PROJECT MUSE®

Buddhist Non-self as Relational Interdependence: An
NTU-Inspired African American Lesbian Interpretation?

Pamela Ayo Yetunde

Buddhist-Christian Studies, Volume 38, 2018, pp. 343-361 (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/bcs.2018.0027>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/709193>

Buddhist Non-self as Relational Interdependence: An NTU-Inspired African American Lesbian Interpretation?

Pamela Ayo Yetunde

ABSTRACT

Virtually every published academic study on American Buddhist practitioners excludes the culturally specific experiences of African American Buddhist practitioners. In the Insight Meditation Community (initially created by white Jewish American practitioners who studied and practiced in Southeast Asia before bringing the Theravada-influenced practices and teachings to the United States), there seems to be a growing number of African American practitioners who may interpret the teachings on non-self differently than other Insight practitioners. In this study of thirty-one African American Buddhist same-sex-loving women (lesbians) who grew up in Christian churches, non-self is largely understood as relational interdependence.

KEYWORDS: Buddhism, African American, lesbian, Insight Meditation Community, non-self, relational interdependence, relational resilience, NTU, same-sex-loving, self, Audre Lorde, Ayya Khema, relationally resilient.

INTRODUCTION

Muzika argues that abandonment anxiety is at the heart of Buddhism (1990, 60). He believes one of Buddhism's deepest concerns is the pain that comes with being attached and the pain of grieving the loss of those we were attached to. Muzika is correct in asserting that there is an abandonment anxiety "flavor" in Buddhism, but abandonment anxiety in Buddhism does not mean that all Buddhists are anxious and anxious about loss and grief. For example, there are at least thirty-one self-described African American same-sex-loving (SSL) women who practice Buddhism in the Insight Meditation Community (IMC) whose Buddhist practices cultivate relational interdependence, arguably the opposite of abandonment anxiety. Relational interdependence in SSL people may be surprising to those who still believe SSL people are relationally deviant, like some psychotherapists who engage in Conversion or Reparative Therapy to make SSL people heterosexual. Contrary to the beliefs that all SSL people are relationally deviant, the thirty-one women in this mixed methods study

of their psycho-spiritual experiences related to the teachings and practices in the IMC, demonstrate high relationality, not abandonment anxiety and not relational deviance.

Though the larger study for this article does not include a thorough intersectional analysis of how being a woman, being African American, and being SSL impact these women's interpretations of Buddhist texts and practices, the presence of African spirituality in some of these women's lives points to the probability that much of what has been written about Buddhist practitioners in the United States has been written about European-descended practitioners. Thus NTU, or the African relational norm that may have been transmitted through generations into the United States, also contributes to an understanding of what Buddhism is beyond abandonment anxiety.

African spirituality was not the subject of the broader study, but I chose black feminist poet, activist, and African female deity worshiper Audre Lorde as one of my conversation partners because of her advocacy for oppressed people, her arguments that oppressed people should do everything in their power to preserve themselves, because of her significance to black women as a feminist and black feminist icon, because of her own spiritual journey from Catholicism, *I Ching* nondualism, African nondualistic female spirituality, secularized Buddhist meditation, and secularized chi gung through anthroposophy, and compassion practices. In the broader study I looked for how Buddhist teachings and practices in non-self were impacted, or not, by any beliefs in the importance of self-preservation.

QUANTITATIVE TOOLS

One quantitative tool used to gather data included a modified Fetzer Spiritual Experience Index (Genia 1991), which included 38 statements, including:

1. I often feel closely related to power greater than myself.
27. Persons of different religions share a common spiritual bond.
28. I gain spiritual strength by trusting in higher power.
31. I feel a strong spiritual bond with all of humankind.
38. Improving the human community is an important spiritual goal.¹

These statements were scored on a Likert Scale of 1 to 6 with 1 being strongly disagree, 2 disagree, 3 neither agree nor disagree, 4 somewhat agree, 5 agree, and 6 strongly agree.

Quantitative Data

Regarding the five statements above, the responses were:

"I often feel closely related to power greater than myself." Forty percent strongly agree, 20 percent agree, 8 percent somewhat agree, 16 percent neither agree nor disagree, and 16 percent strongly disagree.

“Persons of different religions share a common spiritual bond.” Nearly 7.7 percent strongly agree, 23.08 percent agree, 38.46 percent somewhat agree, 23.08 percent neither agree nor disagree, 3.85 percent disagree, and 3.85 percent strongly disagree.

“I gain spiritual strength by trusting in higher power.” Nearly 24 percent strongly agree, 19.23 percent agree, 15.38 percent somewhat agree, 19.23 percent neither agree nor disagree, 7.69 percent disagree, and 15.38 percent strongly disagree.

“I feel a strong spiritual bond with all of humankind.” More than 19 percent strongly agree, 46.15 percent agree, 15.38 percent somewhat agree, 11.54 percent neither agree nor disagree, and 7.69 percent strongly disagree.

“Improving the human community is an important spiritual goal.” More than 42 percent strongly agree, 38.46 percent agree, 11.54 percent somewhat agree, and 7.69 percent strongly disagree.

