

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“**Socially Engaged Buddhism and Racial Justice**”
Rev. Sam Trumbore August 9, 2020

Call to Celebration

From *The Bodhisattva's Embrace* by [Alan Senauke](#)

I begin our service this morning with the words of Hozan Alan Senauke, Soto Zen Buddhist priest who serves the [Berkeley Zen Center](#). He is also the founder of the [Clear View Project](#), developing Buddhist based resources for relief and social change. He writes in his book, *The Bodhisattva's Embrace*:

What is socially engaged Buddhism? It is dharma practice that flows from an understanding of the complete and endlessly complicated interdependence of all life. It is the practice of the bodhisattva vow to save all beings. It is to know that our liberation and the liberation of others are inseparable. It is to transform ourselves as we transform all our relationships and our larger society. It is working from the inside out and from the outside in, depending on needs and conditions. It is to see the world through the eye of Dharma and to respond empathetically and actively...

The Buddha's teachings on mindfulness invite us to be mindful of the body in the body, feelings in the feelings, breath in the breath. This means becoming aware of actions and things from within themselves. [Becoming] aware that one is never truly apart from one's body, breath, feelings. In just this way we are engaged with the world, aware that we are never apart from it. There is no outside, or as an old Zen saying goes, "There is nowhere in the world to spit."

Spoken Meditation

Some of you may have seen segments of the [funeral for John Lewis](#) last week. I could, we could, hear some of his words again and again, let them sink in and allow them to penetrate deeper into our minds and hearts releasing their wisdom and power.

I have arranged a few quotes of his words as our spoken meditation this morning. Let us turn inward now to receive them, and their wisdom and power.

Before we went on any protest, whether it was sit-ins or the freedom rides or any march, we prepared ourselves, and we were disciplined. We were committed to the way of peace – the way of non-violence – the way of love.

I believe race is too heavy a burden *to carry* into the 21st century. It's time to lay it down. We all came here in different ships, but now we're all in the same boat.

We are one people with one family. We all live in the same house ... and through books, through information, we must find a way to say to people that we must lay down the burden of hate.

The scars and stains of racism are still deeply embedded in the American society.

Yet he consistently said: I'm very hopeful. I am very optimistic about the future.

There may be some difficulties, some interruptions, but as a nation and as a people, we are going to build a truly multiracial, democratic society that, maybe, can emerge, as a model for the rest of the world.

Never give up. Never give in. Never become hostile ... Hate is too big a burden to bear.

Reading

From *The Inner Work of Racial Justice* by Rhonda Magee

Over the past twenty years as a law professor and workshop leader, I've facilitated thousands of conversations with people about how race and its stand-ins (culture, background, color, accent and the like) play out in the lives of everyday people. I've seen many of the ways that race and racecraft are factors in all our lives, and very often, painful ones. I've gotten to know thousands of people well enough to be trusted as a conversation partner in reflecting on these issues. I've listened to thousands of stories about people's lives and the moments that stand out for them as pivotal in teaching them something important about race. I have come to understand these conversations as foundational mindfulness practice. The connections they enable and the ways in which they shatter our former understanding of ourselves and the world are the essence of the path of waking up in the world, moment by moment...(p141)

At the heart of this work are deep questions facing each of us. The answers we seek require not merely rational conversation and analysis, but emotional literacy, social intelligence and an ethical commitment to a vision of a more just world. When we develop those capacities and grapple with our questions together, we find answers, as well as the capacity to seek new answers when our old answers no longer serve...(p151)

I've seen how my own moral and social imagination is stimulated by being with others who are doing the work of racial justice. I have seen how being with others who are working to see their own biases inspires me to see my own. I have seen how my own relative comfort and fear of vulnerability can be a barrier to helping alleviate other's suffering. I have seen how being together in community actually does lessen the sense that I am impassably different from those who lives and identities are different from my own. Over time, I've experienced less fear and more joy in making resilient connections across difference. (p184)

Homily

[Robin DiAngelo](#) in her book, *White Fragility*, writes:

In my workshops, I often ask people of color, “How often have you given white people feedback on our unaware yet inevitable racism? How often has that gone well for you?” Eye-rolling, head-shaking, and outright laughter follow, along with the consensus of rarely, if ever. I then ask, “What would it be like if you could simply give us feedback, have us graciously receive it, reflect, and work to change the behavior?” Recently a man of color sighed and said, “That would be revolutionary.”

Today, I would like to give you some tools to be *that* kind of revolutionary.

Robin gets white people. However she might get critiqued, she profoundly gets how white people resist being uncomfortable and receiving information they do not want to hear about their whiteness. And what most white people don't really want to spend much time feeling or thinking about is how they are complicit in the pervasive American racist system of white supremacy.

