

Lama Rod
“Teachings for Uncertain Times”
February 22, 2017



Hi. My name is Lama Rod, thank you so much for joining me in this teaching. I want to start out by telling a story. About three or four years ago I was a formal teacher running a dharma center, and I began to experience a kind of a breakdown. This breakdown felt very confusing, felt very ambiguous. It felt very frustrating. It felt like being stuck. I began to reach out to teachers, to spiritual advisors, and to my mentors to really try to get some feedback around what I was experiencing. It was through the support of teachers, mentors, and spiritual advisors that I began to understand that, as a dharma teacher, I was attempting to be something that I wasn't raised to be, or I was pretending to be something that was outside of myself.

So there was Rod, and Rod was this black, queer, southern born, Christian-influenced male-identified person who had begun to practice dharma in the Tibetan tradition. [Rod] had been authorized as a lama and was now Lama Rod, and was attempting to create this brand-new identity as a lama. The dilemma really came out of the conflict of my root identity as it was merging into this new identity as a lama. Now, this identity as a lama was deeply influenced by the Tibetan culture as well as white European sangha cultures. I had to take time to step back and figure out how to reground myself in the experiences of Rod. What I began to study and ground myself in was the practice of intersectionality.

Intersectionality is a theory that tells us that we are complex individuals who are deeply influenced by different sets of identity locations. “Identity locations” mean that we have been born into certain bodies, and these bodies have been deeply influenced by relative causes and conditions. With talk about gender, race, sexuality, religion, class and so forth, all of these identities actually interact and intersect with each other to create these really different personality expressions. The context in which we move in and out of that actually influences which intersectionalities are more pronounced.

What I began to practice was coming back and naming what these identities were for me, and how they influenced who I was, and how certain identities carried with them a kind of privilege, and how other identities carried a kind of disprivilege. The privileged identity that I

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upheld was primarily being a male-identified person because male-identified people are very intensely tied into the structure of the system of patriarchy. My disprivileged identities were those identities of queerness and of blackness, as a person who is black identified and also a descendent of Africans and African slaves.

My work was holding space for these identities. When I began to hold space, I began to emerge in a kind of deeper authenticity as a dharma teacher. I wasn't this person trying to be a lama, I was Rod, [to whom] dharma and dharma practice was deeply manifesting through my identities, and it deeply informed who and what I was. That allowed me to actually show up in a way that felt healthy, balanced, and much [more] deeply connected.

Later on, I developed this practice and called it “radical presence,” which was a theory that I included in the text, *Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Liberation and Love*, with my co-authors, Rev. Angel [Kyodo Williams] and Dr. Jasmine Syedullah. Radical presence is this way of being in the world that's just very simple, direct, and deeply informed by who and what we are. It brings into question and interrogates the ways in which we're forced to be [someone] other than who we are.

I experienced that deeply in sangha spaces, where I was told over and over again that there are certain ways that one has to be as a dharma teacher. I found myself completely rejecting that kind of policing of my own body and my own experience. That rejection actually was an expression of dharma that felt very liberating and very open and very freeing. Sometimes it felt very aggressive, but I began to see how other people were being policed in these spaces. Not just dharma teachers, but also lay practitioners.

I began to teach radical presence and intersectionality more, because I felt like intersectionality was a very skillful expression of the liberatory nature of dharma teaching. For dharma teachers, specifically, I feel that the practice and the teachings of intersectionality and radical dharma are very important and actually imperative. Because we are communicating very subtle and often

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times very gross expressions of oppression and exclusion in the ways that we communicate dharma.

The more we know about ourselves, the more we're grounded in our intersectionalities, the more we understand how our privileged identities and disprivileged identities are actually interacting and influencing how we show up. Specifically how our privileged identities can actually be communicated through our dharma teaching. [How] that creates a kind of exclusion and psychic violence in the way that we're communicating dharma.

For instance, the ways in which we essentially dictate how dharma practice should be done, but more specifically how one should experience dharma practice. When we say, “Oh, if you don't have these certain experiences doing these certain practices, then you're wrong. There's something wrong with you.” That's kind of violent for many of us.

[Laughs.] [I am] someone who came up through sanghas where sometimes I felt really marginalized because I would experience teachings very differently or I wouldn't understand certain teachings. I felt like, “Oh, I'm kind of wrong,” you know? As a person whose intersectionality is actually tipped more towards that of the disprivileged expression, [one] that was easily feeding into this narrative that I was somehow wrong, faulted, or inherently off. That was an experience that I carried very deeply as a lay practitioner, and that's an experience that I've been working really diligently to bring awareness, compassion, kindness and patience to, as a dharma teacher.

So radical presence is this very simple and direct way of simply being ourselves. In this particular time, with the uncertain times that we're currently living in; the violence, the hatred, the political unrest, we're struggling to be ourselves. We're struggling to be ourselves because more and more it becomes dangerous to be different. It becomes dangerous to be queer and of color or it becomes dangerous to be any religion other than perhaps mainstream Christian. Radical presence helps me ground myself in a kind of courage, because I ground myself in who and what I am. So when I'm out in the world functioning as a layperson on the street and as a

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dharma teacher in the sangha, I'm actually the same person functioning in both spheres. I simply am trying to show up and be myself. As I show up and be myself, I'm being aware and attentive to the kinds of violence and aggression that I'm forced [to deal] with as other communities and individuals want me to be different than what I am.

Radical presence [oftentimes] makes people very uncomfortable, because many of us are actually pretending to be very different people. We're performing. We're putting on masks because we seek to have membership in certain communities. We seek to be accepted, to be validated. We seek to be safe. That's all very important and I think that's all very real, but that comes at a cost. Inauthenticity really costs us in the end because we begin to lose sight and connection of who and what we are. At the heart of radical presence is simply the act of love. Loving ourselves, loving others, and allowing that love to be deeply manifested in the world in a real clear way.

Essentially my practice early on, when I began to feel this confusion and struggle, was the practice of learning to love myself deeply. In loving myself deeply I held a greater space for all of my identities and my particular intersectionality. I began to trust that experience and I began to bring that experience to the forefront as a dharma teacher and as a person.

Lama Rod is simply, just simply, the person that I am as a dharma practitioner, friend, family member, and whomever I am in different relationships. I am the same in all these relationships. I allow dharma to manifest through who and what I am.

Thank you so much for joining me, and I hope that this has been helpful for you.