In addition to Likert scoring, I separated the statements into two categories—spiritual practice and spiritual experience—based on my experience as an IMC practitioner of fifteen years.² Using Spearman Correlation to determine which spiritual practices had a relationship to which spiritual experiences pertaining specifically to relationality, I found relationships between these statements:

1. “My practice gives my life meaning and purpose” and “I feel a strong spiritual bond with all of humankind.” (.433)
2. “My practice is often a deeply emotional experience” and “My relationship to absolute reality is experienced as unconditional love” (.480), “I gain spiritual strength by trusting in higher power” (.412), and “I feel a strong spiritual bond with all of humankind” (.419).
3. “Ideas from faiths different from my own may increase my understanding of spiritual truth” and “Learning about different religions is an important part of my spiritual development.” (.489)
4. “Although I sometimes fall short of my spiritual ideals, I am still basically a good and worthwhile person” and “I often feel closely related to power greater than myself.” (.590)
5. “I can experience spiritual doubts and still remain committed to my practice” and “I often feel closely related to power greater than myself.” (.455)
6. “My practice guides my whole approach to life” and “I often feel closely related to power greater than myself.” (.448)
7. “Improving the human community is an important spiritual goal” and “My relationship to absolute reality is experienced as unconditional love” (.458) and “I believe that the world is basically good.” (.487)

The analysis demonstrated that these women’s spiritual practices positively impacted their relational experiences and aspirations. As people who are women, of African descent, SSL, and Buddhist practitioners, they were not defined or determined by their experiences of multiple marginalization based on gender, race, sexuality, and religion. Based on the quantitative analysis, these women seemed to be relationally resilient,³ not burdened by abandonment anxiety.

Qualitative Tool

In order to understand how Buddhist teachings and meditation practices in non-self (not a subject of the Fetzer SEI) were interpreted by these women, I posed these questions,⁴ for qualitative analysis, to five of the thirty-one survey participants:

1. What does the word “self” mean to you?
2. Are you a self?
3. Do you have a self?
4. What attempts have you made to preserve self?
5. Where did your concept of self come from?
6. Have you transformed your notion of self?
7. Have you let go of trying to preserve self?

Brief excerpts from the interview transcripts are listed below.

*Qualitative Data***1. What does the word self mean to you?**

Deborah⁵ (college professor):

It's this strong illusion that's hard not to believe in or hard to shake because we've been conditioned to believe in a concept of the self . . . maybe a little bit of materialism . . . but I say more importantly believing that you're separate from other beings.

Norene (accountant and Buddhist lay leader):

Today I would say it means love and release. Yeah, that's what I'd have to say . . . my first thought was self/non-self, and then I went to self/love and then I went, I had this thing of, an exhale of the breath and just let it go, releasing.

Marcella (yoga teacher and vegan chef):

I think it's just a reference point for who you are, I think that the core of who it is and I think the way I kind of understand for Insight practices there's also this kind of idea that you have to let go of this idea of your self, who you are to attain enlightenment and you know that's something I'm still trying to understand and embody but when I think about Self with a capital “S” that's surely about how you feel when your connection is to your own person, that is how I would described it.

Ayo (interviewer):

It's interesting that you mention Self with a capital “S” so you make a distinction between Self with a capital “S” and self with a lowercase “s”?

Marcella:

Yeah, because I think there's an emphasis on yourself as being important and I think when I think about my childhood, only being exposed to Christianity in that way it was almost like Catholicism like your relationship to God was like being a child of God so there was this diminutive relationship with God

and even my mom to this day, I love her a lot, has this—there was God always punishing you or you always have to go through this struggle towards the end of your life or when you die and go to heaven that's when you know, you can really attain—that's where you get your gifts for having attained and being dedicated to God, but I, I am God. God or creator or creation creating in me that big force, that important alignment of energy is me and I am—that's why I think it's important to capitalize "S" for Self.

Alicia (psychologist):

Self. Ah, when I think of the word self, what I have come to call my local identity, my local and physical identity in this incarnation, and while there might be moments when my sense of self feels fixed and permanent in some ways, I know that, I know that that's really just an illusion, I know that I'm so much more than the container that this part of my consciousness is focused in right now, at this moment, but I can say I was raised African American, I've got some native ancestry, some indigenous ancestry, certainly have some European ancestry, but I have identified as African American all my life. I can say that I'm a lesbian and that's a part of my self-identity, I can say that I grew up working class, that's a part of my identity, being a spiritual seeker is a part of my identity, so I feel like I have multiple identities that make up that self, but I also know that they are constantly in flux and constantly changing and I also know that there are aspects of my being and my consciousness that exist in the realms of the unseen that are constantly, continuously having an effect on who I am as my consciousness is focused in the body of Alicia that I might not even be aware of, you know, most of the time. So the notion of a self, the concept, it's not true to who I am in my entirety, spiritually and energetically.

Mary (former neuroscientist and Christian pastor aspirant):

It's something that is for me a useful concept but I know that at some level it is not true. It's useful to think about me as an individual person for life and living life, but I know that there's a way that's not really the case that I'm this individualized, atomized sort of person you know that's truly individual and truly myself, it's a strange concept you know and I haven't really delved deeply into Buddhist philosophy. There's a lot of different ways people think about the self. I think for me there's the sort of—it's layered. There's the sort of usefulness of it and the sort of other piece that, something about the way in which at least for this moment in time that is human life there is a, how can I describe this, there is a part, there is this me that connects with the greater universe God, whatever that is, but then underneath there is that—I'm sort of this drop that's going to go back into the ocean, you know, at some point. So, I'm not really me.

