



## The Dukkha of Racism

YENKUEI CHUANG

*Most people are afraid of suffering.  
But suffering is a kind of mud to help the lotus flower of happiness grow.  
There can be no lotus flower without the mud.*

Thich Nhat Hanh<sup>1</sup>

**D**UKKHA EXISTS, and no one is exempt. A Pali word from the time of the Buddha, *dukkha* means the suffering, malaise or unreliability that arises from meeting aging, sickness, death, and loss in our lives. The simplicity and power of this universal truth cannot be overstated. Sickness, aging, death, and loss happen to all of us. Instead of feeling as if we are being punished or that we could have done something to avoid it, we can accept this universal truth without personal shaming and over-identification. When we learn how to suffer wisely, we achieve sovereignty and freedom from all causes of suffering, even racism.

When I first learned about *dukkha*, none of my western Buddhist teachers mentioned the suffering behind racism, exclusion, and marginalization that I experienced as a cis-female immigrant of color. My first mentor listened to my grievances of cultural and language differences that separated me from my parents and peers but reflected nothing back to me. When it came to race and class differences, most of the white western-convert teachers I encountered assumed that their teachings were universal and applied to everyone. They would say things like: “Remember when you were little and the grown-ups got dressed up to go to a New Year’s Eve party?” “Remember the neighborhood parade on July 4th where you got to play and walk in the middle of streets with your dog?” “We are a group of women who have gone through the feminist revolution, and we know what

*it's like for you.” “Remember how summer camp was the time when your parents tried to get rid of you?”*

No. I did not go to summer camp. No. There was no Fourth of July celebration. No. Definitely no dressing up or party on New Year's Eve. I fumed at the gumption of teachers who presumed universality. Did they not see me? Was I the only student who didn't grow up with these historically normative experiences? Although it was unintentional, I felt hurt. Unseen and unimportant. Invisible. Marginalized.

I did not always feel this way. When I first started studying Buddhist meditation, I generally agreed with everything the teachers said. I was new, and I was there to learn. I liked their kind demeanor and the wisdom behind their words. I sought their acceptance. I did not see or feel anything askew with their teachings. In individual meetings, I voiced grievances of non-belonging and listed experiences of alienation as an immigrant woman of color: difficulties communicating with my parents, lack of familiarity with cultural customs that others seemed to take for granted, and a general sense of malaise—always feeling new and homeless on this land. I spoke of a wish for an American mother who could help me figure things out, and I longed for intimacy with my own mother, to be seen fully, heard, and cared for by her. While a Buddhist teacher offered sympathies and meditation practices for connecting with my birth mother, she mentioned nothing of the racial and cultural issues complicated within this desperate longing. I remembered appreciating her suggestions without batting an eyelash. At that time, I felt heard and saw no flaw in her dharma advice.

It was just part of the landscape I lived in that white folks, as members of a racially dominant majority, could blissfully ignore the impact of racism on their daily experiences. Yet, how was it that I, an immigrant woman of color, could also stand apart and watch race from the sidelines? Had I internalized so much whiteness that race had become a blindspot? Had I become a *model minority* in American Buddhism and joined their collective silence on racism?

In the journey to becoming an American woman, I feared not fitting in and not belonging. I felt I had to assimilate, adapt, and adopt the dominant narrative of race. It meant sussing out the racial hierarchy and placing myself close to white power. It meant thinking what they thought, feeling what they felt, and saying what they said: *collude with white power, ignore racial bias, and erase any part of you that might think, feel, or speak otherwise*. I wanted to be one of them, and so I learned to be ashamed of my differences.

## Waking Up to Internalized Racism

It took many years to recognize my own internal complicity in racism and colonialism. Only when I woke up to a different consciousness was I able to release the shame of being an *other*. I can see clearly now that my social identity as a female immigrant of color was a central, underlying cause of my suffering. I grew up in a system dominated by patriarchy and white male supremacy, but I did not question its link to social, cultural and familial expectations. My parents did not tutor me on the racist hierarchy of white superiority when we immigrated to the U.S. Perhaps they did not know about American racism, or perhaps they had no support to help them defend against racist remarks and attacks. Either way, they were eager to have their children adapt to the new culture in whatever ways they could. They seemed happy when their children married white partners and they did not insist that their grandchildren learn Chinese and Taiwanese. They seemed satisfied—as if all of this was what they had expected and wanted. Or, perhaps they didn't know they could have it another way.

