

Book Review

Dreaming Me: Black, Baptist and Buddhist—One Woman's Spiritual Journey

By Jan Willis

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Review by Kwan Haeng Sunim

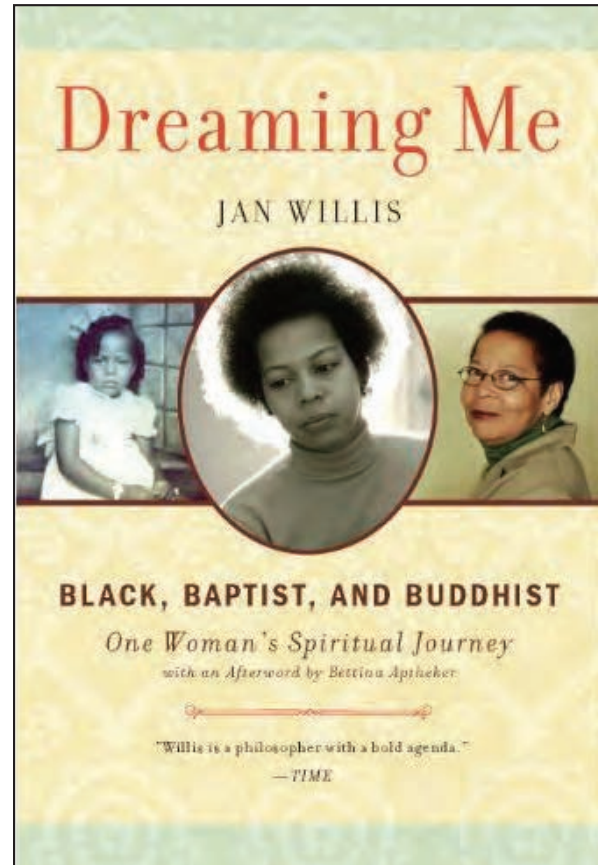
Dreaming Me: Black, Baptist and Buddhist—One Woman's Spiritual Journey is an autobiography written by Jan Willis, a professor of religion at Wesleyan University and the first African-American scholar-practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism in America.

Born in Docena, Alabama (near Birmingham) in 1948, the daughter of a Baptist deacon and steel worker, Jan Willis grew up amid the turmoil of the civil rights movement in 1950s and 60s. The Ku Klux Klan made regular visits to her neighborhood. Along with her father, mother and sister, she marched with Martin Luther King Jr. in Birmingham. Later she went on to attend Cornell University just as the war in Vietnam began to draw protests from the student body. Confronted with her rage and anger, she wondered at the Buddhist monks who set themselves on fire in protest of the war.

Willis's spiritual journey was precipitated by life experiences touching her essence, not the least of which were dreams that chronicled her spiritual insights. As the book begins Willis tells us of a dream she has about lions. These lions are powerful and are coming after her. They threaten not only her but her family as well. As she progresses through her life story we see that these dreams are a reflection of her life. From these dreams we sense there is a self beyond our thinking minds, a self that is in fact hindered by our thinking. What is this self? What am I? Willis struggles with that question, both in her dreams and in her day-to-day life.

Her book's title suggests how names and forms can help or hinder the quest for spiritual awakening. Jan Willis takes us through her own soul-searching transformations. She writes candidly and with grace about the formation of her faith in the context of racism, oppression and relationship. As a child of nine, she regularly endured the racial taunts of a young, white, five-year-old girl on her way to the post office. As a young teen, at home with her mother and sister while her father worked the night shift, the Ku Klux Klan burned a cross in front of her house. Her suffering was the catalyst for her self-examination and her search for the truth. Her experiences as a Baptist and Buddhist bring the two paths together. We find the shared self behind name and form, whose goal is to find truth and share it with others.