2. Are you a self?

Alicia:

Yes and no. Yes and no. That's the paradox of being in this dense realm. Yes, I am a self but I'm also a part of the non-self. Both.

Mary:

The answer is yes and no . . . ultimately there are no boundaries between me and everything else. That everything is, that I am like a drop in the ocean. I am totally in, there are no boundaries and you know, in fact, there is on a physical level, like if you go down to the tiny little physics there are not boundaries. Because we feel this is all very permeable, things are all changing you know, on a microscopic level and so I think . . . there are no boundaries.

Deborah:

I have been conditioned to believe that [I am a self] by our society but I do agree that we are [undecipherable] on kind of these illusory boundaries and I do think that we are connected to all beings . . . I think it's tricky because theoretically I know that it is an illusion, but I've been so conditioned to, I mean so steeped in that view it's hard to let go. I think that it may take some practice and time.

Norene:

I have to say I'm struggling with that. That question. That's a question I ask myself. I'm going to say "I don't know." Just don't know.

Marcella:

With a capital S, yes. I guess I feel like I feel empowered and embodied and I think of myself as Self.

Ayo:

To understand what Marcella means by self with a capital "S," I must return to her response to the question "What does the word self mean to you?"

Marcella:

I think self is your reference point again for who you are in the world . . . I'm still trying to understand and embody but when I think about Self with a capital "S" that's surely about how you feel when your connection is to your own person.

Ayo:

It's interesting that you mention Self with a capital "S," so you make a distinction between Self with a capital "S," and, I'm sorry, self with a lower case "s"?

Marcella:

You're supposed to work towards, not just your personal alignment, your relationship to food, your relationship to sex, your relationship to others in the community . . . the ego, I've learned both in yoga and meditation that you're supposed to diminish the ego.

3. Do you have a self?

Marcella:

I think I have many selves. I have the self that I am when, during yoga or meditation or dancing or cooking or writing, traveling, any of the things that make me feel close to God that's the self that I am. When I'm at work I'm clearly another Marcella, another self, a different self to my family . . . I would like all

of those [selves] to be integrated . . . I want to be myself in every variation of my self . . . to have a more integrated approach to how I show up.

Norene:

[long pause] Yes.

4. What attempts have you made to preserve self?

Alicia:

Well, I believe I am preserving self at every moment of every day that I exist in this dimension. It's what allows me to hold myself together . . . just at the level of consciousness I am holding myself together so that I can navigate through the physical reality that is this human experience. I guess on some level that being done outside my conscious awareness to a certain extent, my holding my notions of self-identity I think a lot of that is happening outside of my conscious awareness. I think it's just an implicit part of who I am on a more conscious level. I think I preserve my sense of selves by trying to surround myself with people and experiences who reflect facets of who I am back to me so that I can see myself being mirrored in others, I think that helps to preserve a sense of self-identity . . . so in terms of being an African American, in terms of being a lesbian, in terms of having more progressive views politically and socially, the way that I choose to eat is a way for me to preserve my notion of who I am as a self.

Deborah:

Can you say a little bit, like to preserve the concept of self, like to preserve that idea of self?

Ayo:

Okay. I'll say a couple of things. One thing is that for my dissertation I'm drawing on the words of Audre Lorde . . . and she made it her, in my opinion, her life's work to preserve herself . . . and teach others that preserving themselves is important . . . and necessary in the context of [where] people of color live. And then we have that word "self," which has many meanings for different people in the Buddhist context, so when I ask you "What attempts have you made to preserve self?" it comes from all of that.

Deborah:

Okay. Well I guess I'll say it more coming from the Audre Lorde angle because I feel like the notion of self and self in Buddhism is philosophical, it's something to work on, it's not to deny [that you were] hit in the face or something because you don't have a self . . . it's an interpersonal connection to others and to other beings, animals, the spirit realm and to me it's about the ego. In the Buddhist paradigm they're talking about the ego . . . believing that this mind and its thoughts are real . . . more like individualism. . . . I feel like in the Audre Lorde perspective I definitely agree . . . she has really important quotes about preserving, self-preservation, self-care, and being revolutionary, and so I feel like they're using the same language but in different ways. . . . I'm a black-identified biracial woman from the South, lesbian identified, queer

as well identified who has a lot of opinions and alternative views that aren't reflected in dominant society, media, or other representation so my preservation of self has been finding like-minded people as my inner circle of family and friends. . . . We support each other and I think in my view she [Lorde] is kind of having this womanist or feminist view . . . a lot of activists should be more like Audre Lorde [chuckle] . . . the revolutionizing process [is] how you're really going to transform society and the way people relate to each other and power differentials, to celebrate people's strengths and difference and care and nurture each other even though you know not everyone is perfect . . . wisdom is really about self-care and self-preservation . . . she [Lorde] was also writing in a time when she was trying to learn the lessons from the late '60s, where it was like women and queer people can wait until after the revolution and we'll include you . . . there was some infiltration or something unraveling that happened because some people weren't bonding, those were weaknesses of not being more unified about people's strengths and to me, that's also what I mean about the Buddhist community . . . the non-profits I've been a part of are celebrating people's assets and their strengths across difference in terms of identity, sexual orientation, in terms of race and ethnicity, black and brown together, Asian and other groups and white allies, class differences, like all types of differences.

