

Ruth King
Teachings for Uncertain Times
February 17, 2017



Welcome to Tricycle’s “Teachings for Uncertain Times.” I’m Ruth King, dharma teacher, author, life coach, and founder of Mindful Members meditation community in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Uncertain times are all we have. We never know what’s going to happen—and added to that is this time of racial inflammation in our social system. I’d like to talk about that a bit. For many of us our hearts are shaky and heavy. Some of us are outraged. Some of us can afford to distract ourselves through comforts and other privileges or distractions. But so many of us are afraid, afraid of what’s happening or what might happen to ourselves, to our loved ones, and to other people in the world that are suffering from racial distress, injury, separation, and fundamental hatred that’s really pervasive right now in the world.

I think it's good to feel our fear, because it wakes us up. Our discomfort is pointing to how tightly woven we are as a human race. What we do next is crucial to us as a society that is experiencing a sense of well-being. So, despite appearances we are all connected. We are all part of the human race and we’re all racial beings. We’re part of a vast cellular system in a skinless body of awareness. These cells are like cellular cells that come in different shapes, sizes, and models. All an important part of the system maintaining its sense of well-being or destruction.

We’re all created equal in this cellular system, but we’re not all treated equally in the world. And it’s important for us to look at what we’ve been a part of co-creating. What we see happening in the world right now are karmic blooms. They’re the result of past actions manifesting. The hatred we see, the harm, the ignorance, the discontent, it’s all the result of past actions, which really is inviting us to look at the actions we take now that will support a biosphere of well-being, because what [is left] unfinished is reborn.

What we do next is so important. The challenge we have now is how to navigate the certainty of racism in these uncertain times. Racism is a heart disease. And it’s curable. It requires a transplant, a surgical intervention of mindfulness and heartfulness. To heal the heart, we must



understand the mind. [Jiddu] Krishnamurti says it this way: “There is no *you* separate from society. Society is not distinct from your culture, your religion, from your various class divisions, from the ambitions and conflicts of the many. All this is society and you are a part of it.” We must again ask ourselves: How do we work with our thoughts and our beliefs in ways that nurture the dignity of all life? How do we insure justice without fostering generations of harm and hate internally and externally? How do we comfort our own raging heart in a sea of racial ignorance, ill will, and violence? And how can our actions reflect the world we want to live in and leave to future generations? These are some of the questions I’ve been asking, and some of the questions I find many people [trying to answer], underneath the turbulence of this time, of the turbulence of the distress in our world. Underneath are questions like this about how to respond with both heart and mind, [while] being awake and wise.

So, I’d like to offer six practices that support racial awareness and well-being. The first practice is the practice of doing no harm. It has to do with conduct and it has to do with us setting an intention; it’s not just words that we speak, as if it were a New Year’s resolution. It’s actually a life practice that supports us in regularly aligning our heart and mind with our actions. So, it’s important to set an intention and reflect on it often. This intention is about doing no harm in our speech, our actions, or in our thoughts.

Secondly, this is a time where we want to maintain our meditation practice. We need a practice of stillness that supports us in gaining perspective and understanding our options. Again, Krishnamurti says: “If you do not know how your mind reacts, if your mind is not aware of its own activity, you will never understand society.” We want to practice steadying the mind and opening the heart. We need to maintain our centering practices of being with the breath and being with the body and slowing ourselves down and taking refuge there. We need practices, mindfulness practices that allow us to investigate our habitual impulses.

We want to develop a relationship with not just calmness, but also with our capacity to move a little closer to the patterns and to the places where we feel gripped and disturbed, to befriend this

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territory so that we're not doing everything we can to run away from it. We want practices to [help us] understand our racial conditioning. What we've been taught and what that feels like on the inside to hold onto and to know, or to perhaps glean, what it's like to let go. We need the *brahmavihara* practices, the heart-practices of lovingkindness, compassion, and having joy for people that are enjoying the fruits of labor that are blooming in their lives. [We also need] practices that support us in developing a relationship with tranquility and equanimity. So, we need our practice at this time. It's not just a luxury; it's vital to navigating the racial turbulence of our time.

The third practice I'd like to talk about is forming racial affinity groups. In the work that I offer on [being] mindful of race, we use mindfulness practices to wake up to our racial conditioning. I encourage like-races to get together and investigate and cultivate racial literacy. There are ways we need to understand our habits in safe places so that we're not trying to solve racial issues before we understand what we're rooted in.