Willis shows how relationships impact our choices and how they come to be part and parcel of spiritual development. Relationships—on the one hand with family, friends, mentors and a teacher with genuine interest in our spiritual development, and on the other with those whom we see as mean, hateful and harmful—all these relationships come together in our prayers and meditation. And as our prayer or meditation life deepens, this apparent tension can bring us to truth as it is. Willis shares



personal and painful memories to chronicle the path of her own spiritual growth, such as the pain and confusion of a five-year-old whose mother shouts out of the blue, "What's the matter with you, you little devil? You think you know so much! You just shut your mouth, you hear! You, you . . . My Lord where did you come from?" Years later, this experience transforms into compassion rooted in insight, about her own family's suffering in particular, and human suffering more broadly.

Willis met her Buddhist teacher, the great Tibetan monk Lama Yeshe, while in India for a year as part of her philosophical studies at Cornell. She "had come to Lama Yeshe loaded with feelings of guilt, shame, anger, and a feeling of utter helplessness." Unable at that time to see past her rage from untold indignities she had endured, she notes, "Yet wounds like mine had a flip side too, a false and prideful view of entitlement: Look at all that I've endured. I'm great. In time, Lama Yeshe would find a way to pull the rug out from under this pride." One morning, Lama Yeshe walked by Jan Willis, paused, looked at her piercingly for a brief moment and, before continuing his journey, said, "Living with pride and humility in equal proportion is very difficult, isn't it? Very difficult!"

About this exchange Willis writes, "It is the trauma of slavery that haunts African Americans in the deepest recesses of our

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souls. This is the chief issue for us, the issue that must be dealt with head-on—not denied, not forgotten, not suppressed. Indeed its suppression and denial only hurt us even more by causing us to accept a limiting, disparaging, and at times even repugnant view of ourselves. We as a people cannot move forward until we have grappled in a serious way with all the negative effects of this trauma . . . With just a glance that morning, Lama Yeshe had captured my heart's dilemma: How to stand dignified, yet humbly, in the world?"

Willis's relationship with Lama Yeshe lasted for fifteen years before Lama Yeshe died in 1985.

Often implicit in her stories is that part and parcel of the process of finding this truth is that a healing takes place.

Lama Yeshe later advised Willis to take the three refuges from his teacher, Geshe Rabten. Some time later, Willis met with the Dalai Lama and spoke to him of her dilemma about violence versus nonviolence. His Holiness said to Willis and her two friends, "We must practice patience and meditate to gain clarity in order to act appropriately." But pressed further on the subject, His Holiness said, "When I came out of Tibet, many Khampas with guns accompanied me. They were concerned about me. They wanted my safety. I could not say to them, 'You are wrong to have guns.' Many monks too in Tibet took up guns to fight the Chinese. But when they came here, I made them monks again. Still patience and clarity are most important, most important."

This is a much needed book, not only for African-Americans interested in Buddhism, but anyone interested in a healing spiritual change from a Buddhist perspective. Anger and

the urge to use violence does not go away simply because we want them to. It is the same with guilt, shame and the feeling of helplessness. Buddhism is a way that shows us, using various meditation practices, that we can remove the effects by becoming nonattached, that is, by digesting our experience. By becoming nonattached we become clear and see things as they are. And for the sake of others we are able to make clear choices. ♦



Photo: Francesco Morello

Kwan Haeng Sunim is a native of Boston, Massachusetts. He encountered Zen Master Seung Sahn in 1986, and shortly thereafter sat his first 90-day Kyol Che in Providence, subsequently becoming housemaster. He developed an interest in ordination after traveling to Hwa Gye Sa Temple in Korea. He became a haeng-ja at Hwa Gye Sa and was ordained as a novice monk in 1999 at Jik Ji Sa Temple. Returning to Hwa Gye Sa, he became housemaster, and later, head monk. Continuing his training at Hyon Jong Sa Temple, he then received full bhikku precepts in the Chogye Order at Tong Do Sa Temple. He returned to Hwa Gye Sa, remaining there until 2005, and then moved to Mu Sang Sa Temple, where he did a 100-day kido and then remained, holding positions as housemaster, head monk and media director. He returned to Hwa Gya Sa as head monk in 2010. Kwan Haeng Sunim returned to the United States in September 2012 and now practices at Providence Zen Center.

