequities of our society. If you're a person of color, however, conversations about race are unavoidable—we're pulled into them whether we've invited such discourse or not. White people often interpret our mere presence in a room as an opportunity to talk about race, and these are not conversations we always want to have. If you're a person of color, the reality of racism is neither optional nor conceptual; it is deeply and painfully felt. This is known as “embodied inequality,”⁵ which describes how discrimination raises the risk of many emotional and physical illnesses among people of color.⁶

Imagine that discrimination is like plaque that covered your being at birth—in its stickiness are challenges to your worth, intelligence, and humanity. Over time, as you try to make your way through the school system, find a job, and look for a partner, it gets thicker and stickier. An important way to begin chipping away at this buildup is to be in a space where we can, temporarily, leave that sticky inheritance at the door. This is the point of PoC spaces.

In these spaces, we can share stories about the discrimination we've faced, and find understanding and support. We can define ourselves on our own terms. When white people are present, this crucial examining usually doesn't happen. Sharing our experiences in integrated spaces often means preparing to defend our anger and frustration, or taking care of white individuals who find what is being said hurtful.⁷ This means that when PoC do take the leap to share painful experiences, white listeners often shift the focus back onto themselves and their own grievances; thus attention and power implicitly shift back to white individuals, reinforcing the status quo. There can also arise a need to “translate” our experiences into terms that white listeners will be more sympathetic to in order to be heard. Genuine allyship requires genuine listening—especially when that listening is hard to be with.

“When I speak to many white people of my experience [as a person of color] they are stunned and start crying or freeze—neither solves anything,” one person of color in the sangha told me. “It feels like I have to make them feel better—it’s that unspoken burden. So if we want change, we have to get past all that. PoC don’t need to constantly be part of that. It’s not safe at this point in the [sangha] to say whatever you feel. Some healing needs to be done with PoC bodies who have experienced that pain.”

In our day-to-day, many PoC have jobs where we're not able to show up as our authentic selves. Showing sadness about the latest killing of a Black person is rarely invited; sometimes the event is not even on the radar of our colleagues. When we do express sadness, it often goes ignored. Our spiritual community should be the place where we can touch into these painful places, but my own community often is not such a place. Indeed, many Western Buddhist communities are reflections of the students who helped established them, the majority of whom were white. Like the society in which we live, it is shaped by white, patriarchal values. This is not a judgment, but a fact. It is what has governed who feels comfortable in our meditation halls and who does not.

How we engage with each other and how we do not. How free we feel in our celebrations or not. In my work in my community, I'm seeing a hunger to explore this pattern and to design new, more inclusive, more alive ways of being, yet it's difficult to see the water in which we are swimming. Our hope lies in an empowered collection of voices that can help guide us toward being the community we long to be. This requires that white people step aside to support spaces in which PoC members of the community are invited to feel, to be, and to touch our humanity on our terms, in a way that feels not like colonization but like coming home.

But isn't this just segregation?

It's important to remember that segregation as an institution was part of a system of oppression designed and maintained by white people. Today, white people may experience occasional prejudice, but not racism. White people do not experience the systemic racism that makes it hard for them to find jobs, housing, healthcare, and justice in the legal system.⁸

Though it may feel like creating PoC spaces is a regression to the pre-Civil Rights era, that feeling affirms a disconnection with the reality of racism in America today. Regression would mean that we've solved the pain of racial inequality since that time. It would mean that in integrated spaces everyone has equal access to being felt, seen, and heard.

Yes, when people of color create space to be with only each other, it is a form of temporary physical segregation in the literal sense of the word, but that is not akin to the institution of segregation. We are not proclaiming "separate but equal" with the creation of PoC spaces.

These spaces aren't acts of oppression, but rather responses to it. They are our opportunity to be with each other away from the abuses of racism and patterns of white dominance. Given that space to breathe, there's a possibility of healing. Being together can offer resiliency for bringing our fullness into integrated spaces where it will inevitably be challenged.

How is inclusiveness cultivated by practices that exclude?

How is inclusiveness cultivated by "caucusing"—i.e., by inviting PoC groups to hold their own spaces and also encouraging white people to hold spaces to examine the illusion of "whiteness"?

The question here is what is meant by "inclusive?" How "inclusive" are integrated spaces for PoC? For white people, "inclusive" spaces typically feel similar to the spaces they normally operate in, but maybe have a few more brown people.

For anyone who has tried to "invite in" more diversity, you may wonder: Why is it so difficult to get Black and brown people to show up? The reason is that merely inviting more people of color into a space does not in and of itself make that space inclusive. Patterns of white dominance suffuse the space just like other spaces we occupy, only this time, we're calling it "inclusive." That's more painful and frustrating than being in spaces that are blind. Staying in that "inclusive" room actually involves PoC putting aside our own needs and taking care of white people as we've been conditioned to do. Then we go home and tell our brown friends how uncomfortable it was and all the things that were said or done that we can't believe. We do not go back. Many "inclusive" spiritual communities remain predominantly white.

