

## **“Making Refuge” for Social “Others” as a Pathway to Racial Justice**

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### **What is “Making Refuge”?**

Zack Walsh, Edwin Ng, and Ronald Purser have introduced the concept of “Making Refuge” as a means of deepening the conversation about, and practices of engaged, Buddhism. Introducing the term Socially-Engaged Mindfulness Interventions, these scholar-activists have encouraged discussion and thought aimed at bringing Buddhism into more intentional engagement with socially-mediated suffering and oppression, including the suffering and oppression caused by race and racism.

We propose the idea of making refuge as a conceptual placeholder and an analytical rubric for identifying the multifaceted ways by which the conditions of trust and safety necessary for living and dying well together may be cultivated across manifold lifeworlds by the co-inhabitants of a precarious planet. The work of making refuge is something all of us must perform in differing ways, and with differing degrees of ease or difficulty, because our shared exposure to vulnerability is at once a fact of existential-material inequality and injustice. Exposure to vulnerability, and thus the promise of #makingrefuge, is something we share-in-difference. Walsh, Z.; Ng, E; and Purser, R (2017)

In the summer of 2017, I joined these scholar-practitioners and a small group of others, including Mushim Patricia Ikeda, Beth Berila, Doshin Nathan Woods and David Loy, in a “Think Tank” to explore the concept of Making Refuge. In the following section, I share some of the reflections and practices that I offered as part of my participation in that group, and some of the ways I’ve continued to explore the implications of the invocation to both Take Refuge and Make Refuge as part of our practice of Buddhism together.

## **Honoring and Mindfully Implementing the Contact Hypothesis**

One of the ways that “the conditions of trust and safety necessary for living and dying well together may be cultivated” is through bringing people together across lines of real and perceived difference under conditions of equality and sanctioned collaboration. Referred to as the Contact Hypothesis, decades of research has shown, in study after study, that one of the best ways to reduce bias is to increase the degree of contact between so-called different groups, and to support them in engaging in meaningful work together. (Allport, G. (1954); Brown, R., & Hewstone, M. (2005))

And yet research and everyday experience has also shown that, given the history of racism, oppression, segregation and the efforts to redress these over the years, people often feel anxious when coming together across differently racialized groups (again, as equals. Whites tend to feel less anxious having intimacy with non-Whites when whites hold the social power, e.g. white people with live-in nannies who are not white.). This difficulty leads to a cycle of avoidance of contact, and, because of their particular position in the racial hierarchy and capacity to remain disengaged from dealing with race in their lives, leads whites to a position of heightened difficulty addressing racism. This is indicative of what is known as “White Fragility.” (DiAngelo (2018))

## **Making Refuge through Compassionate Cross-Racial Engagement**

Zenju Earthlyn Manuel teaches us to allow awareness of our identity-based suffering to be a bridge to developing the tenderness necessary for full empathy, for the will for compassionate action, and for awakening itself. She writes:

Identity should not be dismissed in our efforts toward spiritual awakening. On the contrary, identity is to be explored on the path of awakening. Identity is not merely a political nature; it is inclusive of our essential nature when stripped of distortion. (Manuel (2015))

The notion of the epistemological centrality of situated living is one that women of color have long brought to discussions of spirituality, freedom and liberation. For example, poet and activist Audre Lorde wrote about the power of embodied feeling – what she referred to as “the erotic” – to give us a sense of our own agency, inherent interconnectedness, and capacity for self-liberation and liberation for a broader oppressed world:

But when we begin to live from within outward, in touch with the power of [living] within ourselves, and allowing that power to inform and illuminate our actions upon the world around us then we begin to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense. For as we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like their only alternative in our society. Our

acts against oppression become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within...Living within ourselves is a force which moves us toward what will accomplish real, positive change.

More recently, Zenju Manuel has written about the need for an embodied practice of coming home, of making sanctuary wherever we find ourselves. (Manuel, E., 2018) An essential aspect of this work in a world built by racism is the creation of communities in which we can work together to deconstruct our biases and experience embodied connection. Through myriad practices that might be brought to bear with the goal of Making Refuge, we may, in a real sense, rehumanize ourselves and support the rehumanization of others. What follows is a brief exploration of a few such practices as an indication of how this might be so.

