

Article

Racism as Delusion: A Buddhist Perspective

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Abstract: The powerful novel *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko combines several uncomfortable truths from the perspective of a young Native American who has returned home after World War II: the theft of Native American land, the manipulations that set poor whites against poor Indians (among others) and the effects of these lies on the hearts of white people, who tried and still try to fill up their hollowness with money, technology and patriotic war. However, as Silko emphasizes, the lies do not work. Not only have we white folk been fooling ourselves, but we also know that we have been fooling ourselves, and the consequences of our self-deceptions continue to haunt all of us. This essay is an attempt to say more about how that collective delusion functions—in particular, to understand the emptiness that patriotism never quite fills up, the hollowness that wealth and consumerism cannot glut. In order to do this, I will offer a (not “the”) Buddhist perspective, so we begin with some basic Buddhist teachings, which are quite different from the Abrahamic (Jewish, Christian, Muslim) traditions more familiar to most of us.

Keywords: racism; delusion; Buddhism; Four Noble Truths; sense-of-self; whiteness; *tonglen*



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“If the white people never looked beyond the lie, to see that theirs was a nation built on stolen land, then they would never be able to understand how they had been used by the witchery; they would never know that they were still being manipulated by those who knew how to stir the ingredients together: white thievery and injustice boiling up the anger and hatred that would finally destroy the world: the starving against the fat, the colored against the white. The destroyers had only to set it into motion and sit back to count the casualties. But it was more than a body count; the lies devoured white hearts, and for more than two hundred years white people had worked to fill their emptiness; they tried to glut the hollowness with patriotic wars and with great technology and the wealth it brought. And always they had been fooling themselves and they knew it.”

—Leslie Marmon Silko (1986), *Ceremony*

This powerful passage, the fictional reflection of a young Native American who has returned home after World War II, combines several uncomfortable truths: the theft of Native American land, the manipulations that set poor whites against poor Indians (among others) and the effects of these lies on the hearts of white people, who tried and still try to fill up their hollowness with money, technology and patriotic war. However, as Silko emphasizes, the lies do not work. Not only have we white folk been fooling ourselves, we know that we have been fooling ourselves, and the consequences of our self-deceptions continue to haunt all of us.

This essay is an attempt to say more about how that collective delusion functions—in particular, to understand the emptiness that patriotism never quite fills up, the hollowness that wealth and consumerism cannot glut. In order to do this, I will offer a (not “the”) Buddhist perspective, so we begin with some basic Buddhist teachings, which are quite different from the Abrahamic (Jewish, Christian, Muslim) traditions more familiar to most of us.

There is, of course, a longstanding and intimate relationship between racism and religion. How could it be otherwise, given the role of religion in influencing and institutionalizing our most fundamental values and beliefs? For centuries Biblical passages were used

selectively to justify slavery, but in the last few centuries religiously-inspired people have been more prominent in the struggles against slavery and racism. In Britain the evangelical Christians Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce, working with the Society of Friends (Quakers), were instrumental in Parliament's abolition of the slave trade. In the United States Christian abolitionists formed the core of the anti-slavery movement, and more recently the efforts of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King and today the Rev. William Barber, among many others, come to mind. It would, however, be a mistake to focus only on Christianity. Many Jews have been deeply involved in the civil rights movement, and many African-Americans are attracted to Islam, for both of these religions are also rooted in the Hebrew prophetic tradition that rebuked unjust rulers for their exploitation of the poor and indifference to the needy.

Nevertheless, this Abrahamic emphasis on God's demand for social justice is not the only possible spiritual response to slavery and racism.

1. The Lack of Self

Buddhism provides a different perspective that does not emphasize justice, individual or social—unless you understand justice as “built into” the universe due to the law of *karma* (in which case maybe we do not need to do anything about it, since all of us eventually receive what we deserve). Instead of justice, Buddhism focuses on delusion, especially our ignorance of what the world really is, which includes ignorance of who we really are. To realize the true nature of the former is also to realize the true nature of the latter, for our greatest delusion is the duality between them: the sense that there is an “I” separate from the world it is “in.” This is the fundamental problem that virtually all of us (except for those who are “awakened,” such as the Buddha) suffer from, rich and poor, white and black and red and yellow, oppressor and oppressed alike. In addition, this basic delusion has enormous implications for how we understand racism, and how we might respond to its challenge.