I think this is particularly important for white people because the conditioning has been so individualistic. It's useful to come together to understand this thing called "whiteness" that other races tend to know a lot about, to investigate what that means, what that means to you, how it feels in the body, what it means to you as a collective of like-minds and like-races.

It's equally important for people of color to form racial affinity groups with like-races so that you have a space where you can cultivate tenderness and support each other in healing some of the common ways that oppression has affected your life. It's also a place where you can unpack some of the blind assumptions that are made about who's suffering and what that story is about.

There's sometimes a hierarchy among people of color of who suffers the most, and there's a lot of invisibility that can happen among the body of color and the diversity of color that is there. It's useful to have a place where you support each other in knowing more intimately what this thing called "people of color" is. There's a link that I have on my website on racial affinity

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group formation under the resources link. If you're interested in that you can find out more about how to form a racial affinity group. It's proven to be very helpful.

The fourth practice I would like to suggest is that you make an offering through your own creative expression. Jane Hirshfield has a beautiful quote where she says, "Suffering leads us to beauty the way thirst leads us to water. We make art because our lives are ungraspable, uncarryable, and impossible to navigate without it. Art isn't a superficial ambition to our lives. It's as necessary as oxygen. Art allows us to find a way to agree to suffer, to include it, and not be broken, to say yes to what actually is, and then say something more. Something that changes and opens the heart, ears, eyes, and mind."

A work of art is always a conversation, not a monologue. It could be writing or creating beauty in a garden or taking photographs of nature. It's a demonstration and an extension of heart that we're all after here. [Art] is a play, creativity, a unique innovation that only you can make available. Consider what this [might be]: for me, it's writing, for others it might be singing. But consider yourself a unique bloom in this cellular system—you are making this offering, this gesture of creativity, of innovation, of artistic expression.

Martin Luther King says that human salvation lies in the hands of the creatively maladjusted. The question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists will we be? The nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists. Consider your offering as a beautiful way of supporting the heart opening. Consider it an anticoagulant and a heart transplant that we all need in this vast skinless body of awareness. It's a way to nurture and heal each other.

The fifth practice is something that I think so many of you are doing already, and it has to do with investing in a culture of care. It's really about standing for racial injustice, taking a stand. It's about finding something to give a damn about and then devoting yourself to it. We have so many things to choose from right now, whether it's immigration, prison reform, or political

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reform, there's no end to it. It's important that we find our place and extend ourselves through an offering to support a culture of care. That's the sangha that we all are citizens in.

Charles Johnson, philosopher, says, "One way to understand right conduct is to see it as a calling to us as citizens, to translate the dharma into specific actions of social responsibility." In a democratic republic that surely means voting for those initiatives that we believe will reduce suffering and violence, ignorance, and hatred and the very divisions fueled by politics itself. So, if we can understand the problem, we can answer the problem. But it means we have to be in the soup, in the karmic soup that we all need to taste. We need to be willing to recognize that we're all members of one human race and to make sure no harm comes to any of us.

The last practice I'll offer is the practice of kindness, the practice of compassion, the practice of lifting each other up, the practice of being there and bearing witness to the good, the bad, and the ugly that is right in front of our faces. There's a beautiful reading that I have that I couldn't find the source for—if someone knows it, I'd love to hear what it is. But it goes like this: "It is not our work to force someone's growth to our liking. It is the work of love to admire the beauty before you, to give people a sense of safety to unfold, to keep each other company when drowning in anguish until the wave can balance out and our feelings can once again live in us."

This is the quality of *metta* in bearing presence with kindness and compassion that we ideally can walk with, not something that we think is separate from everything else that we're doing. But it's the quality, the atmosphere that's holding the container of all that we're doing and must do in order to polish this third jewel of sangha so that it is in service to racial ignorance, distress, and well-being.

Racism is a heart disease. It's a heart disease that requires intervention. It's curable. But it requires that we pay attention to ourselves as individuals and as members of racial collectives. [It requires] the practice of setting intention. Maintaining a mindfulness practice that is calming and

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investigative. Forming a racial affinity group to cultivate racial literacy, well-being, and healing.
Having an artistic expression as a form of *dana*, or generosity, to the culture, to our culture.
Investing in a culture of care and maintaining an atmosphere of kindness. These are practices I think will support us in moving towards more racial harmony and away from harm. Thank you.