



Vimalasara (Valerie) Mason-John
Teachings for Uncertain Times

Hi, I'm Vimalasara Mason-John, chair of Vancouver Buddhist Center and author of eight books. Welcome to Tricycle's series, "Teachings for Uncertain Times."

Often people ask Buddhist teachers, how do we respond to the cries of the suffering in the world? As committed Buddhists, we go for refuge moment-to-moment, placing the three jewels at the center of our lives, at the center of our thoughts. We do not escape from what is happening in the world by turning to blame, self-pity, or distraction; we go for refuge to the Buddha, not the human being but what the Buddha attained. We go for refuge to the dharma, the teachings that point to the truth. We go for refuge to the sangha, not our local spiritual community but the area sangha, the noble ones who have woken up to the truth.

In uncertain times like war or change of political climate, it can be inevitable for people to place emotions like guilt, anger, resentment, ill will, hatred and aversion at the center of their thoughts, at the center of their lives. And why wouldn't they when they are feeling angry? But in the end, these emotions only lead to more suffering.

In the *Dhammapada*, the verses of the dharma, it states that hostility does not still hostility. The centrality of going for refuge is devoid of age, sexuality, gender, race, color, class, wealth—anybody can go for refuge and step on the path of liberation and freedom. The Buddha said, "It's not our birth that counts, it's our worth."

However, in today's uncertain times, it can be challenging for black people to step onto the path and go for refuge. We live in times where there is a disproportionate number of black people being killed by the police, a disproportionate number of black people incarcerated in prisons, in mental health institutions. We walk into the meditation halls with this painful load.



Black lives matter when all lives matter and when all lives matter, black lives will matter. This is a human rights issue, it's not just an issue for black people. And for Buddhists, it's an issue of compassion, taking responsibility, and acting.

The Buddhist teachings are taught and not caught. We catch them within the context of our social conditioning. I, as a black queer woman acknowledge my unearned privilege. I have the privilege of access to education, the privilege to be able to be an independent woman and marry my partner, however I walk in a different external world to what my fellow white practitioners do. My dukkha is triggered every time I'm stopped by the police on the streets, stopped at airports, stopped at car borders. This is the reality for many black people in this world today—it's not random, it's racism. My dukkha, my suffering, is stirred when I wake up in the morning and I hear that another black person has been killed by the police. My dukkha is also triggered when I listen to the Prime Minister of England, Theresa May, or people like Donald Trump, say they want to limit the access of Muslims in their country.

Muslims are also black people. Over 40 to 50 percent of Africa is influenced by Islam, and in the region of West Africa where I come from, the dominant religion is Islam. I bring all this dukkha to my cushions along with the everyday dukkha of aging, death, and sickness.

So how do we practice in these uncertain times when xenophobia is on the rise? The online Oxford Dictionary actually named “xenophobia” as the word of the year—the fear of others. How do we practice when the polarization of race, color is becoming more prevalent on the streets? How do we practice with the rise of fascism? How do we practice when in today's world, queer people, women, black people, Muslims, are beginning to be afraid for their safety. How do we practice?

Yes we all suffer, this is the first Noble Truth that the Buddha taught, that there is suffering. The Buddha also taught that there is a path that leads to more suffering, this is the second Noble Truth. And we step onto that path that leads to more suffering when we turn away from what is happening in our personal worlds and try to shut out what is happening or flee to thought of



guilt. But there is an end of suffering, the Buddha taught the third truth, the cessation of suffering, and the cessation of suffering begins with compassion. We must have compassion towards ourselves before we can act.

In 2016, the British population voted to leave Europe. This is known as Brexit. We also saw the rise of people like Donald Trump. During this political climate I heard many white Americans, many white Europeans saying they're going to flee to Canada, to Australia, to New Zealand, and I'm sure these countries will welcome many of them with open arms. Who is going to welcome me? Who is going to welcome the black Americans, the black Europeans, the Muslims, who is going to welcome us?

In the *Dhammapada* it says that people often through fear flee to sacred hills, to shrines, to woods, to groves, to forests. In reality, this is not a true refuge, in reality this is not the best refuge, and these refuges will not release us from suffering. Many Buddhist practitioners flee to their cushions and aim to get into blissful meditative states known as *jhana*. There's nothing wrong with this, but I call this spiritual bypassing because in the end we will still suffer. We have to sit on our cushions and turn toward what is happening, turn towards reality, and begin to see things clearly, see things as they really are. And we do this first by cultivating lovingkindness towards ourselves, we also do this by recognizing that all human beings are breathing, we breathe in the same oxygen and we breathe out carbon dioxide into the same environment. We need to realize that all human beings are condensed lumps of energy made up of 70 percent of water. Earth, fire, air, we need to realize that we are all interconnected, we have far more in common with each other than we don't have in common with each other.

We also need to realize that this body we call *me, mine, I*, will produce *vedana*, (feeling tone in the body) which will be pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. We cannot escape this feeling tone, we have to turn towards it, turn towards it with lovingkindness, when we can accept this, then maybe we can be ready to step off our cushions and take responsibility in the world just like the hummingbird in the story I will now tell.



Once upon a time, there was a raging fire in the forest and the animals fled through fear to the edge of the forest. They came to a stream and some of them kept on fleeing to another forest. But some animals stopped and they paused and they looked back at the fire and with despair they thought, "Who is going to help us, we are powerless? Who is going to save our homes? We may as well just flee to another forest."

But there was an animal who thought differently, a hummingbird, and this hummingbird thought: "How will this release me suffering if I go to another forest, there could just be another bush fire, there could be just another flood, and what about the people left in the forest who are burning?" And with these thoughts, the hummingbird swooped in to the water and picked up a drop of water in its beak and flew across to the fire and splashed it on the fire and some the animals looked on with shock, thinking, "Who does this hummingbird think it is? Does it really think that this drop of water will make any difference?"

But the hummingbird kept on flying back and forth again and again and some animals began to have thoughts of guilt and they turned away with these thoughts of guilt by knocking the hummingbird, saying, "Your wings are so small, they will burn, your beak is so small, what can you do?" And some animals just turned away from the fire and just ignored it and went to another forest. And one animal got so angry, it said, "What do you think you're doing?" And the hummingbird startled, stopped and paused and said, "I'm doing what I can." These tiny drops of water for Buddhist practitioners can look like this.

When we hear that another black person has been killed by the police, when we go into our dharma halls and we see our black dharma brothers and sisters, we can ask them, "how are you today?" That next tiny drop of water could be that we listen as our black dharma brothers and sisters vent their frustration. That next drop of water can look like turning towards your vedana, the unpleasant sensation when one of us says, "We don't want to speak to you today, we need to be silent." And that next drop of water may be having the courage to come up to one of us the next day and just say: "How are you today? I'm radiating compassion towards you." And that next tiny drop of water could look like you saying to some of us, "We support you, if you want your affinity, people of color groups and maybe we need to have an affinity group for white



people where we can begin to look at our unearned privilege, we can begin to look at our white conditioning, we can begin to look at what it means to let go of white self."

After all when the Buddha gained enlightenment, he said something like this: "These mental conditionings that have described me as a Buddha, a *deva*, an *asura*, a human being, a man, these mental conditionings have been destroyed by me and all of us can destroy our mental conditioning." That tiny drop of water can perhaps look like some of you petitioning your local police service, perhaps peacefully protesting on the streets. That tiny drop of water can be radiating compassion—compassion is action. Non-action is not compassion.

We can be like that tiny hummingbird and we can do the best we can.

Thank you.