One way to develop this point is by emphasizing the fundamental relationship between two of the most important Buddhist concepts: *dukkha* and *anatta*. *Dukkha* is the word usually translated as “suffering” but the connotations of that English word are much too narrow; *dukkha* includes impermanence, dissatisfaction, frustration, anxiety and really refers to our manifest inability to live happily. Shakyamuni the historical Buddha summarized his teachings into four noble truths, all of them about *dukkha*: life is *dukkha*, the cause of *dukkha* (craving), the end of *dukkha* (spiritual awakening) and the way to end *dukkha* (the eightfold path).

Anatta means “not-self” or “no-self” and refers to the fact that our usual sense of being (or having) a persisting, unchanging self is an illusion. This is not to deny that we have a sense of self, but this sense of self is (in contemporary terms) a psychosocial construct. “My self” is not a hard-core of consciousness but composed of mostly habitual ways of perceiving, feeling, thinking, acting and reacting. Those impermanent processes interact and produce a self-awareness that seems to be separate from what it is aware of: other people and things. If you strip away those psychological and physical processes, it is similar to peeling away all the layers of an onion: when you reach the end, nothing is left. There is no core of self behind or within them. The claim that we all have the same Buddha nature means that this is true for all of us—white, black, red, yellow, whatever.

Buddhism emphasizes *dukkha* because this sense of self is inherently uncomfortable. Being a conditioned construct, without any reality of its own, it is ungrounded and ungroundable, which means it is always insecure and anxious about itself. Since we do not understand this, however, we tend to become preoccupied with projects that we believe can make us feel “more real.” What I focus on depends upon the kind of person I am and the type of society I live in. In the United States, for example, we are often conditioned to believe that the basic problem with my life is that I do not have enough money, or enough of the things that money can buy—regardless of how much I may already have. We also cling to other symbolic realities such as fame or power, but nothing *in* the world can ever fill

up what seems akin to a bottomless pit at one's hollow core. A basic anxiety—a persistent sense of *lack*—continues to fester as long as I understand my-self to have a reality separate from the “outside” world I am “in”, because that delusive *sense* of a separate self can never become a really-existing self.

Intellectually, this argument may seem abstract and difficult to understand, but most of us have some innate awareness of this problem. In fact, if one's sense of self is a psychological construct, we *must* have some such awareness—yet it is an uncomfortable awareness, because normally we do not understand what the source of our discomfort is. I suspect this is one of the great secrets of life: each of us individually experiences this sense of unreality as the feeling that “something is wrong with me.” Growing up is learning to pretend along with everyone else that “I'm okay, you're okay.” A lot of social interaction is about reassuring each other and ourselves that we are all really okay even though inside we feel that something is not quite right. This plugs easily into the tensions that usually bedevil multi-ethnic and multi-racial societies. Those at the bottom of the pecking order learn quickly what is wrong with themselves: their inferior color or culture.

So far, I have discussed how we try to stabilize our insecure sense of self by identifying with something outside us, but we also try to *push away* other things that we do not want to be associated with. A sense of self is constructed as much by what we *dis-identify* with as what we *identify* with. In fact, they usually go together. If living a “pure” life is important to me (however I understand “purity”), then I will be preoccupied with *avoiding* impurity. If I am very attracted to the lifestyle of the wealthy and famous, I do not want to spend my time hanging out with poor people. In addition, if being white is important to me, I will not want to spend time with black people or Asian-Americans—unless I am in a superior position.

These are instances of what is sometimes called bipolar or antithetical thinking. Buddhism emphasizes how our minds can become stuck in certain ways of thinking that cause problems for us, and antithetical thinking is a good example. We often distinguish between two opposites because we want to identify with one and shun the other, but the interdependence of those opposites means that they are two sides of the same coin. Since each side gains its meaning only by negating the other side, you cannot take one without the other. The interdependence of good and evil is an especially troublesome example: we cannot know what is good until we know what is evil, and we feel that *we are good* when *we are fighting against that evil*. Tragically, much of the evil in our world has been caused by human attempts to destroy evil—or what has been understood as evil. So Hitler tried to purify the earth by destroying the vermin who contaminate it—the Jews, gypsies, homosexuals and so forth. Stalin viewed peasant *kulaks* the same way, and Mao Zedong all landlords and the Khmer Rouge any educated person. Today, of course, the source of evil in the world is Islamic fundamentalists.

