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OPINION

# How Buddhism can help blacks

By *Maya Rock*  
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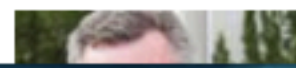
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[Buddhism](#) in America is on an upswing. A [2008 Pew poll](#) estimated that there are 1.6 million Buddhists in America. [The Dalai Lama's](#) face is instantly recognizable and several of his books, with titles such as *Becoming Enlightened*, have been bestsellers. Mainstream Western doctors and monks alike acclaim the benefits of meditation, the cornerstone of most forms of Buddhism. I see some connections between the Buddhist philosophies and black culture and have been keen to explore what Buddhism offers to black people.

What drew me to Buddhism was one powerful word: suffering. All over Buddhist literature there are acknowledgements that human existence is suffering. Suffering, according to Buddhism, is a fact of daily life. It's not only the big losses - like the loss of a person - that affect us, it's the small things, such as being cut in line or being chastised by a supervisor. Suffering occurs because of our attachment to the 'phenomenal world' - everything from our favorite songs, magazines, books, hairstyles, shoes, to our most cherished beliefs, attitudes and opinions. Buddhism teaches that it's only when we rid ourselves of these attachments that we can truly be at peace.

Buddhism's frank acceptance of the existence of suffering resonates with the black experience. [Choyin Rangdrol](#), one of the few African-American teachers of Buddhism, said in an interview, "When I discovered that it was possible to avoid becoming ensnared in the mentality of an angry black man by applying Buddhism, I felt I had found a great treasure not just for me but also for my people."

Author Alice Walker echoes Rangdrol's thoughts. In *The Best Buddhist Writing of 2007*, she [relates a typically horrific](#) anecdote from the 19th century about the son of a black woman and white farmer who was shot by his father and a group of white men for riding a horse that was "too fine." Walker explains that the typical Buddhist reaction is to offer compassion to every one involved, rather than taking the familiar way out which is to punish the perpetrators of the crime.

Buddhism doesn't just speak to healing from history. It can ease the pain of those suffering right now. The reluctance of Buddhism to demonize criminals makes it a natural fit for prisoner conversion. It is well known that many blacks find God and Allah in prison. Many also find Buddha.

[Jay Jarvis Masters](#) is a black Buddhist on death row. He has been featured in *O Magazine* and has written two books entitled *Finding Freedom: Writings from Death Row* and *That Bird Has* [Recent Man](#). He believes that Buddhism can speak to those

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Jay Jarvis Masters is a black Buddhist on death row. He has been featured in *O Magazine* and has written two books entitled *Finding Freedom: Writings from Death Row* and *That Bird Has Wings: The Autobiography of an Innocent Man*. He believes that Buddhism can speak to those trapped behind bars. "A lot of people in [prison] are coming around," he is quoted as saying. "They don't see Buddhism as a religion; they see it as a kind of meditation, or relaxation. A lot of prisoners have been on death row for a long time now. They are restless. They want to learn patience. They want to learn to sit with their thoughts, or better yet, without them. There's an absolute need for some kind of spiritual life."

One doesn't have to be behind bars to benefit from Buddhism. One of the most famous black Buddhists, Tina Turner, practices a brand of Buddhism called Soka Gakkai. Soka Gakkai, which does not promote meditation, has been viewed skeptically by other Buddhist sects. It rests largely on the chanting made famous by Angela Bassett in *What's Love Got To Do With It?* Chanting is said to reward through the law of attraction. So you can chant for a new car, a new house and so forth. Tina Turner, however, used it to escape from a physically abusive marriage. Jazz musician Herbie Hancock is another noted Soka Gakkai practitioner and says that chanting inspires him.

Almost all forms of Buddhism prize meditation as a response to dealing with emotions no matter how justified they seem. It asks us to consider that everyone who reacts in anger feels that his or her anger is justified. When you sit and meditate, you begin to perceive the transience and ephemeral nature of your thoughts and emotions. You realize that you don't have to follow them.

In this day and age, ideas, thoughts, religions, and even emotions, flash ever more rapidly across the globe through the Internet. Bombarded by stimulation from the outside and our own reactions from the inside, we may feel overwhelmed. Buddhism invites all people to take a break from those feelings and to discover calmness within. There is much that black people can gain from Buddhism.

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