One day at an annual meditation retreat for experienced practitioners (mostly white), two senior teachers (white and Latina) led an inclusion/exclusion exercise that was designed to raise racial/gender/class consciousness and promote social harmony. We were randomly grouped into circles of twelve to sixteen people. With questions and prompts, we were instructed to step into the circle if we responded in the affirmative and step out if we did not. Although I had participated in several of these diversity exercises before, it was the first I had ever done with a Buddhist meditation community. And I was not prepared for what came tumbling out:

*I am not native born, but I am a human being.*

*I am Asian American.*

*I am female-body.*

*I am an immigrant.*

*I am a non-native English speaker.*

*As a child, I worried that my parents might not be alive when I got home from school.*

*I fear verbal aggression on my race and gender.*

*I fear walking down the street.*

*I fear being physically and sexually assaulted.*

It was exhausting to bare those raw vulnerabilities but important to make visible their force in shaping my development. In the safety of this Buddhist circle, I felt deeply and painfully the profound tenderness of these vulnerabilities for the first time. There had been so much stuffing down, minimizing, and avoiding these fears and experiences of marginalization. Just as I had not always been seen for these identities externally and explicitly, I did not take time to see their impact internally. Being marginalized made me feel weak, scared, alone, and stupid. I thought it was my fault and I did everything I could to cover it up.

In his book, *My Grandmother's Hands*, Resmaa Menakem discusses the inherited trauma of white-body supremacy. He defines trauma as the body's response to something threatening that is happening too much and too fast, and in the case of racism, too often. He names two types of pain in response to racialized trauma: clean pain and dirty pain. *Clean pain* is pain that mends and can build our capacity for growth; *dirty pain* is "the pain of avoidance, blame and denial."<sup>2</sup> For many years, the collective response of dominant culture to racism has been this form of dirty pain, which has perpetuated the system of white-body supremacy. This dirty pain has been called out by many, and most recently, by the protest movement Black Lives Matter which began in 2013 with the shooting death of Trayvon Martin. Healing from racialized trauma can happen and must happen on both the individual and the collective levels for bodies of all colors. As Menakem points out, "White-body supremacy in America doesn't just harm Black people. It damages everyone."<sup>3</sup>

Calling out the dirty pain in me meant I had to acknowledge my own internalized racism. I had to accept that there was suffering in my experience as a person of color, an immigrant, and a woman. I had to make visible the dukkha of racism, sexism, and xenophobia in myself. Yet, doing it seemed absolutely shameful when I had worked all my life to blend in. To admit that I had succumbed to this *dukkha* felt like a personal failure. Why wouldn't I feel happy and successful after a Ph.D., marriage, and a house in the suburbs? How could I still feel like a foreigner and outsider after living my entire adult life in the U.S.? But denial is a form of dirty pain and a tool of racism. I had been inculcated to be the model minority whose lighter skin, mild manners, and academic achievements brought me closer to the privileges of *white adjacency*,<sup>4</sup> such as automatic entitlement to intelligence, good work ethics, trustworthiness, and respect. There was a cost, however, in having these privileges. It meant erasing my own knowing through assimilation, downplaying any racial slights, and adopting the dominant cultural values of white superiority in beauty, family values, and work.

And yet, this kind of internalized racism can be so subtle. Externally I could present as liberal and well-resourced in diversity activism; I could say and do all the right things for social justice. Internally, though, I could harbor various unconscious biases for light skin bodies with higher education, European features, and socioeconomic status. If it were not for this relentless gnawing in my belly, I might not have had any inkling of these unconscious biases. I resented this gnawing and I tried to ignore it like a dirty pain, but it was a gnawing that growled at the loss of a full relationship with my birth culture. It was a gnawing that would not stop growling against the diminishment of my being.