There is another unfortunate irony. Since my sense of self is an ungroundable construct, there is nothing I can achieve or obtain that can ever provide the security I cannot help wanting—and without an understanding of this impasse what often results is a perpetual compulsion to do or acquire even more, *ever more*. The danger here is that such efforts will actually reinforce the delusive sense of myself as an always-needy and increasingly separate from others, because the struggle to acquire what (I think) I need makes me all the more “self-centered.”

2. The Dualisms of Race

What does this Buddhist perspective on our basic situation imply about racism? Such an approach can provide us with a different understanding of racial discrimination, both why we fall into it and how it damages all of us. In order to see that, however, we must notice a parallel between this fundamental problem of the individual ego-self and a similar problem with collective selves, or “group egos.” Just as many of my personal problems are self-induced due to the basic insecurity of my own ego (which understands itself as separate from others), many of our social problems can also be traced back to a group ego:

we identify with our own nationality, religion, economic class, race, etc., and discriminate ourselves “inside” as being different (and usually better) than the others “outside.”

Again, the basic problem is the delusion of an “inside” that is separate from the “outside.” With collective selves too, the division between “us” and “them” is something that is constructed. Racism, our “most dangerous myth” (Ashley Montagu), is an especially potent example. “Race, many sociologists and anthropologists have argued for decades, is a social invention historically used to justify prejudice and persecution” (Harmon 2007). Even though genetics has been used to support this construct, researchers have discovered that there is more genetic variation within “racial” groups than between them. According to Thomas S. Martin, the greatest genetic differences are between sub-Saharan Africans and Australian aborigines, both black-skinned. Genetically there is not even a clearly distinguishable “white race,” according to Cavalli-Sforza: most “whites” are approximately two-thirds Mongoloid and one-third African.¹

Nevertheless, racial boundaries within the United States remain largely intact, because the myth of race continues to play an important role in our societal self-definition—that is to say, our collective self-construction. This construct has many intertwined dimensions, of course: the dividing line between whiteness and blackness has been (re)constituted historically, legally, economically, educationally, medically and sexually (e.g., anti-miscegenation laws). The typology keeps shifting because the borders remain relational and fluid. This implies that establishing and maintaining these boundaries is a never-finished process, which brings me to my next point: the unresolvable tension built into such boundaries, which persists as a major source of our collective *dukkha*.

Racially too, any distinction between inside and outside remains unstable and uncomfortable, because the supposed unity/identity of the “inside” depends upon differentiating itself from the “outside” that is excluded—which means it cannot really be excluded, since it is needed for the self-construction of the “inside.” This situation is similar to the “duality” between good and evil: any awareness that *we are good* depends upon awareness that *something else is evil*. The meaning of *being white* cannot be distinguished from *not being black* (or *not being Asian*, or *not being Native American*).

I mentioned earlier that the individual sense of self, being a psychological construct, can never achieve the secure identity it seeks. Collective senses of self are even less stable, since groups often dissolve and re-form into differently aligned groups. What holds a group together—for example, the Ku Klux Klan? By promoting racism, nativism, anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism, the Klan constituted itself as an organization of white, Protestant “good ole” boys.” What bound its members together (into an “inside”) was their common animosity to blacks, Jews and so forth. (the “outside”).

“So what?” one of its members might reply. “Get rid of them all and we won’t need a KKK.” However, that misses the crucial point. Much of the attraction of such a group is that it (supposedly) provides a collective way for us to gain a stable sense of identity by merging our individual senses of lack (“what’s wrong with me?”), which otherwise fester individually. “Now I know what the problem with my life is, what makes me so uncomfortable. You and I have the same problem: it’s *those other people*.” This realization can seem empowering, even liberating. It is the same reason war continues to be attractive, despite all the suffering it brings: in wartime we feel newly bonded together *here* against the enemy *over there*. The vague, unfocused sense of unreality and personal *lack* that usually haunts me is now combined with others’ *lack* and projected far away. War provides our lives with a collective meaning: we unite to destroy our collectivized sense of *lack*, now objectified onto “them.” This implies, of course, that *we need the enemy*, because otherwise we do not really “understand” what our problem is, *or even who “we” are*. For the enemy to be that “outside,” however, they must be demonized: they are not similar to us, they are *animals* . . . and they are probably demonizing us in a similar way. Our “outside” is their “inside,” and vice-versa.

