

A New Paradigm for Racial Justice and the Global Pandemic

By Marisela Gomez and Valerie Brown

Let us open to a new and deeper way of understanding the Five Mindfulness Trainings, guiding principles for mindful and ethical living, which call us toward individual and collective awakening, compassion, and peace. We are aware that we are interconnected. What happens in Wuhan, China affects people in New York City. What happens to the Black body affects all bodies. We are called forward.

The global pandemic is a gateway to suffering worldwide, disproportionately impacting Black people, indigenous, and people of colour, who face poverty, sickness, displacement, and death. They, we are not alone. Our lives and livelihood are interconnected. We are called forward.

We cannot exist independent of low wage workers, health care workers, un-housed people, single mothers, undocumented people, the unemployed and underemployed. If one such person lives on the knife edge of racial, ethnic, social, structural, and systemic oppression and discrimination we are all affected. We are called forward.

The practitioner dwells in the now, recognizing equanimity and instability, discrimination and non-discrimination, ill-being and well-being, practicing right view and engaged through compassionate action. Aware of the cycle of racial, ethnic, and social inequities and discrimination, we courageously turn to practice wholeheartedly. We are called forward.

Lighting a stick of incense, listening to the sutras, sitting upright and solid, palms joined, the practitioner looks within and in concentration the path and fruit of skilful action is revealed. We are called forward.

Speak aloud these words with the sangha voice, a true river of understanding:

Acknowledging Beauty as Reverence for Life

Aware of the suffering caused by oppression and generational harm based on racial, cultural, social, and ethnic inferiority and superiority and its resultant structures of injustices and harm, I acknowledge the beauty and violence inherent in life. I vow to resist being complicit in systems and structures that continue to perpetuate violence and hatred instead of reverence of life for marginalized groups. I recognize that each person contributes to my individual and our collective awakening, and the co-creation of a world that celebrates and affirms differences and similarities. All living beings can teach me something, when I remember to pause, breathe, listen deeply with a calm and open mind and heart, and ask myself: 'is there more' or 'what else is here with me?' I honour and respect all life guided by Right View and Right Energy.

Belonging and Connecting as True Happiness

Aware of the suffering caused by ignorance and aversion of my own and other's racial, ethnic, cultural, and social history, its legacy and how this affects me whether I am aware of it or not, I am committed to connecting to these histories. I know that turning toward these histories with an open heart is my journey of awakening to true belonging. I will take the time to learn the history of the racial and ethnic group with which I identify as well as for other socially constructed racial and ethnic groups. Aware that there is no genetic or biological difference between different racial and ethnic groups, and that these identities were constructed by one group to establish dominance over others, I will turn toward racial and other forms of othering with an open heart and compassionate action. I know that this history has led to fragmentation inside and outside body and mind and brought much suffering to all beings. I vow to transform this suffering through the practice of connecting with an open heart. I will notice when emotions of belonging and othering arise and I will ask myself 'why'? Whatever feelings, perceptions, or mental formations arise, I will embrace and when needed engage with love in action. I am committed to practising Right Resolve, Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood so I can help relieve this legacy of racial and social suffering. I will practise looking deeply to see that true happiness is not possible without true connecting leading to belonging and understanding.

Cherishment as True Love

Aware of the suffering caused by discrimination and oppression, I vow to understand its roots within my consciousness and my body and the collective body of the sangha and larger society. I vow to recognize the ways in which I have benefitted or not-benefitted explicitly or implicitly from systems and structures that foster discrimination and injustice. I am aware of the legacy of violence, especially unlawful police violence, perpetrated against Black people, indigenous people, people of colour, differently abled people, people of various gender identities and expressions and sexual orientation, and others who are marginalized. I acknowledge the lived experience of all people to deepen my capacity for understanding and for greater compassionate action. I am aware that narrowly constructed, prevalent interpretations of intimate relationships constrain how we cherish each other in our expression of love, leaving many further isolated and alienated. I am committed to looking tenderly at my suffering, knowing that I am not separate from others and that the seeds of suffering contain the seeds of joy. I am not afraid of bold love that fosters justice and belonging and tender love that seeks peace and connection. I cherish myself and my suffering without discrimination. I cherish this body and mind as an act of healing for myself and for others. I cherish this breath. I cherish this moment. I cherish the liberation of all beings guided by the wisdom and solidity of the sangha. This is my path of true love.

Vulnerability as Loving Speech and Deep Listening

Aware that vulnerability is the essence of our true nature, our humanness, I vow to risk listening and speaking non-judgmentally with understanding and compassion to alleviate suffering and support peace in myself and others. I vow to live with empathy, compassion, and awareness and to listen for understanding rather than disagreement. When I've hurt others through my unskilful action or speech, I vow to practice making a good apology that acknowledges what I have done and offers sincere regret, knowing that this supports the other person and me. I am committed to speaking that aligns with my highest aspiration and encourages honesty and truthfulness. I am committed to generous and courageous listening that bridges differences and supports understanding of others who may be different from me. I am committed to taking meaningful steps to become a true instrument of peace and to help others to be the same. When I am not able to understand the experiences of others, I vow to come back to my breath and my body, and to offer myself gentle patience while learning to support myself in developing greater awareness and skill. I vow to practice awareness of my beliefs, perceptions, and feelings, aversions, and desires and to take refuge in mindful breathing and in the sangha to support greater stability, peace, and understanding. Through my practices of vulnerability, patience, forgiveness, and deeply listening, I know that my speech will be guided by love and understanding. Practising in this way supports Right Speech and Right Action and guides me to Right Insight.

Welcoming as True Nourishing and Healing

Aware of the suffering caused by the consumption of an inadequate history of racial and ethnic forms of social segregation, I am committed to healing myself and the world by welcoming, and practicing with this awareness. I will notice how my thoughts, perceptions, feelings, words, and actions may have been influenced by this inaccurate history. I will look deeply to understand how both physical and mental health, for myself, my family, and my society have been influenced by embracing and denying this racial, social, and ethnic history of inferiority and superiority and its legacy of inequities and injustices. I will cultivate joy to support me toward individual and collective wholeness. I will practise mindfulness of the Four Kinds of Nutriment to become aware of how edible foods, sense impressions, volition, and consciousness are all influenced by this history. Practising with Right Energy and Right Resolve, my Right Action of consumption will include awareness of certain websites, electronic games, TV programs, films, magazines, books, and conversations and how they continue to foster wrong perceptions of racial, ethnic, and social injustices. My understanding of interbeing supports my conscious consumption that sustains a healthy understanding of differences, one that does not oppress or discriminate. This Right Insight will preserve peace, joy, and bring healing in my body and consciousness, and in the collective body and consciousness of my family, my society and the Earth. To assure that my descendants do not live in a racially, ethnically, and socially unjust world, I commit to diligently practising with true welcoming on this path to nourish and heal myself, the sangha, and society.

The Five Mindfulness Trainings keep us centred in life's storms and joys and remind us that life is a precious gift. The Trainings are a path to liberation and transformation. Practising these Trainings supports us toward racial and ethnic reconciliation and social change and heals deep suffering. The Five Mindfulness Trainings help us cross this shore of suffering and bring us to the side of true awakening and love