This gnawing was the key to my liberation because it begged me to understand the *dukkha* of racism. It would not have me accept my position as inferior on the racial hierarchy. It would not have me accept a racial hierarchy for anyone. Naming this *dukkha* was the first step in the movement towards freedom from erasure and internalized racism. Naming this *dukkha* gave me permission to feel into the rage and the grief in this bound-up trauma of growing up minority. When I leaned into this suffering along with others in a people-of-color (POC) sangha, we affirmed each other in our experiences of clean pain and dirty pain, ancestral and present day. We uplifted each other in our care and activism to transform the *dukkha* of racism from mud to lotus, from dirty pain to clean pain. As POC meditation practitioners, we recognized that this first step away from erasure began with the Buddha's central instruction on meditation: mindfulness.

## Mindfulness, Wisdom, and Compassion

The establishment of mindfulness begins with the body, feelings, and mind as outlined in the *Satipatthana Sutta*.<sup>5</sup> In a simple way, we all know what mindfulness means—we know when we are mindful and we know when we are not. Practicing *Satipatthana*, however, deepens the wisdom of awareness by bringing the insight of the three characteristics into our view: *dukkha* (suffering), *anicca* (change), and *anatta* (not-self, interbeing). We can contemplate them by first reflecting on the body through its anatomical parts, through the changing qualities of the elements in the body—earth, water, fire, and air—and through the death of the body. *Satipatthana* then instructs that we contemplate *vedana*, the feeling tone of our experience in the present moment—be it pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. We can watch how we get pushed or pulled into action by the feeling tone. This direct knowing anchors us because no one can dispute that we feel what we feel. We stay in the truth of the experience just as it is—refraining from urges to fix and change, and we connect fully with our experience without any erasure. Lastly, mindfulness

meditation, in its non-judgmental open spaciousness, allows us to experience the mind directly through the constructed and conditioned nature of mental activities. In light of those three characteristics, we see the limitations of our thoughts and perceptions. We see the tendency of our mind to distort reality by taking what is not beautiful to be beautiful, what is not permanent to be permanent, what is not ours to be ours, and what is not perfect to be perfect.<sup>6</sup> We see this tendency of the mind to be influenced by vedana (feeling tone) and shaped by sociocultural family values. Because thoughts and concepts are constructed, they are of the nature to change; yet, many of us attach to our beliefs as if they are right, as if our whole identity is dependent on them. Where do these thoughts come from? Whose thoughts are they? If they are mine, then why can't I control which thoughts arise?

As our practice continues, we realize that we perceive and make sense of the world through a set of conditioned and constructed lenses that befits our sociocultural and family history. And here, we can ask, *do we agree?* Do we want to uphold these beliefs and perceptions? With awareness, we see the movement of the mind, and we can pause and discern if such movement is beneficial and wise.

Racial identity is like the lenses we wear: it shapes what we perceive and how we respond. While we cannot escape wearing the lens of racial conditioning, we can become aware of its impact on our perceptions and mental activities. With this awareness and an understanding of its potential harm (dukkha), insubstantiality (anicca), and conditionality (anatta), we have a real chance to respond differently to the lens of racial conditioning. In Buddhist teachings, perception can be trained and changed because it is conditioned by past causes and circumstances. When we bring mindfulness to our racial conditioning, we can pause and notice how that shows up in this very moment. We can invite the mental factors of curiosity and investigation (*dhamma vicaya*) to further our understanding. Is there tension in the body? What stories are gathering steam in the mind? Is there relaxation or tightness when we're in a racially homogenous group? How about a mixed race group? What are the conditions that shape our racial identity? How does racial identity affect the way we think and interact with others? How does it lead to more suffering or freedom from suffering?

## Freedom from Shame, Delusion, and Erasure

Perhaps it was inevitable that, after many years of meditation, I would wake up to the dukkha of racism. In retrospect, I realize in practicing mindfulness that I have been outfitting myself with the very tools for resisting erasure. Over time

it has become easier and easier to know than to not know. I am more willing now to pause and tune into unpleasant experiences rather than avoiding or pretending that they do not exist. I have learned to trust that they have something to tell me. I welcome their presence so that I can understand and feel what needs to be felt. The more I practice, the more I trust the direct knowing of mindfulness meditation that serves as an antidote to the erasure of thoughts and feelings. The tools of mindfulness meditation have created a safe space for me to experience the felt sense of marginalization, to know deeply in my bones what it feels like to be shut down by others, to be shut down by myself, and to know what it is like to speak again, to reclaim what has been cast aside. This fuller, more embodied sense of knowing is what brings about the release of a heart deluded and shamed by racism.