In other words, when our senses of self collectivize into “group-egos” they often collectivize our sense of *lack* as well. It is always tempting to project that sense of *lack* onto

someone or something outside. There are two problems with this, however. It usually leads to scapegoating that other someone outside. In addition, whatever relief such scapegoating might provide can only be temporary, at best, because the need to identify a villain outside ourselves persists. It persists because our sense of *lack* persists. Our sense of *lack* persists because we do not really understand where it comes from and so we do not really know how to resolve it. Collectively as well as individually, this way of thinking and acting is delusional. It ends up increasing *dukkha* for everyone involved.

Tibetan Buddhism has an apt analogy for this situation: it is akin to picking up a red-hot coal in our bare hands because we want to throw it at someone else. The more mature alternative is to realize our interconnectedness and to live the way that interdependence implies. This presupposes, though, that we can find better ways to address our senses of *lack*.

How does all this play out racially?

3. The Anxiety of Whiteness

Historically, of course, racism has been an important way for elite whites to gain the support of poorer whites (often recent immigrants from Europe) against blacks and other minorities. *White* privilege helps to maintain a *class* privilege that would otherwise be more difficult to rationalize, given the economic tensions between wealthy and working classes. This is an example of the way an “outside” can be exploited to unify an “inside.” The social injustice of such alliances and discriminations are issues that require constant attention. However, my Buddhist perspective implies that the basic problem with racism is not reducible merely to economic incentives, for something else is also motivating racial distinctions, something more intimately connected with our never-secure-enough sense of self.

W. E. B. DuBois emphasized the “double-consciousness” that black people experience:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two warring souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body . . . (Du Bois [1903] 1965).

When whiteness is taken as the standard identity and assumed to be the criterion of self-unity, those who are not white become conscious that they fall short. Frantz Fanon, trained as a psychiatrist, made the same point: “White civilization and European culture have forced an existential deviation on the Negro . . . What is often called the black soul is a white man’s artifact” (Fanon [1952] 1967). Under colonialism black identity was constructed by whites.

And not only under colonialism. As John A. Powell has put it, those “whom society has marginalized and dehumanized do not experience the unitary self as an essence, but as an aspiration; a ‘longing’ for coherence and self-satisfaction.”²

There is no dissonance between Whites’ personal experiences of humanity and societal definitions of humanity. Thus, the smooth fit between societal norms of Whiteness and the constructed identity of Whites created an illusion of coherence and racial invisibility or neutrality—of “normality”. By attaining this sense of racial neutrality, White males are thus able to adhere to notions of the essentialized modern self without problematizing their own sense of identity . . . Thus the pull to be an individual, especially by Blacks and other “others,” is an effort to claim one’s humanity by not being marked by race, gender, etc. It is an effort to become, or pass for, the White male.³

This important distinction between black and white self-consciousness is very important, but it can also be misleading, because the supposed coherence of white identity is nevertheless illusory. As Buddhist emphasis on the *dukkha* (suffering) of *anatta* (no-self) implies, *all* personal identity is a construct that never quite achieves the stable unity it

aspires to. In the case of black identity, black people are constantly aware that they fall short, because white dominance continually reminds them. In the case of white identity, such awareness is more unconscious but no less problematic—in fact, perhaps all the more problematic for being unconscious. How we define ourselves cannot be distinguished from how we define others, for those are two sides of the same act of construction. Insofar as white identity achieves its (illusory sense of) coherence by distinguishing itself from the non-white “other,” whiteness too is constructed only in relation to blackness—which whiteness nevertheless keeps trying to deny and exclude.

John powell quotes Shannon Winnubst: “the more a subject realizes his dependence on the Other, the more vehemently he rejects all connection to and distances himself from that Other.”⁴ The consequence is what powell describes as the “ontological emptiness of whiteness”:

the sense of self, constructed from whiteness, is in constant fear of being contaminated by the racial other that is already present in absentia . . . the destruction of whiteness equals the destruction of the self—ontological death, or perhaps even worse.⁵

Being largely unconscious as well as unsuccessful, the white exclusion of non-white is experienced as fear: not only fear of contamination, but more generally the persistent, always-festering anxiety that one’s own white identity is threatened. This helps to explain why there is such strong resistance to overcoming racism: to threaten the stability of racial discourse is to threaten the stability of the dominant self.⁶ Whether dominant or not, however, the self is always threatened, because identity is always constructed and therefore always vulnerable. With anger and aggression, we blame others for this inherent problem with our own sense of self. To begin resolving the racial version of this predicament, “it is imperative that we look at how racial structures have marked whites” (Toni Morrison).⁷ As powell puts it, “Without working on the interiorization of whiteness, we simply cannot solve the problem of whiteness.”⁸ Or blackness, for without solving the problem of whiteness, will our society ever be able to solve the problem of blackness?