Mary:

Wow, that's an interesting question. Well, on one level, every day I make an attempt to preserve myself. I eat, sleep . . . I want to take care of myself. I think that there were times in my life where I, things were difficult, so I worked on . . . I went to therapy for many years and done a lot of personal growth work, is that preserving self? I don't know. I think as I get older, I guess maybe wiser, I understand that no-self better, so I'm not as attached I guess to things about, for many years I had various, I mean for me identity was really important. Identity in terms of what I did in the world, scientist and then after that I did technology work as a web developer and then I went to seminary and became a seminarian and I was going to become a pastor and then it didn't work out to be a pastor and so I was in this "Oh my God what am I?" And I think I've been able to disconnect that, I do various things, but I don't need to have an identity as something that I do, that I'm doing this thing. I've let go of that identity, which has been really important for me. It's true about my spirituality. I'm not a Christian and I'm not a Buddhist. I mean I am a Christian and I am a Buddhist. Those are traditions that I follow, but don't feel the need to say I am one or the other. But I spent a lot of time trying to figure that out. Am I a Christian or am I a Buddhist? You know, and I'm both and neither.

Marcella:

I certainly think there's yoga practice and meditation practice and I went to nutrition school . . . where they taught nutrition in a holistic manner . . . becoming reiki master . . . learning about how to make raw food, [having] a spiritual mentor . . . having a wholesome relationship to money. . . . You know, those things are a spiritual practice too. . . . You know, generosity is a spiritual

practice too . . . and developing a better understanding of myself and healing myself.

5. Where did your concept of self come from?

Mary:

Well, I think it's been changing. I think we have in our culture a very specific way of thinking about ourselves. A very individualistic, particular way that Americans think about self or selves and what we do and so of course I picked that up—you cannot help but pick that up if you're an American, generally, and then you know I also learned some things from Christianity which I've discarded mostly which have to do with original sin and then I learned about self and no-self from my Buddhist practice and from reading various things. I mean my Buddhist reading is more broad than my practice, I read Tibetan and I read Zen, Theravada stuff, but my practice is very specific Theravadan, but I have read some Zen stuff that is very specific about no-self and such. So anyway I can say I have a sort of broad perspective from the Buddhist sense of self and no-self.

Deborah:

Well, we live in such an individualist society, I think that is where I picked up those concepts through schooling and media and I think it's really good to get to know yourself deeply [by being] still [and] let it all come up . . . but I think society's notion that the individual is separate from other people is the dominant view and then I've been blessed to be part of subcultural groups black and white in Atlanta where, you know, collectives where my experience has been more in the collective notion of identity—you're an individual person but you are also a part of this collective symbolically, but also this group in this particular setting . . . but also theoretically. I wasn't in Ferguson⁶ in body, but it's like it happened to me like it was someone in my family in terms of police brutality again where black men and black women and Latino men and Latino women . . . so I don't think it really serves one well—I've seen it go wrong [chuckle] when it's just thinking about yourself.

Norene:

Well once again I'm trying to define, "Do I have a self?" first and foremost and if I say . . . if I'm looking at it as a yes, do I have a self, then how I have cultivated that today is very different than when I was a child and part of that comes from not necessarily needing to be seen as I did as a child and also recognizing consciously when I am holding too much attention or attachment to this me that I am, this me, my, I, it's mine, this is how I see it, trying to build a world around me, almost as if there's a box, concrete box, actually concrete so very very different. As a child I had no real understanding of the concept of—I didn't even have a word for self I think—to be first the best little girl, second I didn't want to get whipped [chuckle], I wanted to be loved, liked, so very very different box, very different box.

Marcella:

All of the concepts of who I am [come] from my upbringing. I'm a woman of

African descent, I'm also a woman of indigenous descent. My grandmother was Cherokee and black even though she did not register herself as Native American. Culturally and spiritually with all the different ways that I learned about different spiritual practices, that has helped me develop my concept of self. I've been to several different countries in my adult life and travel has been a way for me to [to be in] an environment where you don't speak the languages, your traditions are different than theirs, you feel like you have a deeper relationship to yourself and this [is] really [a] beautiful way. . . . Learning how to properly eat, prepare food has helped me develop a concept of myself. . . . I was kind of an activist [in] social justice circles and learning about Mumia Abu-Jamal and reading things about Assata Shakur, Angela Davis, and people like that helped me understand in some ways myself more as a black woman, so those are some ways that I developed my concept of self.

