

Valerie Brown

*How to Fight Injustice Without Hating*

Week Three: “How Unconscious Biases Hinder Skillful Action”

December 18, 2021



My name is Valerie Brown. I’m a dharma teacher in the Plum Village tradition founded by Zen Thich Nhat Hanh. I’m also a Quaker, a member of the Religious Society of Friends. It’s my pleasure to join you for our third dharma talk on unconscious bias and how it hinders skillful action.

In the last couple of dharma talks, we looked at the systems and structures of racial and social injustice and inequity, and then we looked at white privilege and white fragility and how they contribute to social injustice and social inequity. Today, we’re going to focus on understanding unconscious bias. Specifically, we’ll look at the neurobiology of an emotional trigger and then dive into understanding implicit bias.

Let’s start with the neurobiology of a trigger. Within the brain, we have this structure called the amygdala. The amygdala’s job is to sense, or neurocept, whether there are cues of safety or cues of danger. When the amygdala neurocepts, or perceives, a cue of danger, it sets in motion a whole cascade of events within the brain and in the body. For example, it might release cortisol and adrenaline into the bloodstream, fueling us to either fight or flight and mobilizing us for quick action. In other words, it might activate the sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system.

When the amygdala is triggered and we’re in this mobilized sympathetic response, from the perspective of our cognitive capacity, the prefrontal cortex, the so-called executive center of the brain, gets compromised, and so we tend to make quick decisions. We tend to generalize more. We lose big-picture thinking and tend to draw connections that may not really be there. We also have a tendency to react defensively, and our memory capacity is compromised. Our capacities to make decisions, to inhibit impulse, to engage in problem solving, and other forms of cognitive behaviors get compromised.

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Implicit bias is, just as you might suspect, a shortcut way of thinking. The brain is sorting and sifting out extraneous material to try to make sense of a very complex world. The problem with implicit bias is that these biases are often contrary to our stated beliefs and values. They are the brain’s way of making sense of a complex world very quickly.

Mindfulness helps us to slow down, to recognize how we’re thinking and how we’re acting, to gain greater awareness, and to buffer this reactivity and support our capacity to pay attention in a more purposeful way. It helps us to interocept, or to know what’s happening on the inside of our body, the feelings and sensations not only within the body but also around us. We can begin to catch these very quick reactions that are happening without our conscious awareness.

I would like to turn now to a practice of self-compassion, a way of exploring and generating feelings of self-acceptance, self-regard, and peace. Through this practice, we can touch on the third noble truth, which is that there is a path to the end of suffering.

Come into a comfortable posture, allowing the body to be aligned. Again, know that you’re in choice. If you have another practice, please feel free to do that. If something I say doesn’t resonate for you, please do what does. If strong emotions come up, know that you can return to a place of groundedness and anchor, whether that’s a sound, a touch, or a scent.

Bring your awareness to your body. If it’s useful for you, you can allow the eyes to be closed. You may wish to place a hand on your heart. Sometimes, just placing a hand on your heart can activate the parasympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system, a way of calming and soothing the nervous system. As you breathe in, feeling a sense of your own okayness, and as you breathe out, feeling a sense of your own okayness. Feeling a sense of accepting yourself as you are in this moment. These are the building blocks of compassion: to just accept yourself in this moment, in this place, for just this moment.

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Again, feeling the breath as it comes in and the breath as it goes out. You don't have to do anything special or make anything happen. Just feeling the warmth of your own body and a general sense that right now, I'm OK. I'm good. If it's useful for you, maybe going back to this beautiful affirmation from Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh. He says, “Darling, I'm there for you.” What if we were to just offer that affirmation to ourselves? “Darling, I'm there for you. I'm OK.”

Take a deep breath in and a deep breath out. If your eyes are closed, please open them and stretch in any way that's comfortable for you. Again, thank you for joining me.