James Baldwin expressed this situation most succinctly: “the white male self contains the oppressed within it,” which also led him to declare: “As long as you think you’re white, there’s no hope for you.”⁹ The reality is that:

We are all androgynous . . . each of us, helplessly and forever, contains the other—male in female, female in male, white in black and black in white. We are part of each other. Many of my countrymen appear to find this fact exceedingly inconvenient and even unfair, and so, very often, do I. But none of us can do anything about it (Baldwin 1985).

To sum up, there is no coherent, unitary self for either black or white except as an always frustrated aspiration, a claim consistent with the anti-essentialist, relational self-emphasized by both feminism and postmodernism: one’s identity is always multiple and fractured, because it is constructed out of ever-changing relationships. This implies that it is essential for us to establish those relationships right, that they be healthy ones cognizant of our interdependence, rather than self-destructive ones based on projection and scapegoating. When we look at the horrific consequences of racism, we naturally focus on the suffering inflicted by white people on non-white peoples. However, this dialectic of introjection and repression means that everyone involved has been suffering, admittedly in very different ways and to very different degrees. Does that suggest a new approach to addressing racial divisions?¹⁰

So far, I have presented the problem of constructed identity in an abstract way. However, one’s identity is not an abstraction. We identify (and dis-identify) with particular traits and characteristics, and the stereotypes that white people have associated with black people—that the dominant culture has used to construct blackness—are quite revealing, especially since they are the same stereotypes that virtually all dominant peoples project

onto the people they dominate. Black people are lazy, less motivated (cannot defer gratification), they are more physical and sexual (cannot control themselves), and of course they are less intelligent (less rational).

What lurks behind these stereotypes? The belief that *black people are more animal-like*. Today such a claim is risible, but it has a hoary history. In the late 18th century, for example, Edward Long and his student Charles White argued for such an intimate connection between black people and apes, probably due to interbreeding:

That the orangutang and some races of black men are very nearly allied is, I think, more than probable . . . it is credible that they have the most intimate connection and consanguinity (Long 1774).

The African seems to approach nearer to the brute creation than any other of the human species . . . (White 1799).

Thanks to Darwinism, some of the impact of this claim is lost today. We now know that all humans are intimately related to other primates, that genetically we are close cousins indeed to chimpanzees and bonobos. Yet most of us still have difficulty accepting (without several qualifications) that we are animals. Why is that? I wonder if the assertion that black people are more animal-like gains some attraction because it plugs into our great human fear and denial of our physicality, of being part of nature and the earth. The natural (from *natus* “born”) world is the realm of birth and death—which provides a strong incentive to identify with disembodied rationality. We are so terrified of death that we create religions to reassure us that we do not really die, but unfortunately such death-denial has major consequences for how we experience life here and now. Life and death turn out to be another example of the antithetical thinking that Buddhism warns us about. Psychologically as well as logically, to deny either is to deny both. “The irony of man’s condition is that the deepest need is to be free of the anxiety of death and annihilation; but it is life itself which awakens it, and so we must shrink from being fully alive” (Becker 1973).

If this supposition is correct, the construction of white identity includes projecting onto black identity the animality and materiality of the natural world that is so threatening. Black people are part of nature; whites are more civilized. Blackness is associated not only with being dirty (the earth) but also with non-being and death; white symbolizes purity, being and life itself. Whether white or black or red or yellow, however, I cannot escape my mortality, and (the real problem) I know it. In this way, too, I am always contaminated by the other who is already present *in absentia*. To try to expel what cannot be expelled is to live in fear, which is loss of vitality.

4. Racism as a Spiritual Challenge

In this world hatred is never appeased by hatred;

Hatred is only appeased by non-hatred. This is an ancient law.