### **Creating Diverse and Racially Just Practice Communities**

The personal practice of addressing mindfulness of bias and racism will be unique for each of us. Each of us enters into this aspect of our lives differently positioned and practiced in noticing and investigating this aspect of our life experience. Nevertheless, we tend to have one thing in common: for most of us, the work of addressing our conditionings around race and racism is not easy. Thus, thought and practice must be intentionally devoted to establishing the capacity to work with these issues in diverse community. While a full discussion of how we may create such communities is beyond the scope of this chapter, some of the core pillars of the work are:

- (1) Developing the commitment to seeing race and racism, to practicing safe and courageous ways of examining racial bias as a part of the construction of the Ego and the Self.
- (2) Engaging in practices of community building that permit the experience of a sense of safe and caring community as a support for the work of seeing race and racism.
- (3) Engaging in practices of racial awareness-raising and bias reduction, and in the allied disciplines of study and community-based learning that support the deconstruction of notions of race, of Whiteness, and of racism at every level.

Once we have grounded ourselves in these and other foundations for the work, we turn to practices specifically aimed at working together to minimize our attachments and other habits around race and racism. What follows are a few such examples of practices that may support us in both Taking and Making Refuge in racial awareness work: (1) Sitting in Inquiry, (2) Mindful Storytelling, and, (3) Mindful Study of Allied Disciplines of Multicultural Teaching and Learning. All three of these practices will support us in both Taking and Making Refuge in racial awareness work.

## “Sitting in Inquiry” Practice

Sitting together, which involves inquiring about our lived experience of race, what I call “Sitting in Inquiry,” assists us in opening up what social psychologists in this field of research and teaching call “blindspots:” dimensions of experience obscured by the conditionings that arise from habits of ignorance, avoidance or attachment to a view regarding race in the world.

I offer these practices not to beginning mindfulness practitioners, but among those who have already had some degree of mindfulness practice and have been exposed to Buddhist or related teachings and understandings about the nature of the constructed self and of reality itself.

From a place of basic understanding about how the mind works, I invite reflections aimed at turning toward the particular workings we have each experienced around the notion of race. I encourage mindful reflection – noticing bodily sensations, emotions, thoughts, images or narratives that arise in response to prompts such as:

Q: How do you react to being asked to examine social identity and bias *in our own life and world?*

Q: What are your blindspots? How have they been shaped, reinforced by places and spaces in your life?

Q: How can you become more aware of these biases and their effects?

And:

Q: When it comes to race, what habits of mind, body, being do you notice in yourself? How have you been conditioned to see, be with, and navigate a world in which you know that racism exists?

Q: What suffering have you been *conditioned* to see?

What suffering have you been *willing* to see?

What are you experiencing *now*?

Q: What suffering have you *not been willing* to see? *What are you right now not willing to feel?*

In examining what arises, we bring care, tenderness and self-compassion, creating the capacity for nonjudgmental awareness of aspects of our experience that we have been

trained to reject. Doing so invites new ways of being with the reality of race and racism in our lives, and with its manifold effects.

As we share what arises in group settings, we deepen our capacity for empathy, and for re-experiencing communities comprised in part through the ideologies and practices of racialized Othering or difference. For purposes of deepening and maintaining the focus, during this practice, on developing greater spaciousness with interior experience, with the support of others, I have found that certain guidelines are essential as supports. At a minimum, I counsel adherence to the important mindful dialogue practices of:

- (1) speaking first and foremost from our own embodied experience, identifying our present bodily sensations, thoughts, emotions (“my heart is pounding,” “I feel a sinking feeling in my stomach,” etc.);
- (2) as much as possible, refraining from analyzing Others in the room (in colloquial terms, I agree to “stay on my side of the net”);
- (3) noticing and naming when we are interpreting direct experience (e.g., “I noticed that you chose a seat on the other side of the room. And I felt myself feeling embarrassed and wondered if I was being rejected. My story about this is that...”).
- (4) Questioning others from a place of genuine curiosity.

We begin sitting together, often with our chairs in a circle, a format which has been shown to reinforce feelings of trust and mutuality. We sit in silence, reflecting on each prompt. As we listen to the words, we notice and silently name the emotions we are feeling in the body, noting bodily sensations and feelings, and then we discuss the thoughts and stories that are arising.

If we speak, we are speaking from the place of our grounded, embodied and lived experience. We try to remain as objective as possible. “I observed...”; “When I heard you say...”. In the course of our sharing, we may note the interpretations that we are bringing into the situation, using the first-person, “I found myself thinking that...” or “the story we are telling ourselves when we hear this is...” And in this way we see, name and reflect on the process by which we are constructing racial and other meanings in real time.

Finally, as in invitation to others, we name what *curiosity* arises in us.

## **Mindful Storytelling**

Not infrequently, the practice of mindful “Sitting in Inquiry” gives rise to or elicits the desire to place our experiences in greater context. We want to tell stories. We want to define terms. Relying on the capacity to listen with mindfulness and to speak

mindfully, we may practice developing the capacity for sharing and reflecting on the “stories” that reflect our experience with race and racism. These are the component elements of what I call “Mindful Storytelling Practices.”