Alicia:

I think my concept of self is ever evolving. I think it's always changing and shifting, based on how I'm interacting with my environment and the feedback I get from my environment. I think my notion of self probably began when I was in the womb, if not earlier, having chosen the parents I chose, the sibling I chose all began to mingle together to kind of co-create an experience of who I thought myself to be, you know, as an infant, as a child growing up. I have a self as a daughter, I have a self as a sister, I have a self as a caretaker, but self is never in isolation, self is always in relation to someone or something else. I can't, it's not possible for me to even conceive of my having a self without being in relationship to other beings. . . . It came from being in relationship with my parents even long before, even long before I was even born. I'm able to say this because I do have beliefs in reincarnation, I have reincarnated thousands and thousands of times. I know that I had a relationship with my mother and my father and my brother even before I came into this existence, so it's like how can I say that my self began, or my self-identity development began after I was born? It began before I was born and has been shaped by, as I said, my relationships with significant others in my life and the significant experiences I've had in my life. The way in which I interface with the world as someone who identifies as African American, my identity as a person of African descent, my experience of being a woman, being the female and interfacing with the world as a female has shaped my sense of identity, my sense of self as a female . . . it's about self in relation to others.

6. Have you transformed your notion of self?

Alicia:

Oh yes, for sure. Yes. Yes because I haven't always felt this way, I haven't always believed the way that I believe right now, so yes I have definitely transformed my notion of self as the result of my exploration in consciousness.

Marcella:⁷

It's just that whole piece about surrender again, when you're able to sit down

on your cushion or on your yoga mat, not run away from . . . you know, sometimes it's really nightmarish when you're in silent meditation because you get to the core of everything that you experienced in your whole life and that came up for me yesterday . . . it's just a way to help inform you about, how again to use that word [self] again [to] be whole.

Norene:

Yes.

Ayo:

How did you do that?

Norene:

Clearly I would say through spiritual work, I would say through being in prayer, meditation, cultivating the ability to let go, to—still on the quest to understand why I hold things so tightly and in the letting go to feel freedom in that so that's been part [of the] process of understanding and defining—do I have a self or not is one [question] I am conscious of holding on. How can I take that three or four breaths to let go for a moment and observe, investigate “oh, that's what that was, there it is again, I'm clinging to that, is that real?”

Deborah:

[long pause] Yes . . . those collective notions of self I had growing up, being part of the black community have been strengthened, and being queer, family becomes like friends and you create your own family, so there's definitely an emphasis on the collective survival, but also to thrive . . . and also for wisdom to emerge.

Ayo:

You've got me thinking about a couple of things . . . [for this project] I'm drawing on the works of Ayya Khema. Have you heard of Ayya Khema?

Deborah:

No.

Ayo:

She was a Buddhist nun in the Theravada tradition and many of the books she wrote were about bringing it all into oneself, being an island, no-self. She taught a lot about that . . . those teaching are very consistent with the canon in terms of the notions of self and non-self, you're talking about the collective, becoming something or being something in relationship to others, collective wisdom and solutions coming from those who have the problem. It feels like there's a rub there between [the] collectivism and communalism you're talking about, and traditional Buddhist teachings and I'm wondering if you have felt that rub or if you see it differently . . . as it relates to self and being?

Deborah:

I don't know if I felt it or not. I think it's interesting like in a Buddhist way, expanding the notion, for me non-self is about understanding the ego is operating or the mind believes every thought, or that we're separate or that we can connect or travel [beyond the physical body]. I've read a lot about the jhanas—there are just whole other realms out there—to me what I've learned

a lot about is engaged Buddhism. There are a couple of books that I liked on that and there's also *Dharma, Color, and Culture*⁸—they are a little bit more engaged as a collective to me, well, this is not vipassana but in the Zen tradition. I went on a Thich Nant Hanh retreat he has in upstate New York . . . and I have always liked his books. What I liked, I think he was trying to get at the question [about] non-self, but that doesn't mean you don't help people who are suffering. He talked about colonialism, he talked about the French coming into Vietnam, the American imperialism, the Vietnam War . . . he got together social workers. . . . Whether there's no self or not, in engaged Buddhism where you're helping, but not just healing, it's like solidarity in a communal stance, to make things better for the group that you're a part of or becoming a part of [it] gives it more meaning.

Mary:

I think as my practice has deepened, almost 25 years . . .

Ayo:

How old are you now?

Mary:

I'm 55. So I think as I deepen my practice and as I, I mean as a non-Christian, non-Buddhist and these days I've been more focused on my Buddhist practice, since I'm not really a part of a church and I'm not doing anything related to that stuff, and so I think things are shifting in my sense of self have changed.

7. Have you let go of trying to preserve self?

Mary:

[long pause] Yes, I think I have. I would have to agree. I would say "yes." I mean, between that identity thing, I think about being willing to say I don't have an identity and also lately I've had a very, I mean I was an activist for many years.

Ayo:

What issues were you an activist on?

Mary:

Lots. Primarily, I mean, it changed over the years. When I was younger, I did a lot of reproductive rights activism and anti-death penalty and various anti-war stuff and more recently stuff having to do with Alameda,⁹ up until two years ago I was living in Alameda and so stuff that is happening in Alameda, focused on Alameda. But now I live in the country and I don't do anything but sign petitions and like things on Facebook, but I have come to understand that, I have come to fully accept how completely messed up things are and that there isn't much that I as an individual can do about it and so I'm focused more on how I treat people when I meet them and what I do in those everyday interactions, that sort of thing and in that sense a letting go of myself.