I get it. I am deeply convicted by her words. I resist being uncomfortable too. No finger pointing here.

After all, it is completely human to recoil from the unpleasantness of existence. It is programmed into our genes to pull our hand back from a hot fire, put on a sweater if the room is chilly, seek out a cool drink when we've been exercising or are thirsty. I don't want to be around obnoxious people who are nasty and critical, even if they are my relatives. **I do want** to be around people who appreciate me, support me and offer me kindness and compassion.

Unfortunately, *unlearning unconscious* patterns of behavior that cause harm to others, as racism does, *even if* you agree that this is a good goal, can be unpleasant, even emotionally painful. Few of us want to acknowledge these patterns are hiding in our brains ready to cause harm *against* our best intention.

Yet all of us are *also* aware that changing patterns, even if they are harmful to ourselves as well as others, is frequently uncomfortable. Sadly, no pain, no gain.

The place I deeply learned this truth of existence was doing intensive Buddhist meditation practice. Sitting for an hour without moving can be quite unpleasant and painful. Yet it also showed me how to be with discomfort in a way that led to the release of suffering rather than its increase.

I've been wondering if my 35 years of investment in meditation practice might be systematically helpful in enduring the emotional discomfort of dismantling white supremacy.

When many people think about Buddhism, social action and social justice don't immediately come to mind. Their preconception is of Buddhist monks sequestered away in their monasteries staring at the wall, sweeping their Zen rock gardens, and chanting mantras. Tibetan monks go into caves for three year, three month and three day retreats. Burmese monks meditate for months at a time in silence.

Those images leave a lot out. During the second half of the 20th century, the East-West Buddhist engagement has stimulated the development of a what is being called a [Socially Engaged Buddhism](#). These monks have always been involved in supporting their communities, often educating children, offering emotional support and arbitrating disputes. In the East-West engagement, that service has extended outward both in Asia and in Western countries.

Some of you may remember my strong interest in and visit to Sri Lanka, in 2014, to see firsthand, [Sarvodaya](#), a community organizing project using Buddhist and Gandhian principles. In Thailand, [Buddhadasa](#) and (Si-wa-rak) [Sivaraksa](#) have been strong advocates for social justice. Many of us are aware of the work of [Thich Nhat Hanh](#) for peace during the Vietnam War and afterwards.

I've spoken here about the work of Roshi Bernie Glassman and his [Zen Peacemakers Order](#). The [Buddhist Peace Fellowship](#) is another advocacy organization that brings diverse Buddhist traditions and individuals together to work for peace. There are socially engaged Buddhist organizations in Britain, Germany, South Africa, Japan, Korea, China and Australia.

You see, suffering is the central concern of Buddhism. The Buddha said I teach one thing and one thing only: the nature of suffering and the way to the end of suffering. Key to that teaching is recognizing how suffering happens in the mind.

Unpleasantness and pain are not the same as “[dukkha](#)” the Buddha’s word that is translated as “suffering” but also as “stress” and “a sense of dissatisfaction with the way things are.”

I know people that delight in eating limburger cheese or extremely spicy sauces or swimming in very cold water on January 1st which all involve significant unpleasant sensations! But sensation does not equal suffering. It is our mental response to the sensations that define our suffering. The Buddha realized while we cannot avoid unpleasantness, (if you disagree try avoiding sickness, old age and death) we have choice over our mental response. We gain that choice when we become aware of the connection between the stimulus and the response. Freedom lies in wisely choosing a response that diminishes mental suffering.

And here we find the connection between Buddhism and Racial Justice. As Robin DiAngelo pointed out, most white people find being “called out” for racist behavior extremely unpleasant and don’t want that to happen. Most of us would rather die than be publicly called a racist. Our sense of being a good person is caught up with protecting ourselves and our reputation. This kind of defensiveness is just what the Buddha would call dukkha.

What, then, is intriguing is learning DiAngelo *requests* people to call her out publicly if she exhibits a racist behavior. She *wants* to model for white people a wise and receptive response. She *wants* to show *how* to ask, with humility, for clarity so she knows what she has done that is harmful. She wants people to see her publicly apologize. She wants to make her amends publicly and be held accountable for what she has done. She does this all in the service of dismantling systemic racism and healing a broken world. She is willing to take her ego down a couple of notches in the process.

Sound intimidating? It does to me. In my ongoing reading and research to learn how to follow DiAngelo's example, I came upon a Black woman in the San Francisco Bay Area. She uses the same kind of Buddhist mindfulness I practice to guide people to recognize internalized racist conditioning. As I began reading her and watching videos of her, I inwardly shouted, "Eureka!"

