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It is a privilege to be as Asian. I love being Asian. It's part of my DNA and part of my life.

It is a privilege to be a Sufi.

Life is full of privilege, but there are a lot of privileges that people are unaware of and as we know, some people in this life are just born with more and I challenge each one of us and this organization that I love to see how we can do better: grow, learn, listen and continue on the path toward the one.

I grew up with a lot of privilege— Growing up in the San Francisco Bay Area is a privilege in and of itself. It is filled with many people from different races, genders, religions, beliefs and socioeconomic statuses. I was raised in the suburbs and went to a very diverse preschool, throughout my primary and high school, I had the gift of knowing and interacting with people from different races, ethnicities, religions and folks of all walks of life. It was the same case when I attended college at the University of Hawaii at Mānoa and later the University of Southern California.

Another advantage that I had growing up- and still have- is the way I look and appear to the public. I'm full Chinese, born in China and adopted and brought to the United States in the mid-nineties. However, I do not look full Asian which worked in my favor as I was adopted by a Chinese father and a Caucasian mother. When I made friends growing up, race was never brought up and I was never the token Asian kid in the group. However, I always felt that I was too white for the Asian community and too Asian for the community. It is still something that I struggle with. However, I've come to realize that there is a HUGE amount of privilege in it as well. Being able to pass as both Asian and White is a blessing and something to be pondered.

Growing up in the Ruhaniat as a second-generation Sufi is also a privilege. Being able to speak the words of God in Arabic without fear of being killed is a HUGE privilege. After 9/11 happened, I thought about that more and more. This was around the time when I realized that I was one of the very few people in the community that was not White. It was always something that I was aware of growing up, and it has never really bothered me because I didn't feel different among the community. I felt like I belonged.

The first racial experience that I had was at the Ruhaniat European Summer School after a night of zikr. At this particular camp, they had beer that people drank after the evening program (which I thought was absolutely insane and was not part of the US culture.) A man from Germany came over to the table that I was sitting at with some fellow Sufi's from the UK and asked me who I was, and I told him my name and told him that I was from the States. He

then proceeded to ask me what brand I was. I was very taken aback and asked him to repeat his question, hoping that I had heard him wrong. He then repeated, "What brand are you? Korean, Japanese, Chinese? Like what are you." I then said, "Oh you mean what is my ethnic background? Well I'm Chinese." He exclaimed, "NO! That cannot be." I asked why that was an impossible thought and he said, "well you don't have slanted eyes" and used his hand to show the gesture of what he thought slanted eyes should be. I was absolutely appalled that someone would use that to describe me. I had been made fun of a little in junior high by people, but I never let it bother me and would often stand up for myself. However, this time— I was unable to even fight back or say anything to defend myself. I was in pure shock and disbelief that a member of the Sufi community was blatantly racist and incredibly derogatory. I've always felt so safe and at home in the community and maybe that was naïve of me, but in that moment, I felt like the bubble of what I believed was shattered. In that moment, my perspective on the sufi community changed. Many of the folks around that table came to my defense, which I appreciated, but later I told them that I needed to be the one to talk to him and to tell him why that was so rude, inappropriate and just outrightly racist. When speaking to him, I later found out that he has an adopted Korean granddaughter and I was absolutely disgusted. I said to him, "would you ever ask your granddaughter this question?" He said, "NO. I would never ever do something like that." I then said, "well what makes you think that you can say it to another Asian?" He then apologized and I said, "I hear what you're saying. I forgive you— but let me make this very clear: I will not ever forget this moment and will never forget how incredibly ignorant, racist and derogatory that was".

From that moment back in 2015, I have never forgotten it. It's something that I carry and now whenever I am in a group of Sufis, I always count how many BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) there are. It is usually less than twenty, depending on the setting. It never really bothered me that I was the "Asian" in the group and today it's not that it necessarily bothers me per se but it's something that I'm much more hyper aware of. It also makes me wonder whether my community, and people that I love within realize that I am the friend that is not white, and I struggle so often with being the person who doesn't look like them. Who can't relate to a lot of experiences that they share as White American Sufis? I would like to think that I get recognized in my community because of my heart, my passion, my love and my wisdom and not just because I'm the ASIAN Sufi who makes everyone feel like they are 'diverse', but now the thought does cross my mind.

With all of this being said- I'm grateful to have friends in my circle and my community who realize that this conversation about race and humanity is a conversation that we are having FAR too late. If we say in Khatum, to "raise us above the distinctions and differences which divide us....and unite us all in thy perfect being." We need to strive to do better, to recognize our failures and shortcomings and listen to what people who feel marginalized in our community feel and what they have to say. I would encourage each person in this community, to take a deep look within to see how they can be better, learn, grow and show up for others. I believe in our family and our organization and I want to be part of the advocacy for transformation, to make us better beings on this earth. I want to help us as a community, rise above these differences and distinctions (of which some of us are not aware) to unite in the heart space.

With love and gratitude,  
Maleka