

Sangha Voices: Melanie Cherng

CIMC has a rich history of practitioners, teachers, staff and volunteers all committed to practicing meditation together in community. Sangha *Voices* is way for us to deepen our connections, and to get to know one another better. Over the next months, we'll be interviewing members of each of CIMC's many Community or Affinity Groups. These Groups provide regular opportunities for both new and experienced practitioners to participate at the Center in the company of others whose life experiences may be similar to their own.

This month, Zeenat Potia spoke with **Melanie Cherng**, a community member of CIMC's **People of Color (POC) Sangha**. The POC Sangha provides a dedicated practice space at CIMC for those who self-identify as people of color, and generally meets on the first Friday of each month from 6:30-8:15pm.



Photo: Melanie and her maternal grandmother Tsai Chao, who has taught her so much about community and relational practice.

ZP: How long have you been a part of the POC Community Group? How did you hear about it?

Melanie: I started coming to the POC Sangha in 2010 when I first moved to Boston to go to acupuncture school. Prior to that I had been living in Taiwan for a year with my family. A college friend brought me to the group. At that time, it was a small, intimate affair.

ZP: Tell us a little bit about yourself.

Melanie: I'm a healer in the technical definition of the term. As an acupuncturist, I tend to people's bodies, minds, and hearts. I also thrive and feel safe in roles where I can nourish the skill of being a steward of relationships and in how folks relate and connect. I'm a body-based person, a dancer and a mover. And I access meditation through feeling into my body, and the settling of my nervous system.

ZP: What purpose and value does the POC Sangha provide to you?

Melanie: In the initial days, the POC Sangha gave me companionship in the dharma, specifically with people of color. I had trouble sitting by myself. Communal energy doing the same thing with others offered stability to my nervous system, which wasn't the case in dominant culture spaces. Then I was asked to serve as a practice leader for the group, and this position of leadership strengthened my practice. These days, as a volunteer, I attend because it just feels so important to me. The benefits I've felt from practice, and the way I've been able to experience and see the world differently is unquantifiable, and I just wish everyone could have the same experience.

ZP: You've been holding space for the POC Sangha to sit online every single morning, since the lockdown happened in March. Can you talk about that?

Melanie: When I initially thought of it, I needed it to be sustainable and so I offered a short period of time where people practice together, and we fold each other into our mundane daily lives. It's almost become a ritual, like toothbrushing, and through shared warmth and intimacy, we share the dharma. In the POC monthly sit, the format is different, as there's a short sit, followed by a dharma talk by a teacher, small groups, and then larger group sharing and Q&A

ZP: If you were to invite a newcomer to check out the POC Sangha, what would you say?

Melanie: If you're coming to a Zoom session during the pandemic, I'd say, it's powerful to go to a space and hear someone teach who is a person of color. One of the biggest shifts in Western Buddhist spaces has been to have teachers who look like us and teach from their lived experience, which is from the lived experience of a person of color. It offers dimensionality and texture to the dharma that's just really different. Once we can gather again in-person, I'd say, the intimacy and relational aspect is really powerful, and the potluck at the end allows us to be joyful with each other.

ZP: Any teachers who are inspiring you currently?

Melanie: Sebene Selassie and our own Matthew Hepburn.

ZP: Thank you, Melanie!