

Viveka Chen
Teachings for Uncertain Times
February 13, 2017



Hi. My name is Viveka Chen and I am a Buddhist teacher. Also, I work for social change. I am ordained in the Triratna Buddhist Order and it's great to be here as part of the Tricycle conversation on uncertain times.

I wanted to reflect a bit with a personal story first about my connection to uncertain times. So I remember 2014, watching the screen of my computer and tuning into what was happening in Ferguson, Missouri, as people were taking to the streets, in the backdrop, a militarized scene of heavy armor in the local police force and the news that an unarmed black man, Michael Brown, had just been shot and killed by a police officer. And I remember something—waking up and watching this scene and feeling that something was called for from me that, in watching a screen, it was not appropriate to just be a voyeur in these times, but to challenge myself, to ask: Where do I belong? Where should I be in this scene unfolding?

Sometimes activists talk about how “woke” we are and Buddhists talk about waking up. And in that moment, I would say it was a moment of re-waking up and that we're not done with that work, no matter how long we may have been in this life journey.

At that time, I began noticing that I needed to update my “wokeness” process and really look at what I was ready for now. That had to do with really challenging the places of my own comfort. Dharma practice had given me the tools to reduce my levels of anxiety at facing racism and other forms of oppression: anti-immigrant oppression, the invisibilizing of native people, xenophobia, an increasing fear of Muslims, all this that, to some extent, my practice had given me some space to be free from anxiety, some space. And then, asking myself: well, what does that space then ask me to step up into? One of the teachings I once was given is that meditation practice in particular is really found in completion through meditation in action. That sitting on a cushion is just preparation for what life really calls for from us.

So in 2014, the Black Lives Matter movement also began from that point in Ferguson and I found myself called to specifically challenge where I could be really listening to that call of anger in myself, at anti-blackness in this country, and how that's not just something that happens

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to other people, but that really all our liberation is tied together. None of us are free until we really all are free from hatred. This very easy thing that the human being does out of our most base need for survival, which is to create self. From there, fear arises and from there, we are held apart.

I want to read something from bell hooks that really inspired me at that time. And she says that:

Dominator culture has tried to keep us all afraid, to make us choose safety instead of risk, sameness instead of diversity. Moving through that fear, finding out what connects us, reveling in our differences; this is the process that brings us closer, that gives us a world of shared values, of meaningful community.

So first, I want to invite us knowing that these are times in our . . . I'm speaking to people working in the U.S. context, where we now have a president who has spoken in terms of severe othering of certain communities that are not part of the dominant power structure. Who has incited what is all too easy to incite: the process of othering, especially anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim immigrants, [and] specifically, xenophobia—fear of what lies behind our nationalistic borders, and thirdly, anti-blackness and invisibilizing of native people. We'll see what happens with, for example, the struggle in Standing Rock for native sovereignty and respect for sacred places.

I want to offer us [the knowledge] that in these times we will be under extreme stress. I want to speak especially to people of color who will be turning towards the challenges, I want to invite us in these times to have a strong sense of purpose for ourselves. That is one of the most key points of mindfulness, a sense of purpose and continuity of purpose. For me, that has been a re-grounding in radical love and inclusivity, which has included doing the work of noticing how I have internalized internal racial inferiority and that has made it hard for me to show up in my full capacity to do the work that's needed.

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Mindfulness of purpose [is] having a sense of what our strengths are, asking others to help us name and find those if we need that help, and then really looking to support us to be able to offer those strengths and gifts in these times. Structural racism has a function: to tell us that we are inadequate and we really need to actually consciously disrupt that teaching. Yes.

So finding our purpose in that stepping into our strengths, and then knowing that in times of stress, there will be a certain type of activation we need. We need to respond, and in responding, to find that level of activation that serves us, that moves us past fear and past where we might need to stay in our comfort zones or respond to the feeling of threat by fight, flight, avoiding, appeasing, disassociating. We need to be awake to that.

We must also notice what we need to find times of rest so that we can persevere. I really want to ask us to find those practices where our stress and activation and vigilance levels can actually begin to come down a bit so that we can rest. So I want to call this “emotional liberation practice” for us in these times, so that we're not constantly driven to the point of self-destruction, to really step into the preciousness of our lives. So we have mindfulness practices that can help with that and conscious breathing, awareness of our emotions, and also practices of self-love, which can connect to love for all those that have been othered, and also the radical love of saying to those who have been conditioned by this system that may be in power that we want your transformation and healing as well. Come with us. Let's create the world we need together.

And I want to just summarize, then: let us find our sense of purpose in these uncertain times and let us be strong for staying on purpose by being able to find spaces and communities where we can activate ourselves, come out of isolation, find what our strengths are, and join together in them—so radical sangha, we could say, radical community. And then also, [let us find] that time of rest, practices that can help us ground and center, and do the loving work of learning how to love ourselves when the world around us may not always show us the love that every human being deserves and our full dignity.

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I hope these reflections help you stay strong. I want to send through this video, as much as I can, love and solidarity and the commitment that I'm doing my work and that the meditation hall is the streets as well as the cushion. Thank you.