It may be argued that to build an inclusive community, caucusing is actually necessary. In an article published by the [American Political Science Association](#), citing her examination of intersectionality within women's movements, professor Laurel Weldon argues that inviting marginalized subgroups to hold their own spaces tends to strengthen broader movements.⁹ She writes,

“The movement against gender violence has achieved cooperation through the development of norms of inclusivity,” she writes. “Such norms include a commitment to descriptive representation, *the facilitation of separate organization for disadvantaged social groups*, and a commitment to building consensus with institutionalized dissent. Developing such norms is not the only possible path to cooperation, but it is an important and overlooked one. It illuminates a way of maintaining solidarity and improving policy influence without denying or sublimating the differences and conflicts among activists.”¹⁰ (Emphasis added.)

Though Weldon’s analysis aims to establish links to the policy relevance of activist movements, its applicability to spiritual communities is significant. The article suggests that pursuing collective liberation (a humane and inclusive society) means fully acknowledging difference and empowering its respectful expressions within a collective.

But when can we be together?

I recently listened to a Meditation in the City Podcast in which Rev. angel Kyodo Williams answered a question from a participant on this topic. Here’s what she said:

“People who have always been entitled to space and to place have no idea what it’s like to have never been entitled to space.

I’m entitled to gather to determine the way and the path to my freedom. You will let me do that and not obstruct it. You will not put your needs and your desire for some kind of picture above my necessity. Doing so obstructs my ability to understand what it is to first be with myself. To be with people that I have not been allowed to be with just as I am.

Put aside your urgency—we’ve been separated for 400 years, kept from one another—for this to just be over.”

Without the full context, these words may sound sharp, but in her reference of “you” Rev. angel wasn’t speaking just to the participant who asked the question, but the collection of “yous” who are waiting and wondering when caucusing will no longer be necessary—when we can harmoniously be together in community. This question often comes from people who do not have an experience of what it feels like not to be able to take up space. For people of color, there are hundreds of years of oppression and segregation carried in our DNA. For so long we’ve been unable to occupy space together in the ways we want. We need time to determine how to reconcile that debt, to determine what the path forward may be. It is work without a deadline.

Personally, I’m not interested in being in an “inclusive space.” Every space I’m in is ostensibly inclusive. I want to be with Black femme people. When that’s not available, I want to be with Black and brown people. That is hard to find, yet it is something my body craves—space where I can be just as I am.

I challenge this idea that “inclusive spaces” can be made without serious reflection, exertion, and patience. To be a truly inclusive space, it must be created by causes and conditions that allow it to happen organically—the internal work has been done so that the fullness of many different bodies can coexist. While efforts to engineer such a space are admirable, they often feel like just that—“engineered.” Everyone is uncomfortable, and then we all fall into our white social conditioning. I’m reminded that it is through practicing the pāramitās—transcendental virtues—that auspicious coincidence can arise. “When you express gentleness and precision in your environment, then real brilliance and power can descend onto that situation,” says Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. “If you try to manufacture that presence out of your own ego, it will never happen. You cannot own the power and magic of this world. It is always available, but it does not belong to anyone.”¹¹

What are the causes and conditions that allow for organically populated integrated spaces? With gentleness and precision, white people must do the work of looking at the delusions of ego (a shared social conditioning) that encourages them to succeed at the expense of everyone else.

When the question “when can we be together?” is asked, it is a glaring indication that we are not ready to be together.

But how are we supposed to learn if people of color aren’t present?

Expecting people of color to be in the room to help white people learn about race is yet another example of privilege. Being in a space where white people are starting to wake up to their white cultural conditioning is heartbreaking for me. It is a pain that is felt deeply. I ache for my ancestors and my ancestors’ ancestors. A sadness comes welling up, and it feels like drowning. While there are some people of color who are up for being in conversations with white people about race, this is a gift offered in the service of collective liberation, and it requires tremendous energy, patience, bravery, and effort. Deep love for others might also bring us to this work. *I love you enough to be on the front lines weathering your arrows of confusion. I love you enough to hold the pain you’ve buried deep, deep down until you’re ready to claim it.* It is not every person of color’s work to do the work of liberation in this way. Please don’t expect it.

I also don’t believe that the presence of PoC is helpful to white people doing this work. Dictated social niceties make it hard to get into these dark places even among those who share your race. Having a person of color present for this means meeting a fairly solid social barrier (that you’re going to say something that will hurt someone else or make you look bad) that’s hard for anyone to confront, let alone someone just beginning this work. It’s generally best if we’re out of the room.