[Rhonda Magee](#), the author of *The Inner Work of Racial Justice* and the source of my readings this morning, is a UC Berkeley Law School professor who teaches mindfulness as one of her courses. She began practicing mindfulness when she was looking for a way to manage her stress level working as a lawyer in a large corporation. She found a group of lawyers who were meditating and connected with the San Francisco Zen Center and their abbot Norman Fischer.

As she practiced meditation, she started noticing the benefits of mindfulness that were healing for her around race. As she developed this race connection with the help of meditation teachers in the San Francisco Bay Area, she started training to become a meditation teacher herself.

She has developed a method of applying mindfulness to race that she calls "ColorInsight." This ColorInsight approach encourages people to "...develop the habit of turning toward—not away from—aspects of our embodied experience that deal with race."

She defines four components of ColorInsight using these words:

First we ground our efforts in the desire, the will and the courage to turn toward rather than away from, race and racism to examine its role in all our lives. Second, we work to develop a deeper and more nuanced capacity to perceive and to understand how race and racism operate in our own lives and in those of others. Third, we deepen our ability to be with others as they reflect on these aspects of their experiences—to listen without judgment and with compassion, and to work together with them toward mutually healing personal and interpersonal transformation. And finally, we commit to looking for ways to act in favor of liberation that touches on the collective and the systemic, thereby opening the door for transformation that benefits us all.

All that sounds quite lofty and well meaning. But how does it connect with Buddhism?

What Magee relies on is the quality of mindfulness that is developed in Buddhist meditation practice. Mindfulness is the quality of knowing what is happening in the present moment. At the simplest, it is knowing that you are breathing in *when* you are breathing in and knowing that you are breathing out *when* you are breathing out. I think I can safely say most of us have not been mindful of our breathing from the time we woke up this morning. Heck you may not even know if you are on an in or out breath right at this moment!

Buddhist mindfulness training in the recognition of present time reality can help us directly witness the mind as a moment-to-moment process. That "moment-to-moment knowing" can reveal to us the habitual responses deeply conditioned into mental reactivity. Directly witnessing and knowing internal mental patterns of habitual reactivity and recognizing the harm caused by them can stimulate compassion to arise. Compassion opens our hearts to the harm we have caused and

the wish to avoid causing harm in the future. As the mind gets unpacked at deeper and deeper levels, choice points can be recognized to change the conditioning and put in place healthier, wiser, more wholesome responsive behaviors.

ColorInsight has foundational attitudes that include:

- An openness to explore without judgment
- Cultivating a “don’t know” mind full of curiosity and open to learning
- Feeling care and concern for the well-being of both oneself and others
- Compassion – the will to act to alleviate the suffering of others
- Patience – the recognition that this is long haul work
- Steadfastness – the capacity to stay in the struggle and experience uncertainty, tension and conflict
- The courage to see, to know and to act for justice including public acts of acknowledgement of harm, apologies, and making amends to the injured and the harmed.

Sound a little like what Robin DiAngelo is doing? Magee is giving us the tools to get there, to be revolutionary.

In truth every one of us has been deeply wounded by the racialization of our society. The marginalized among us experience having salt rubbed in those wounds on a regular basis. Others of us have hidden this suffering from ourselves but that does not mean that it is not there. It lurks under the surface of consciousness as fear and hate and anger and resentment. It poisons the heart, mutes the emotions and limits our ability to enjoy the beauty of the diversity of human expression all around us.

I conclude with these words by Rhonda Magee which also speak for me:

So many of us fight for racial justice because of the love we feel in our hearts—love that burns like fire for those who have been harmed or killed by racism, and those whose lives have been diminished by the stories they have internalized.

For me, the love that kindles the fire for justice in this very life is also for those who feel so disconnected from their fellow human beings that racism finds a home within their hearts and minds.

I have suffered enough. You have suffered enough. We have all suffered enough.

May we bring ourselves into continual conversation with one another and with the racial injustices here and now, ending the suffering and making things right—one moment, one risk, one luminous reconnection at a time.

Benediction

I've got lots of quotes I'd like to regale you with from Magee but here is one last one for you to take home with you:

If we are able to see one another clearly, we are able to see the value in each person we are privileged to meet. If we can take on their pain as ours, we might, together, be able to disrupt the patterns that lead to that pain. We **do not** do it out of anger or bitterness. Our effort is to create a world in which we are **more** alive and well, driven by positive care and concern.

One of the most celebrated civil rights heroes of our day, Colin Kaepernick, makes it plain: "We resist out of love."