Deborah:

I think I'm in the process of letting go. I mean, not in the Audre Lorde sense, but in the Buddhist sense of self, through my different experiences on the cush-

ion, off the cushion and in terms of really trying to apply the dharma. Interesting that word “preserve,” you know, even monks who have been on retreat or the teachers on retreat have been very clear or the laypeople who have been the teachers, you know, are clear, like people have asked [if] I’ve been in a domestic violence situation and the monk will [say] preserve your life, you’ve got to hit back to protect your child. It’s not like you want to be violent in general but for self-defense or protecting a life. I feel like they could be a little more clear about [what to do when being] abused emotionally or any other way. . . . There is a theoretical tension because there’s no self and we are reincarnated. . . . Is it just a piece of you that is reincarnated? I don’t know. I think that gets a little tricky theoretically and philosophically, you know, I haven’t heard anyone resolve that yet. I have to let it go and be in conflict.

Norene:

Not entirely. There are times when I’m fully creating boxes, fully creating ego . . . so no.

Ayo:

Alright. I’m trying to think right now if I want to ask you a follow-up question, and I do. So part of this study is examining the lives of African American lesbians in the Insight Meditation tradition, sort of with the understanding that Audre Lorde brings to the experience of being an African American lesbian and she had written a lot about her need for self-preservation and advocated through her poetry and prose for self-preservation. When you think about creating boxes, do you think that some of the boxes you create are healthy for you to do?

Norene:

No. No.

Ayo:

Okay. Next question.

Norene:

No. And I just want to say I don’t necessarily, it’s not always a creation, it is sometimes a construct that is created, not necessarily by me, so I fit into those boxes because I’m not conscious of coming outside the box. I find myself fitting into the box and not busting out so, when I was talking about, when I find myself in this ego place, maybe it’s a condition that is exterior to me and I kind of fall into it or I better hold on to [it] so that I won’t get hurt or what have you. So I’m actually feeding into a created form, well there are times I’m creating it myself, I’m not going to say I don’t, but it’s not always the case that the self, the ego is being created by myself sometimes it is as you were saying with Audre Lorde, self-preservation, I’m just holding on.

Ayo:

When you use the word ego, what’s your definition of the word ego as you’re using it?

Norene:

I would say almost synonymous with self.

Marcella:

Yes. There have been points in my life where I certainly had suicidal thoughts. . . . I was getting to that point where I understood why people “off” themselves because sometimes the pressure and the struggle and the suffering just takes you there . . . but knowing that there’s space now, there’s a LGBTQ sangha, a people-of-color sangha . . . these are resources that I have now that are life affirming.

Alicia:

No. No. You know a part of the reason that I’m so attracted to Buddhism is because it is such an embodied practice and I didn’t realize it until I was in my late 30s, early 40s maybe. I was not living in my body. That, even though I thought I was, it wasn’t until I really began to immerse myself in Buddhist practices in particular the Four Foundations and those associated practices that I came to realize that my body and mind were, were not well integrated, and so my meditation practice has really, really supported me in living a more embodied life. . . . I find this existence really difficult, in part because I feel suffering so deeply and for me this is a really challenging realm to live in and if I had my way, if I was independently wealthy, [chuckle] didn’t have to work for a living, I’d probably be in meditation most of the time, you know, such that I would have the experience of myself as transcending those facets of myself that I identify with, hence achieving an experience of no-self, or transcendent self or big self, but I can’t live in that state of consciousness and survive on a physical level in this plane and so I have to preserve those aspects of my identity, my sense of self because it helps me to cohere who I am and it’s also hard to live in this realm and to have to interact with the people so different from myself, different ideas, different perceptions, different mental formations, different beliefs, and who may not take responsibility for those ideas, feelings, thoughts, and beliefs and maybe project them on to me first, so I often find myself interacting with the projections of other people, which in itself helps to preserve my sense of self.

MIXED METHOD ANALYSIS—SEQUENTIAL NESTED TRANSFORMATIVE STRATEGY

The tools I used to collect data included the Fetzer Spiritual Experience Index. The statements were graded on a Likert Scale. The statements were divided into spiritual practice and spiritual experience categories and I utilized Spearman Correlation to determine relationships between practices and experiences. In addition, I asked several questions related to the Buddhist concept of self. The interviews were transcribed and Atlas.ti software was used to identify common themes. The method for integrating the data and analysis is called Sequential Nested Transformative Strategy (SNTS).¹⁰ SNTS involves analyzing the quantitative data first, analyzing the qualitative data second (that is the initial sequence), “nesting” the qualitative analysis into

the quantitative data and analysis, and allowing the findings to transform the analytical and interpretive processes, again. SNTS is akin to a continuous internal dialogue between the quantitative data and analysis, and the qualitative data and analysis. Through the SNTS method, I found that these women were highly relational, in part because of their Buddhist practices and philosophies, but I was still mystified by how an “abandonment anxiety” religion that espouses detachment could produce such relationality, that is, until I remembered NTU.