—The Dhammapada

If this Buddhist-oriented argument is more or less correct, there are at least two important implications. First, the problem of racism is not merely social/economic/political/educational/penal/etc. It is not only a secular issue but also a spiritual one, in the sense that racial identity is deeply implicated in how we understand ourselves: who we think we are and how we should live in the world. If so, any genuine solution to the social problem of racism will necessarily involve a spiritual dimension. From a Buddhist perspective, our basic delusion is the self—that is, the sense of separation between myself and the rest of the world, including other people. My main point is that the basic delusion at the heart of racism is one example of this sense of separation. The construction of racial identity involves an attempted exclusion that never quite works to give us the stable coherence I/we aspire to. Once again, I think John Powell has it exactly right:

It is clear that the solution to whiteness will not arise within a worldview or a self view based on separation. Moving beyond this view of the self as separate and unconnected is a profoundly spiritual project. We are not often comfortable mixing our spiritual yearnings and our secular work for social justice, but I have argued that this is a false and problematic separation.¹¹

Another implication of my argument is that no solution to the situation of non-white people in the United States will be possible without also addressing the fundamental *lack* built into whiteness. This is consistent with the Buddhist understanding of compassion, which is needed by all those ignorant of their own true nature—that is, virtually all of us, oppressor as well as oppressed. Such a Buddhist perspective does not necessarily imply that we should respond in the same way to a deluded torturer and the suffering victim. It means that we do not identify with one while rejecting the other, because, appreciate it or not, we are nondual with both. To identify only with the oppressed is not a Buddhist solution because it reproduces the same basic problem: the delusion that discriminates them (the bad) from us (the good).

Our efforts to redress and reconcile must flow out of our interconnectedness, our interdependence even with people whose actions we must oppose. To label them evil is to take sides against them, which cuts off connectedness—and thereby the possibility of understanding and feeling compassion for them too. Once one does that, there is little chance for either peace or justice.

I wonder if the solution to racism parallels what may be the only realistic (!) solution to class exploitation today. Wealthy people in the United States are so dominant, and through the corporate media they exert such effective control over our collective consciousness, that there is little if any possibility of a successful social transformation that would overthrow them, even if that were desirable (and without a spiritual transformation in consciousness, any new elite would soon be no better). I suspect that the best way to challenge the wealthy and powerful is not to appeal to some altruistic sense of justice and sympathy, but to find ways to help them become aware of the consequences of wealth-obsession for their own *dukkha*. Calls for altruism usually presuppose the delusive sense of separation that needs to be challenged. Recent economic and psychological studies have confirmed what Buddhism and other religions have long known: money and possessions are not really what make people happy. Beyond a minimal level of basic income, money is much less important than the quality of one's relationships with other people. More than anything else, personal relationships are what help us overcome the sense of separation that otherwise poisons one's life. If this were to become generally understood, might it eventually lead to a different kind of revolution?

In a similar fashion, perhaps what is needed for effective racial transformation is (in part) finding ways to help white people become more aware of how racism affects their own *dukkha*. This is not an appeal to selfishness, but to the fundamental spiritual realization that my own (sense of) self is never actually separate from others.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that we should simply replace an Abrahamic understanding of reason with a more Buddhist approach. Rather, the two perspectives supplement each other. The Abrahamic prophetic tradition—especially its focus on justice—remains essential, and by no coincidence this is precisely where contemporary Buddhism has something important to learn, since the concern for social justice has been lacking in Asian Buddhism. Perhaps a combination of the two traditions shows us the way forward.

5. Letting Go of Racism

So far, I have presented a Buddhist understanding of our basic problem, and how that applies to racism, but virtually nothing about the Buddhist solution to these problems. This final concern brings us to practices that promote mindfulness. Identities that have been constructed can be deconstructed and reconstructed, which is what the Buddhist path is all about. In addition to the usual religious emphasis on ethical precepts, Buddhism includes the world's largest body of meditative techniques. Such practices help to develop awareness

of how our minds work, and de-condition them from the habitual ways of thinking and acting—including unconscious, automatized racial stereotypes and prejudices—that create and sustain the *dukkha* of our lives. It is not enough simply to transform our own minds, of course, but the kinds of transformations that are needed will not happen unless we also address the ways of thinking that rationalize unjust social arrangements.

A survey of relevant meditative practices is well beyond the scope of this paper, but I conclude by briefly discussing one important Tibetan Buddhist practice known as *tonglen*, literally “giving and receiving.” It is a healing visualization that can help to transform the way we relate to other people, including those of a different race, ethnic identity, nationality, etc.