Over the years, I’ve shared my own stories, and invited the sharing of stories from others in the room. For example, I share stories of my experience as a cisgendered woman, racialized as Black, who is now (though I was not always) a member of the upper-middle class, stories which reveal that this particular combination of identity characteristics tends to be confounding for many people. As just one example, I share how I once opened the door to accept a large vase filled with flowers, sent by the Dean of my school to Professor Magee on the occasion of my being granted tenure.

I opened the door to of my home one afternoon – an apartment in a nearly all-White neighborhood. There I was as a petite Black woman wearing the sweats which were my typical Saturday-at-home attire.

The deliveryman gazed at me. “Flowers for Professor Magee,” he said.

I reached out and towards him, preparing to take the vase. “I am Professor Magee,” I said.

Clearly somewhat taken aback, the hidden ground of his preconceptions temporarily shook, the man pulled the vase back just a bit rather than release it to me. “

Are you *sure*?” he asked.

And lest I allow any incorrect assumptions to go uncorrected: the deliveryman was a Black man.

I tell the story of my experience on the other side, too, of being a young woman who grew up in the South at a time when it was Black and White and there were few people around who did not speak English, and realizing, on moving to California, that I reacted – not altogether with welcome – when I found myself surrounded by people speaking a variety of “different” languages.

I am not proud of the evidence that I have seen within myself that I carry biases like everyone else. But admitting that I, too, have biases, and sharing these “stories” assists in creating space within which others may allow their own truths to well up as tears in their eyes, or as words of admission that they feel safe in exposing to the light of accountability. Such revelations assist us in coming home together to a place where we can practice together the intention of “never again.” Such is the practice of Making Refuge, one commitment at a time, one moment in the practice of undoing our biases after another, together.

**Mindful Study in the Allied Disciplines of Multicultural Teaching and Learning**

Relatedly, relying on the capacity for mindful teaching and learning using objective sources, we may commit to study. We may read analyses of those who have studied race relations in our culture. We may explore terms that arise that we haven't heard before. Seeing and becoming comfortable with what we do not know in this area, we take some time to learn, for example, a bit more about "Race as a Social Construct," about the "Contact Hypothesis," about "Microaggressions," or about "White Fragility." Understanding the importance of context -- of placing our own and others' experiences in a broader field of understanding which includes relevant culture in time and geographic space -- we devote time to studying aspects of history and experience that we haven't learned, especially histories affecting ourselves and members of our communities of practice and daily life.

Practices such as the foregoing – Sitting in Inquiry, Mindful Storytelling, and Mindful Study – are not easy. They require specific, deep and ongoing commitments to doing the work of personal consciousness-raising and transformation. They require us to move into vulnerability with intentionality and courage and with the aim of addressing racism and racial bias as an aspect of our lived experience in a world in which the illusions of race are real in their consequences, especially in terms of how race continues to affect our chances in life a great deal.

And because we are each differently situated by virtue of our multifaceted social identities, we will each hear the call to move into this sort of vulnerability differently. We may each, and quite legitimately, require different conditions of support if we are to move toward vulnerability in a given space, community and moment – whether in carefully curated, identity-based practice groups, or in integrated groups.

Thus, the work of Making and Taking Refuge is indeed work. But working to raise our capacity to be with one another in our vulnerability is, I believe, inherent in the work of moving toward more deeply integrated and loving community. Indeed, it is being together with one another in our vulnerability that is one of the important drivers of the work of building empathy, care and trust. I offer the foregoing as a means of opening the door to your own reflections about how the practices and teachings of Buddhism might support us in deconstructing our notions of race and reconstructing the habits and conditionings we have all imbibed in a world dominated by Whiteness. May these reflections be of benefit to each and all in a world in which too many have suffered far too greatly as a result of the myriad delusions born of racism, White Supremacy, and other seductive identity-based states of confusion.

## **Conclusion**

Deepening our capacities to see racism clearly in all of its forms and variations, from personal to systemic, and to deconstruct largely invisible aspects of our lives like the practices and dynamics of Whiteness cannot happen overnight. But in time, our dedication to meditation and the allied disciplines of study and engaged awareness-raising support us in deepening our practices for living more respectfully and indeed lovingly together. By engaging with race and racism more effectively through Buddhist-inspired practices, we open doorways to meeting the great challenges inherent in the work of deconstructing the delusions, dehumanizing patterns and

practices and teachings of Whiteness and White Supremacy and of reconstructing our communities as refuges, for us all.