NTU

Based on the classic or foundational Theravada Buddhist teachings on non-self, as represented by Buddhist nun Ayya Khema (and many others), as well as my readings of the Pali Canon and my experiences in IMC, I was surprised to hear that the research participants’ narratives on self and non-self focused on community, collectivism, and communalism. Upon deeper reflection I remembered an article written by one of my professors, African American Womanist pastoral theologian Carolyn Akua McCrary, ordained in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church. McCrary believes people of African descent have a norm of interdependency. She bases her theory, in part, on NTU, a Bantu-Rwandaise philosophy, Howard Thurman’s theology, and Fairbairnian Object Relations Theory.¹¹ For purposes of this article, I will focus on McCrary’s understanding of NTU.

NTU, according to McCrary, who draws on African scholar Alexis Kagame’s *La Philosophie Bantu-Rwandaise de L’être* (Bantu-Rwandaise Philosophy of Being) (1956), is the common denominator or common ground of all being (McCrary 1990–1991). NTU is understood as four categories of philosophy on being, including: 1) *Muntu*, which means human being; 2) *Kintu*, which means thing; 3) *Hantu*, which refers to place and time; and 4) *Kuntu*, which means modality. Quoting Janheinz Jahn’s *Muntu: The New African Culture* (1958, 4th ed.), she describes NTU as the cosmic universal force that coalesces Being and beings. McCrary says that

NTU is the unifying force which bespeaks the connecting essence of all that is; and that at the fundamental core, there is an interconnectedness and an Interdependence of being of everyone and everything, trees, rocks, rivers, air, water, animals, birds, insects, time, place and form, etc. One cannot therefore, relegate someone or something outside one’s realm of care and concern. For since we are all inextricably joined to everyone else and everything else—at the point of NTU—then whatever we do to another being, is done at the fundamental level of our own being. Thus Bantu philosophy is different from most Western philosophies at this foundational level. In Western philosophy, not everyone and everything is valued in terms of being significantly related and inextricably intertwined with one’s being as a human being. (McCrary 1990–1991, 124)

No one in this study mentioned the word NTU, but two women specifically mentioned how African spirituality impacted their Buddhist spiritual lives.

Deborah:

In some way I think I've always been a little bit focused on the spiritual. I've also got some kind of initiation with the Yoruba, Nigerian Orisha tradition and incorporate that a little bit.

Ayo to Marcella:

And do you think that your understanding of spirituality is what your mother and her mother and her mother handed down to you and [did it] fall outside of an African spirituality or was it within an African spirituality?

Marcella:

I think it was very African even though I always wondered why my mom and grandmother liked going to like a quieter church because I felt like every time I, when I was in middle school and high school when I was going to church with my other friends there were the tambourines and the guitars and what I learned later in college was, what I learned about Africa was about enslavement practices and colonialism and when I started taking classes about the African diaspora—the shout or field hollers—those are all things in different parts of the new world, to carry on traditions and it felt like reading tea leaves. I do think that was the only way of learning more about the African traditions. After studying abroad in Brazil I always felt, like in the largest African population outside of Nigeria, you know just seeing the way Dahomey, the religions of Dahomey in West Africa has strong traditions in Brazil, I [saw that] some of the same ways we eat our food, interact with each other as African Americans, and some black Americans may not want to acknowledge it, but there are definitely remnants of Africanist, we interact as spiritual people.

Ayo:

You mentioned Dahomey.

Marcella:

That is the group, like a family of traditions which springs from the Western part of the continent of Africa and so when you learn about like Santeria or like Brazilian Candomblé or even like Haitian Vodun those styles of spirituality from that region of Africa are, you know that is what I was taught.

Ayo:

The reason why I asked about Dahomey is because that is, I guess you can call it a trope, that is the symbol Audre Lorde used when she invoked African spirituality, African spiritual goddess worship if you will, and I wondered if there was any connection there with Audre Lorde's work?

Marcella:

You know, I do love Audre Lorde and I know that her family was from Grenada and Dominica and I learned she had parents from the Caribbean, but yes from what I read from Audre Lorde she really focused on eroticism as a way to be empowered, I guess that was like a spiritual practice. I didn't know as much about her connection to African tradition, but that's something I'd like to learn more about.

In the common themes selected from the interviews and qualitatively analyzed, African spirituality is connected to some of the women's need for self-preservation,¹² African goddess deity exchange,¹³ self-acceptance, reasons for leaving churches focused on a white male god, and the celebration of diversity. African spirituality, self-preservation, and African goddess deity exchange were also part of black feminist poet Audre Lorde's spiritual journey from Catholicism to *I Ching*, to her travels in Africa and her positive encounters with African spirituality, to her positive encounters¹⁴ with secularized Taoism and secularized Buddhist concentration meditation while receiving medical treatment at Lukas Klinik in Switzerland. With a connection between African spirituality and interpretation of self as interdependence, it is possible that NTU, though unarticulated and perhaps even unknown by these African American women, is a philosophy that operates in African spirituality that when adopted, impacts how Buddhist self and non-self is understood as relational interdependence by these women of African descent.