In meditation, my awareness can often “*see*” the mind like a veil lowering down to close off the reception of additional information; it can also “*see*” the mind veil lifting up to open into boundless consciousness and reception. Awareness can see the arising and passing of thoughts, and it can understand the conditioned nature of the mind and heart. Knowing that nothing is “*permanent, perfect, and personal*,” awareness allows for a light touch with what is experienced [emphasis added].<sup>7</sup> As awareness becomes more stable, continuous, and sensitive to my internal experience, the capacity to withstand the blow-outs of my tender heart grows stronger as well. I become less attached to how things need to be in order for me to be happy. I see how I habitually carry a defensive mindset with regards to race and authority figures. As stability and equanimity grow, I begin to reclaim and repair ruptures in my relationships that have everything to do with belonging. A growing interest in what makes me different replaces shame, and I reconnect with my ancestors and what has been lost in the trauma of immigration.

At the same time, the practice of mindfulness meditation also cultivates other qualities such as integrity, patience, kindness, joy, compassion, equanimity, and fearlessness. Together they form a protective shield against mind states of internalized racism and exclusion. While external racist attacks still feel dehumanizing and hurtful, I am learning not to disconnect within. I feel the pain as it rises and passes through this *fathom-long body*, where all the world’s suffering begins and ends.<sup>8</sup> Kindness and compassion stay close to the body to offer a soothing balm to the racialized wounds. Confidence grows in knowing that the problem is not me or mine, but caused by the current and past conditions of this nation, born in the genocide of Native American bodies, the forced enslavement of African bodies, and colonialist, xenophobic abuse of Asian and Latinx bodies. The exclusionary policies, the Japanese internment, the anti-Asian racism during the Covid-19 pandemic—all of this is real. And,

it's not because I am an alien virus dangerous to the welfare of the State nor is it because I do not work hard enough to acculturate.

## The Six Daily Remembrances

Dukkha exists, and no one is exempt; but so is freedom from dukkha. James Baldwin writes “people who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are.”<sup>9</sup> With mindfulness meditation, I learn to pause and open to the dukkha of racism and watch for moments when I numb out or internalize and blame myself. I ask if it is passing like clean pain or getting stuck like dirty pain. I ask if I can abide by non-erasure and non-invisibility. And, when I can see the impermanent, imperfect, and impersonal nature of dukkha, I feel a little better, a little freer.

And yet, all of this doesn't mean that the dukkha has gone away for me. It doesn't mean that the horrors of racism and other oppressions can be wiped clean with mindfulness meditation. In his teaching of the Five Remembrances, the Buddha reminds us that we are of the nature to sicken, grow old, die, and experience loss.<sup>10</sup> As tragic as that may seem, this is what it means to be human. Furthermore, as children of this culture, I believe we are of the nature to think the culture's thoughts. We cannot escape the cultural conditioning of race, gender, class, sexual expression, ableism, and other social biases on our collective and individual consciousness. When we do not remember this, we live in denial of the power of cultural conditioning. We get stuck in dirty pain.

Though we cannot escape the nature of human vulnerability and cultural conditioning, what we do matters. How we think matters. What we say matters. This is the last remembrance: we are the owner of our *karma* (actions). We inherit the consequences of our karma—thought, speech, and deeds; they provide the ground on which we stand. This last remembrance is where we can learn to face the dukkha of our lives with awareness, wisdom, and compassion. We are asked to memorize and recite these remembrances every day so that we do not forget their pervasive presence and influence on us. So that we can practice growing up with dukkha and learn what it means to be a fearless member in the club of aging, sickness, death, and conditioning. As James Baldwin suggests, we can allow this learning to enrich our lives and discover the potential of deathlessness: the ability to live freely in the midst of great dukkha. As we live life knowing that we're dying, can we walk with gentler steps that leave less harmful traces? As we think our thoughts, knowing that they are conditioned, can we pause and discern if such biases will lead us to freedom?

