

Sangha Voices: Valerie Spain

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 get to know one another better. We will be interviewing members of each of CIMC's many [Community Groups](#).

This month, Zeenat Potia spoke with **Valerie Spain**, a facilitator for the **White Awake Sangha**. This sangha, a community of white CIMC practitioners is bringing their spiritual practice to the work of interrogating and dismantling white supremacy. Meetings are currently being held online on the second Sunday of the month from 5:00-7:00pm.



ZP: Please describe the White Awake Sangha.

VALERIE: The White Awake Sangha is a community of white CIMC practitioners doing the emotional work of examining racism and white supremacy, how we internalize them, and how we perpetuate them interpersonally, culturally, and institutionally, both as individuals and collectively. Our goal is to bring our spiritual practice to the work of interrogating and dismantling white supremacy in ourselves, our relationships, our communities, and especially at the meditation center we call our spiritual home.

The White Awake Sangha is appropriate for any white practitioner no matter what meditation style they practice or where they are on their antiracism journey. Our goal is to build community as well as resilience, capacity, and commitment for the work of fighting systemic oppression. All are invited to explore issues of whiteness and racism, and our role as white practitioners: to not just be good allies in antiracist work, but to be actively engaged and taking initiative in dismantling racism within ourselves, at CIMC, and anyplace we may encounter it.

ZP: How was the White Awake Sangha born and what your role in making that happen?

VALERIE: In 2014, several white practitioners including myself started talking about having white affinity groups at the Center. This led to putting together a proposal for programming at CIMC, and out of that, came some offerings with Eleanor Hancock and Meck Groot. Then a few *kalyana mitta* (KM) or spiritual friend groups were formed, and our work gained some momentum. Covid and the nationwide racial uprisings in 2020, precipitated us and the CIMC administration to formally launch the White Awake Sangha.

ZP: Tell us a little bit about yourself.

VALERIE: I've always been a creative and entrepreneurial person, a free spirit. I've made art and written since I was a child, so those are my two creative passions, and I see my entrepreneurial spirit as part of that. I co-founded one of the first postpartum doula care services, and this inspiration is connected to my midwifing skillset and strength. I enjoy acting as a catalyst to start things and then engaging and empowering others to turn whatever it is into a community effort. I am mission driven and have a strong sense of justice. For example, I was introduced to health equity through my public health work which started around 2008, and this was also around the same time that I came to white affinity work, which really started to grow around 2013.

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

VALERIE: It is a community of practitioners who hold one another accountable, and develop a network of support, care, and love for us to be able to get into the personal and interpersonal work of dismantling racism. In this way, we are more authentically equipped to come to the greater work of dismantling white supremacy on a systemic and institutional level.

Dharma practice is so perfect for understanding this dilemma that we find ourselves in. For white folks, benefitting from privilege or being advantaged, and balancing the tension of also wanting to dismantle the systems that privilege and advantage whiteness. We have been putting a lot of emphasis of late on love and loving oneself, being self-compassionate, and to be able to be understanding towards other white folks who don't agree with you. As white people, we are often best positioned to have these difficult and complex conversations with people in our families or our colleagues who disagree with us on the issues of racism. It takes a lot of willingness to be vulnerable and to make mistakes, and then grow from all of those experiences.

This work at CIMC is deeply nurturing to me as I hope other people find it nurturing to them.

ZP: If you were to invite somebody to come and check out the Sangha, what would you say?

VALERIE: Come and see for yourself. It's a very welcoming group. We have new folks pop in every month, and that there aren't any experts. We're all there to learn together and we welcome people who are interested in building community and want to be a part of this.

ZP: Who or what is inspiring you currently?

VALERIE: The work of other white activists because it connects me to a wider network of people, and the knowing that there are other folks out there doing this. A desire to make the work loving and celebratory. We all have a practice journey of race identity, and we can learn to both celebrate life and joy and beauty and hold the heaviness and the real sorrow of things. At CIMC, I see there are more visible conversations around race, and the more transparency we have, the more possibility there is for change to happen. An awakening is happening across the organization.

ZP: Thank you, Valerie!