I believe that in most circumstances, doing race work in an integrated setting is harmful. This is not a popular belief, especially among white people. I have been challenged on this time and again, and I keep showing up for these conversations in mixed-race settings and breaking down from the pain of it all. I open myself up to stories about racist family members, or admissions from former white supremacists. Why do I need to hear this? The fact that racism exists is not a surprise to me. That it infiltrates my very own community is obvious. I do not need to hear more stories about it. Are these admonitions made in hopes of atonement? It is not mine to give.

The only thing I want to hear from white people about race is, *I’m sorry. I didn’t see. I didn’t listen. I’m working to see and listen now.*

If you want support on this journey, there are white people who have worked hard and are further down this path who you can talk to. You don’t need people of color in the room for every conversation about race in order to come to realizations about racism. You can do this work yourself and be liberated by it.

The society I envision does not include race- or gender-based quotas.

We live in a world where if we are unconscious about who is not in the room, we will inevitably create a society that privileges white, affluent men and disadvantages everyone else. This is the society we have now.[12](#)

If we want to move forward towards collective liberation, we first have to acknowledge fully and completely our collective confusion as it is, now. There may be instances in which we realize how little we know. Our constructs must come crumbling down. We will be confused. Emotions will arise. This is good—it means there’s an opening for surrender, to let go of how things should be or how they appear to be, to come into contact with what is happening right now, what is happening in the body. This is what must happen for transformation.

Because of the inequities woven into the fabric of our society, we must make a conscious and concerted effort to encourage oppressed voices to come forward. And when those efforts fail, we have to turn deeper into ourselves and ask, what is it that we're still missing? We have to ask the questions we're afraid to ask. We have to be with the things we're afraid to allow. This is precisely what the teachings of the Shambhala tradition train us to do. This is the purpose of the practice of spiritual warriorship. We meet fear with gentleness, and in doing so practice fearlessness. Let us not avoid the sharp edges of reality or the thorough application of our teachings for a cozier cocoon of sleepiness.

How do I have more relationships with people of color?

I don't get this question directly, but I feel it. I feel it in the overly friendly welcoming of my presence by someone with whom I share no obvious connection. I feel it in the over-sharing of race work that white people often feel compelled to tell me about. I feel it every time white people's actions or words show me that they've immediately labeled me as a brown woman. When someone feels the compulsion to show me that they're on "the good side," or when they wonder if the big brown person who just came into the Center is lost, I wonder if noticing and pausing might be possible. Can this energy be harnessed as an opportunity to examine what is going on internally? Can this vulnerability be surfaced in conversation? "I'm feeling a desire to tell you about the work I'm doing at the Boys and Girls Club, but I'm also sensitive to how this may land for you." This is the on-the-ground practice of race work in an integrated setting. There are countless opportunities for white people to express this kind of vulnerability. Extending out in this way creates space for people of color to share their own experience and authenticity. It may not go perfectly every time. We all have things to learn. But it is a necessary place to start.

If your community is mostly white, it is not by accident. Do your work, get real, look at the places you've been avoiding. Ask another white person the question you've been unsure about asking. See how you're perpetuating the system of institutional racism; *we all are*. Become intimately familiar with your role. Explore the places within yourself that you hold back. Can you be yourself a little more? You do this work and people of color will naturally want to engage with you. Why? Because through feeling and exploring your ignorance you've created a genuine opening for my reality. Stepping into this unknown means carving out space for my existence.

...

Breathing.

These words are shared not to shock or offend but in kindness—as an offering of my own fullness and genuine aspirations for my community. I hope to create an opening for honest conversation. I hope to bring more understanding and support through the sangha for the importance of these spaces. I hope in hearing me other people of color will be heard.

What happens in PoC spaces? Anything we want—and this is the beauty of them. We can be sources for our own nourishment and resilience. Why wouldn't an ally be in support of this? My friend recently said, "We don't need allies (i.e., friends); we need accomplices (i.e., partners in crime)." I couldn't agree more. The act of supporting people of color is one of subversion. We are subverting white cultural conditioning. These are the values that fuel our institutions and organizations; they fuel our social hierarchy and how we self-identify. Undermining this conditioning requires fierceness and bravery. Anyone doing this will be challenged. Will you be an accomplice in supporting PoC spaces?

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1. For an explanation of capitalization of “black,” “brown,” and “white” in this essay, see Touré, *Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness? What It Means to Be Black Now* (New York: Free Press, 2011), vii. For a discussion of the debate over capitalization, see Merill Perlman, “Black and white: why capitalization matters,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, June 23, 2015, retrieved from https://www.cjr.org/analysis/language_corner_1.php.
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