When I recite the daily remembrances, I now include a Sixth Remembrance on cultural conditioning. May it help me, you, all of us remember what

is true. May it help us see clearly. May this right view lead us to sovereignty and freedom from all causes of suffering, even racism.

*I am of the nature to grow old; I have not gone beyond aging.*

*I am of the nature to be ill; I have not gone beyond illness.*

*I am of the nature to die; I have not gone beyond dying.*

***I am a child of this culture; I have not gone beyond cultural conditioning.***

*All that is mine, dear and delighted, will change and vanish.*

*I am the owner of my karma, born of my karma, related to my karma, abide and supported by my karma. Whatever actions I shall do—for good or for ill, of that I shall be the heir.*

*These we should frequently recollect.<sup>11</sup>*

## Coda: Belonging

I don't know if I'm there yet but I could almost feel it. I want to deny its emergence, but don't know if that's possible. It's growing. It's birthing. The time will come when I cannot push it back and pretend it does not exist. For now, though, I want to stay where I am, comfortable in my identity as a minority—marginalized, excluded from any sense of belonging. I mean this is where I've been most of my life—a minority here in the US, and in Taiwan, a *hwa-chiao*, one who has become American.

And yet, here I am.

Lying on this earth here, I take comfort releasing my back, the entire back-body melting onto the earth-body. Moist. Mossy. Softened soil. Smelling of barely spring. I relax into the embrace of the earth belly, and I hear it telling me I am home. I belong. I am an extension of the earth body, and the earth body an extension of me.

*What are you doing? Silly you! Get up now. You're going to get your dress all dirty. Look at that! How are we going to get those grass stains off?*

Yes, that voice still comes up from time to time.

*Ching chong. Where are you from?*

*Ching chong. Go back to your own country.*

Silly. Those silly voices. So hurtful and so stupid. How could I have paid any serious attention to them—as if I was at fault, as if I was not white enough, American enough, Taiwanese enough, sticking out like someone

who shouldn't be. Here.

Here. I am not giving energy to such silliness anymore. Delusions of a crazy xenophobic racist world. Making walls and wars. They made me crazy for many years—restless, anxious, fearful, and constantly measuring myself against another to see if I belong.

I am not giving energy to it anymore. It will not grow in me anymore. Whatever poisons I have ingested, they have caused enough harm, and they are not welcome in my body anymore. As I lie here on this earth-body, I smile. I am detoxing onto the earth. Releasing. Emptying. My belly is happy; my body relaxed. A new breath rises from the earth-body into my body, and it tells me I am beautiful. It tells me I'm precious—my body here, taking up space.

As I watch the moon rise, the moon sees me here.

Whole with no part left out.<sup>12</sup>

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## NOTES

1. Thich Nhat Hanh, *No Mud, No Lotus: The Art of Transforming Suffering* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2014).
2. Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands* (Las Vegas: Central Recovery Press, 2017).
3. Ibid.
4. Kuo, Iris. "The 'Whitening' of Asian Americans." *The Atlantic*, August 31, 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2018/08/the-whitening-of-asian-americans/563336/>
5. *Satipatthana Sutta* (Majjhima Nikaya 10: The Discourse on the Establishment of Mindfulness).
6. *Vipassana Sutta* (Anguttara Nikaya 4.49: Distortions of the Mind).
7. "Impersonal, imperfect, and impermanent" are meditation teacher Ruth King's apt interpretation of the three characteristics. See, Ruth King, *Mindful of Race: Transforming Racism from the Inside Out* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2018).
8. *Rohitassa Sutta* (Anguttara Nikaya 4.45: To Rohitassa).
9. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage International, 1963), 98.
10. *Upajjhathana Sutta* (Anguttara Nikaya 5:57: Subjects for Contemplation).
11. Ibid.
12. This last piece of writing was inspired by Izumi Shikibu's poem: "*Watching the moon at midnight, solitary, mid-sky, I knew myself completely, no part left out.*"

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