

# Every Human Being Is Completely Diverse in Their Own Way

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**Question:** We have been discussing in our sangha, and this last sangha weekend, the idea of continuing the effort to create a situation in our sangha where we can be welcoming so that people of a diverse background and cultural, personal and racial identity can feel welcome. It is a very big issue and there are many ideas and plans.

**Montero JDPSN:** How did it become a big issue?

**Q:** Even that is a big question. It's maybe the biggest question. And there are many ways to slice that up and address it directly. You have to be careful, because each one of those ways has its own good and bad aspects, its own problems and its own solutions. But something we keep coming back to is how to be proactive. Should we have a night that is just for people of color or whatever group you are trying to promote? That may have its benefits, but it is a little artificial in some way. So the issue I keep coming back to is that it starts with us. We take a look at ourselves and what we are doing moment to moment. Are we even thinking about other people and our relationship to them? Can you say anything about that?

**Montero JDPSN:** I think everyone here has had that first interview with a Zen teacher when you read "The Human Route," which is part of our tradition and kong-an training. After the student reads the poem, we ask a very simple question: What is the one pure and clear thing? Usually the student doesn't know what to say. So then the teacher gives some simple teaching: "When our

minds are thinking, our minds are different. When our minds are not thinking, our minds are the same." If you really attain that, then your question will answer itself.

This body is just a conglomerate of atoms, karma, energy, aggregates. It appears to look like this [*points to himself*] and it also looks like that, like that, like that [*points to different people in the audience*]. If you look closely, every human being is completely diverse in their own way—in their karmic thinking, their physical attributes and their cultural background. Every single person is absolutely unique. There is a diversity of however many billions of people there are in the world. At some point, we make something in our minds that says "Oh! We are somewhat alike so we belong to the same group," so we are this or we are that or that. That is called making something. That means already our minds are separate.

But one thing that is clear about our teaching is that it points to something that is before thinking. Something that recognizes that we are not this body. That we are not this external look and shape—black, white, gay, straight, man, woman, gender-fluid—we are not any of that. That is what our teaching keeps pointing to.

So you say, let's have a night for people of color. My question is, "What color?" Maybe my scientific background interferes and wonders if you are going to measure the wavelength of the light that is absorbed by someone's

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skin to decide who can come or not? And which part of the skin will you measure because, at least for me, some areas of my body are definitely different skin tones than others—trust me on this one. Focusing on our outside form is not where it is at.

All that our sangha can do is continue to be loving and open, and also serve as a mirror to anyone who visits our sangha, so that they can see not their external appearance but their true self. If they are really attached to their outside form, to their thinking, to their idea of what they are, we can help them investigate that which is before all of those attachments. We can give them tools to explore that. After all, what color is your mind? [*Hits the floor with zen stick.*] What color is that?

This reminds me of a famous story in our school. Perhaps most of you have heard it already, but since it connects with this issue it is worth retelling. The story is from when Zen Master Seung Sahn had this conversation about feminism with Bobby Rhodes (Zen Master Soeng Hyang), who is currently the head of our school. Back in the mid 1970s the issues were a little different, and many students wondered about the patriarchal nature of historical Zen. All ancient Zen masters that anyone knew were men, so naturally modern American women were skeptical of such a tradition.

20] During this conversation, and glossing over its every detail, Zen Master Seung Sahn told Bobby, “Yeah! A woman cannot get enlightenment.” Bobby angrily said, “WHAT? What kind of patriarchal bullshit is this? How can you say that? That is wrong! Where is your sense of equality?” And the Zen master calmly said: “Oh, I am sorry—Are you a woman?”

At that time, Bobby had been practicing for some time and recognized the master’s response as a big hit to her mind. The moment your mind says “I am a woman” you are far away from enlightenment. “I am a man”: farther away from enlightenment. If you make yourself anything—a man, a woman, a dog, a cat, a Democrat, a Republican—you are far, far away, because our true nature is before all of that. So a man cannot get enlightenment; a woman cannot get enlightenment. Any attachment to anything puts you far away from it, yet letting go of all of it brings you right back to enlightenment. So this is my approach to this situation.

People always tell me, “Your sangha in South Florida is so diverse. What are you doing to achieve such diversity?” We are not doing anything! People just come, we say hello, we give them some teaching and we practice together. So I ask the questioner, “Why do you want this diversity, and what does diversity look like to you? Is diversity limited only to some type of outside look?”

I wonder if the Zen teachers in old China ever wondered, “Oh these monks and nuns all look pretty similar, not so diverse.” In that case, you are not look-



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ing closely enough. I would encourage you to see that when there are two people, then two different karmas appear. That is already diversity.

Don’t get hung up on this group or that group, because then you become part of the dividing process. Our practice points to [*claps hands*] completely become one with everything. Some may say that is easy for me to say because I am very diverse. I guess they say that because I have Hispanic karma and gay karma, Buddhist karma and other traits people may associate with being diverse. I am not any of that. That is actually one of the greatest things that practice revealed for me, that I am not my karma. My body is just my karma, my preferences, my opinions, they are just my karma and I can be free from their coming and going.

How we use that karma is most important. How can we use all of it to help this world? So be very careful not to be trapped by your “I am different” karma, as this keeps other people’s “I am different” karma alive as well. If you are a dharma teacher, try to help others realize how originally we are one. That is more important. Then use these outward differences to help this world, whichever way that is. Just be careful not to force it. That is my view on this matter. ♦