The heart of the practice involves visualizing “a specific life situation and connecting with the pain of it.”

You breath that in, feeling it completely. It’s the opposite of avoidance. You are completely willing to feel pain—your own pain, the pain of a dear friend or the pain of a total stranger—and on the out-breath, you let the sense of ventilating and opening, the sense of spaciousness, go out.

In other words, suppose there is someone in your life that you cannot stand, the very thought of whom brings up all kinds of negative feelings. You decide to do *tonglen* with feeling more open, and braver and gentler in that particular situation. So you think of that person and up come all those awful feelings, and when you are breathing in, you connect with them—their quality and texture and just how they grab your heart. It is not that you try to figure them out; you just feel the pain.

Then on the out-breath you relax, let go, open up, ventilate the whole thing. But you don’t luxuriate in that for very long because when you breathe in again, it is back to the painful feeling. You don’t get completely trapped in that, because next you breath out—you open and relax and share some sense of space again. [. . .]

After you have worked with the specific object for a while and you are genuinely connected with the pain and your ability to open and let go, then you take the practice a step further—you do it *for all sentient beings*. This is a key point about *tonglen*: your own experience of pleasure and pain becomes the way that you recognize your kinship with all sentient beings, the way you can share in the joy and the sorrow of everyone . . . (Chodron n.d.)

This practice seems simple, but it can have powerful effects on how we relate to others—and to ourselves. As Pema Chodron, an American Buddhist teacher, describes it:

People often say that this practice goes against the grain of how we usually hold ourselves together. Truthfully, this practice does go against the grain of wanting things on our own terms, of wanting it to work out for ourselves no matter what happens to the others. The practice dissolves the armor of self-protection we’ve tried so hard to create around ourselves. In Buddhist language one would say that it dissolves the fixation and clinging of ego.

Tonglen reverses the usual logic of avoiding suffering and seeking pleasure and, in the process, we become liberated from a very ancient prison of selfishness. We begin to feel love both for ourselves and others and also we begin to take care of ourselves and others. It awakens our compassion and it also introduces us to a far larger view of reality. It introduces us to the unlimited spaciousness that Buddhists call *shunyata*. By doing the practice, we begin to connect with the open dimension of our being (The Practice of Tonglen n.d.).

Of course, one cannot expect that specific meditative techniques such as *tonglen* or *mettabhavana* (literally “mind-training in loving-kindness”) will attract large numbers of people. Nor are such practices sufficient in themselves for transforming us, or how we relate to other people. The call for justice remains essential: the crucial issue is what will most effectively sensitize us to be able to hear that call and respond to it. The implication of Buddhist teachings is that it is not enough simply to (try to) affect social institutions. Perhaps one of the painful lessons to be learned from the last half-century is that, when it comes to something as deep-rooted as racism, we must also find ways to change ourselves—and to find ways to encourage others to want to change themselves. In the end, what is important is not any particular mindfulness practice, but that we find our own ways to overcome the delusion of a separate self and realize our deep kinship with others. This will naturally make us responsive to the need for justice. Such a realization could play—perhaps *must* play—an important role in overcoming the racial divisions that we all suffer from.

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Notes

¹ See <http://prorev.com/2008/02/departments-silly-talk.html> (accessed on 1 March 2008).

² “The Multiple Self,” p. 6.

³ “The Multiple Self,” p. 7.

⁴ “Dreaming of a Self,” pp. 24–25.

⁵ “Dreaming of a Self,” p. 40.

⁶ “The Multiple Self,” p. 21.

⁷ “The Multiple Self,” p. 20.

⁸ “Dreaming of a Self,” p. 44.

⁹ In “The Price of the Ticket,” a documentary film by California Newsreel (1990).

¹⁰ “It is because whiteness is empty and derivative that it needs the constitutive other for the grounding of its being That is why Roediger, Ignatiev, and others assert that there is no such thing as white culture. At its core, whiteness is vacant” (Powell). The collective implication—that white culture is vacant—is suggestive. Is white culture vacant because it has been dependent on the vitality of nonwhite contributions? To cite one very pertinent example, what remains of popular music if you take away the African roots of ragtime, jazz, blues, rock, rap, hip-hop? More generally, what would be left of American popular culture if the contributions of black people were suddenly removed?

¹¹ “Dreaming of a Self,” p. 45.

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