

Valerie Brown

*How to Fight Injustice Without Hating*

Week One: “Systems and Structures of Racial Injustice”

December 4, 2021



Welcome to this series of four dharma talks, “How to Fight Injustice Without Hating.” My name is Valerie Brown, and I am a dharma teacher in the Plum Village tradition, founded by Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh. I’m also a Quaker, a member of the Religious Society of Friends. My feet are touching the earth in New Hope, Pennsylvania, which is the unceded territory of the Leni Lenape people and specifically the village of Aquetong, which means “Spring in the Bushes.” I transformed my 20-year career as a lawyer lobbyist to human-scale equity centered work with teams and leaders to foster greater compassion, authenticity, and trust.

These talks are about how we can address racial and social inequities and injustices through the practice of mindfulness. Each dharma talk will be about 15 minutes in length, and it will be followed by a mindfulness practice. The objective of these four talks is to help you mindfully and compassionately respond to social injustice and social inequity without succumbing to hatred, violence, fear, and anger. Each talk will help you understand the systems and structures that promote racism and injustice in our society. It will help you to understand the connection between mindfulness and racial injustice. We’ll look at white privilege, white fragility, and all of these forms of sufferings and how they contribute to inequities in the world. You’ll learn about unconscious bias and how it hinders our ability to skillfully respond, to stay calm, and to stay peaceful. Finally, we’ll learn how to center racial and social justice in our lives and in the world to foster a more compassionate world.

We’ll begin with the first topic, the systems and structures of racial and social injustice in the world. In this dharma talk, we’ll look deeply at the systems and structures of injustice, how the dharma relates to all of this, and, more importantly, what you as a mindfulness practitioner can do about it. We’ll conclude with the practice of mindful breathing.

We all want a society that promotes fairness, equity, and justice, and yet we know that our society is embedded within centuries of racism and social injustice that continue to linger. As

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meditation practitioners, we can sometimes get hyper focused on our spiritual practice, so much so that it can become a defense mechanism that we can avoid or even repress strong emotions and traumatic events like social injustice. In other words, we can use our spiritual practice as a way of not facing these tragic situations in our society. The American psychologist John Welwood coined the term “spiritual bypass” to describe this way of avoiding the painful realities in our society.

Growing up, you might have been taught that it’s equitable not to see the color of another person. You might have been taught to take a colorblind approach to life. But we know that just the opposite is true—color blindness creates divisions because it ignores fundamental parts of another person and fundamental elements of that person’s identity. The real test of fairness isn’t about ignoring a person’s race or social status but instead really seeing the fullness of the person and recognizing our own stereotypes and assumptions.

Racial and social injustice hurts everybody, and it falls particularly hard on marginalized people, people who lack access to systems and structures and to societal norms because of their nondominant social group status. This is a form of suffering, which leads to the first of the four noble truths, the reality that there is suffering in the world.

We know that the effects of discrimination do not fall equally in our society and that the systems and structures are embedded in the very fabric of our society on a federal, state, and local level. Racism is not only intrapersonal, felt on an individual level, but also interpersonal, felt among people and systemically within the structures of society. Discrimination in all its forms is a form of suffering, and one of the objectives of mindfulness is to help alleviate that suffering in the world. We can do this through a greater capacity for our own self-awareness, which then can blossom into greater compassion and greater understanding.

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As a reminder, mindfulness is about focus and nonjudgmental awareness. But we often forget a third component of mindfulness, which is a strong ethical base. We practice mindfulness with a focus for the good of humanity and the good of society. The point here is not to be swayed completely by the power of concentration and nonjudgmental awareness, as wonderful as that may be, but to remember the strong ethical component of mindfulness. Mindfulness is here to alleviate the suffering in the world and to create greater compassion, greater understanding, and greater peace.

With that, I'd like to invite us to turn to a mindfulness practice. The first practice is mindful breathing. Know that you are in choice. If something I say brings up strong emotions for you, know that you can return to an anchor, whether that's touch, a scent, or sound, something that comes up. You should be doing what is right for you.

Begin by taking a few deep breaths, bringing your awareness to your body and noticing the shape of your own body. Allow the head to be balanced over the shoulders, the shoulders balanced over the hips, and the knees balanced over the feet. Take a deep breath in and a deep breath out, following the in-breath and out-breath all the way through. As you breathe in, feel the cool air come in, and as you breathe out, feel the warm air of your own body as you breathe out. Take another breath in, feeling the fullness of the in-breath, feeling the fullness of the out-breath. If you find that your mind wanders off, that's not a problem. Just bring your awareness back to this sensation of breathing. Again, take a deep breath in and a deep breath out. Whenever you're ready, if the eyes are closed, slowly open them and stretch in any way that's comfortable for you.

Thank you everyone for joining me for our first dharma talk. I look forward to seeing you for our second dharma talk, and the subject is how systems and structures of injustice relate to mindfulness. See you then.