

Valerie Brown

*How to Fight Injustice Without Hating*

Week Four: “Developing Inner Calm and Strength Toward Racial and Social Injustice”

December 25, 2021



Welcome everyone. My name is Valerie Brown. I’m 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. I want to welcome you to our fourth and final dharma talk, “Developing Inner Calm and Strength Toward Racial and Social Injustice.”

In the last several dharma talks, we’ve explored structural and systemic racism, internalized dominance and internalized oppression, white privilege and white fragility, the neurobiology of an emotional trigger, implicit or unconscious bias, and how mindfulness can do something about all of this. Today, we’re going to be looking at how we develop our internal sense of calm and strength in the face of social and racial injustice in the world.

Emotional experiences tend to be sticky, meaning that our reaction to an emotional experience, whether positive or negative, can persist for a very long time after an event has passed. We have a negativity bias, which is an adaptive way of being in the world where we tend to hold on to negative events and thoughts and they persist for a very long time.

Many Buddhist teachers and practitioners use an approach called RAIN. Rain stands for *recognizing* what’s happening as a way to address this, *allowing* life to be just as it is, *investigating* our inner experiences, and *nonidentifying*. RAIN helps us to disentangle from the stickiness of emotions, especially afflictive emotions. We can begin with *recognizing* what we might be feeling, whether the feeling is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. *Allowing* is a really important practice of letting our emotions be as they are. We don’t do this all at one time. Maybe it’s just a tiny bit of allowing and letting be, and just that small movement to allow things to be as they are gives a sense of ease. *Investigation* or inquiry is a skillful practice in which we can ask ourselves, “What’s happening inside my own body?” This is a practice of interoception, where we notice, “Wow, my face is feeling flush, or I’m feeling tired, or I’m really feeling

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stressed out in this motion in this moment.” Just by noticing and naming it, we become a bit less entangled to whatever the emotionally charged trigger is.

Very often when we’re triggered or upset or when we’re dealing with difficult issues like racial injustice and social injustice, we can start feeling guilty or fearful or angry and become fused with that emotion. These emotions can also be a skillful means—they can be a path to actually ignite us toward skillful action. I don’t mean to suggest that an emotion like fear is exclusively something that we should not identify with—rather, we should hold it in a more skillful way.

It’s important to bring in some of the Buddhist teachings on what happens with these strong feelings that come up. In Buddhist scriptures, the Buddha likened these emotions to a storehouse of many different kinds of seeds. In the Plum Village tradition, Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh has likened these seeds to a storehouse consciousness that lies deeply embedded in our consciousness. These seedlike emotions, whether fear, despair, joy, or excitement, get activated by our daily life and by the social and cultural conditioning that happens day in and day out that I’ve described in the other dharma talks. For example, within your consciousness, you have a seed of fear. If you identify as an Indigenous person, for instance, and you’ve experienced encounters of fear walking around in your daily life, driving a car, or interacting with police officers that have watered the seed of fear, that seed is going to get strengthened and spring forth easily, often without our conscious awareness.

In the Plum Village tradition, we are advised by our teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, to take good care of these seeds that lie dormant in our storehouse consciousness, in the consciousness of our mind, to recognize when they’re getting triggered or watered, and, as best we can, to fill our lives with events and daily activities that water and refresh positive seeds in our life. These can be a tiny little glimmer like looking out the window and seeing the sky or having a cup of tea in the morning and coming back to a general sense that I’m basically OK.

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This is the practice of taking care not only of the strong emotions that can come up but also of the good within ourselves. We can engage in practices like mindful eating, paying attention to the food that we're consuming. As we walk around, we can be aware of our body and our environment and take that in and feel a sense of gratitude for being here on this earth in this moment. We can become aware of our own breathing and the gift that this breath is. All of these practices lead to the fourth of the four noble truths, that there is a path that leads to the end of suffering.

I'd like to share the practice of lovingkindness, or *metta*. This is a way to develop a sense of a strong and open heart. Come into a comfortable posture, allowing the body to be aligned in any way that is comfortable for you. Know that you're in choice. If you have another practice, please feel free to do that. If strong emotions come up for you, know that you can return to an anchor. Check in with your own body, feeling your body aligned as best you can. Take a deep breath in and a deep breath out. Notice if there's any tension that you're holding anywhere in your body, and, maybe just a tiny bit, releasing whatever tension might be there in the shoulders or the neck or the back.

In this practice of *metta*, or lovingkindness, we offer a sense of appreciation to ourselves, to people we love, and even to people that we don't know. What would it be like to offer appreciation to someone that you don't even know that well? Then, if you're ready and it feels appropriate, you can offer appreciation and a sense of warmth to someone that you're not thrilled about or someone that you might have difficulty with. And then coming back to yourself, you can offer yourself some appreciation and kindness.

We'll begin by coming into a comfortable posture, eyes open or closed, whatever works for you. Take a deep breath in and a deep breath out. As you breathe, just hold yourself with a sense of

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regard, kindness, and basic okayness in this moment. If it's useful, you could place your hand on your heart, maybe on your belly, whatever is useful for you. Just doing that releases oxytocin, the love hormone, and helps to activate the parasympathetic branch of the nervous system. Take a deep breath in and a deep breath out, holding yourself with a sense of kindness, maybe offering this phrase, “May I be happy today. May I feel safe. May I be happy today. May I feel safe.” Really take that in.

When you're ready, bring to your mind's eye someone you have affection for, an uncomplicated person that you like so that it's easy to genuinely offer to this person, “May you be happy today. I wish you so much kindness and so much happiness on this day.” Really feel that. Take that in. What would it be like to offer this person that you already care so much about happiness and kindness? Take a breath in and a breath out, if it's useful, repeating those words, “May you be happy. May you feel kindness today. May you be safe.”

Now, turn your attention to someone that you may not know very well. This could be somebody you pass occasionally on your street. It could even be an image of someone you read about in the newspaper today. Bring that person into your mind's eye. When you're ready, repeat the verses to this person. It could be a group of people. It could be an animal. Wish them, “May you be happy this day. I wish you so much kindness. I hope that you're safe.” Whatever the words are, offer these words to the person that you don't know. Take a deep breath in and a deep breath out, feeling the rise in the fall of the abdomen as you breathe.

Now, turn to the person who you might have some difficulty with. If it's appropriate and you feel ready, offer even to this person or people that you've got an issue with, “I wish you happiness. May you be safe today. I hope that you find kindness on this day.” Really take in what it's like to offer a sense of kindness to a person that you might have difficulty with.

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Now, come back to wishing for yourself this sense of peace, this sense of kindness, offering to yourself these words, “May I be happy. May I be safe. May I experience kindness today in my life.” Really feel that. Take a deep breath in and a deep breath out. If the eyes are closed, please open them and stretch in any way that’s comfortable for you.

Thank you for joining me. It’s been a delight and a pleasure to have you for these four dharma talks. We began by looking at structural and systemic racism and social injustice and oppression. We looked at unconscious bias and what to do about it, and we examined white fragility and white privilege. We looked at the neurobiology of a trigger to understand the impacts on social and racial injustice in the world and how mindfulness can be used to alleviate the suffering in the world. Thank you for joining me for “How to Fight Injustice Without Hating.”