CONCLUSION

This study was an exploration of the psycho-spiritual experiences of African American women who are same-sex loving, and practitioners in the Insight Meditation Community. Due to the fact that the study was an exploration, I had no hypothesis and no research problem. Though I am a member of IMC and have been trained as a lay leader in IMC, I never had occasion to share a survey, or sit with a group of African American lesbians and ask them questions about how their spiritual practices impact their spiritual experiences. Nor did I ever have the occasion to ask for their interpretations of the esoteric teachings in the Insight tradition. I was surprised to learn how relationally resilient these women are, given our experiences living in a society and culture that, as McCrary and some of the research participants stated, does not value everyone, nor carry the norm of interdependency. Despite a culture and context of individualism, these women spoke of Buddhist non-self as community, collectivism, interdependence, and communalism, not fear of being attached or anxious about being abandoned, or fear of grief as Muzika said is at Buddhism's core. Abandonment anxiety is not at the core of these women's Buddhism. Why? Collectively speaking, some of these women do not believe they are separate from others, not even from God. They see themselves as part of energy and consciousness existing in the invisible realms of existence. When the body dissipates, an essence of them still remains like a drop returning to the ocean. There was a nonduality expressed that is very similar, if not the same, as nonduality in NTU. They spoke of being without boundaries, and even having multiple selves and no self simultaneously. These women's African spirituality is not separate from their Buddhist spirituality and may explain, in part, why these women talked about seeing themselves mirrored by others, and non-self as actively finding like-minded people to include in their inner circles. Contrary to classical or foundational Theravada Buddhism, non-self has been also understood as celebrating people's strengths in diverse communities, but consistent with classical or

foundational Theravada Buddhism, non-self was understood as not paying too much attention to or being attached to one's concept of self, although it is important to embrace one's queerness and being a part of an LGBTQ *sangha* (Buddhist spiritual community). Though there is relational interdependence and relational resilience, there is also the acknowledgment that being in relationships can be challenging because of differences and the psychological phenomenon of projections that cause self-making.

The quantitative data and analysis and the qualitative data and analysis, through the SNTS method, opened me, as the researcher and primary analyst,¹⁵ to the possible influence of NTU, at least in its nonduality, because in the sequence of the SNTS analysis, I learned that a majority of the research participants were in agreement on these statements:

- I often feel closely related to power greater than myself.
- Persons of different religions share a common spiritual bond.
- I gain spiritual strength by trusting in higher power.
- I feel a strong spiritual bond with all of humankind.
- Improving the human community is an important spiritual goal.

This is hardly what Buddhism promises, but for householder Buddhists in particular, it seems healthy that Buddhism can offer greater relational resilience for those who may already have an African value of collectivism, community, and communalism.

NOTES

1. Including all thirty-eight statements with responses and analyses goes far beyond the scope of and space for this article.

2. Spirit Rock Meditation Center, an IMC organization, trained me to become a Community Dharma Leader (CDL). CDLs are lay Buddhist leaders just below the highest dharma teacher designation.

3. For purposes of this study I used Object Relations Theorist W. R. D. Fairbairn and his definition of resiliency as being the diminishment of the anti-libidinal/persecutory object, which leads to less ego fragmentation, which leads to an improved ability to be in healthy relationships with external others.

4. Many more questions were posed, but listing them and analyzing them goes far beyond the scope and space of this article on NTU and non-self.

5. All names, except mine, are pseudonyms.

6. Deborah is referring to the police shooting of the unarmed black teenager, Michael Brown, in Ferguson, Missouri in August 2014.

7. The actual question I asked Marcella, after she talked about the impact of reading about black activists on her sense of self was, "So how do you find the teachings from the Insight tradition and letting go of all of that?"

8. *Dharma, Color, and Culture: New Voices in Western Buddhism* is edited by Hilda Gutiérrez Baldoquin, and was published by Parallax Press in 2004.

9. Alameda is not the actual city Mary referred to, but in an attempt to protect her identity, I chose Alameda as her place of reference.

10. SNTS is a combination of Sequential Explanatory Strategy, Sequential Transformative Strategy, and Concurrent Nested Strategy.

11. I also utilized W. R. D. Fairbairn's Object Relations Theory in my research, but Object Relations Theory is not the subject of this article.

12. Self-preservation is one of twelve spiritual movements (akin to spiritual formation stages) some African American Buddhist lesbians experience between growing up Christian and becoming Buddhist.

13. African goddess deity exchange is one of twelve spiritual movements (akin to spiritual formation stages) some African American Buddhist lesbians experience between growing up Christian and becoming Buddhist.

14. Positive encounter(s) is one of twelve spiritual movements African American Buddhist lesbians experience between growing up Christian and becoming Buddhist.

15. The quantitative analysis was conducted by Devlon Jackson, MPH, PhD.

REFERENCES

- Genia, Vicky. 1991. "The Spiritual Experience Index: A Measure of Spiritual Maturity." *Journal of Religion and Health* 30, no. 4:337–347.
- McCrary, Carolyn. 1990–1991. "Interdependence as a Normative Value in Pastoral Counseling with African Americans." *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 18, nos. 1 and 2:119–147.
- Muzika, Edward G. 1990. "Object Relations Theory, Buddhism, and the Self: Synthesis of Eastern and Western Approaches." *International Philosophical Quarterly* 30, no. 1:59–74.