



MINDFUL  
OF  
RACE

Transforming  
Racism  
from the  
Inside  
Out

RUTH KING



**sounds true**  
BOULDER, COLORADO

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## Two Realities, One Truth

A beautiful teaching often shared in Buddhist communities supports us in placing race in a social context. It's called the Two Truths Doctrine, and it describes two realities in which we all live: ultimate reality and relative reality. Simply stated, in relative reality, we are some bodies—formed, habituated, ego-driven, and relating to life through concepts. In ultimate reality, we are no bodies—formless, empty of self, and eternal. In relative reality, I am a woman, African American, lesbian, great-grandmother, artist, and elder. However, in ultimate reality, I'm none of these things. I am beyond conception; I am awareness dancing with the karmic rhythms of life.

In ultimate reality, there is neither race nor a reason to suffer. We are undivided and beyond definition. But in relative reality, we're all in considerable pain as racially diverse beings driven by fear, hatred, greed, and delusion.

In relative reality, language is commonly how we relate. Talking about race is messy because it brings to light our racial beliefs and values expressed in ignorance, innocence, and righteousness. Many of us show up with good intentions but are braced, bruised, and afraid. We put our foot in our mouth; we get scared, become frustrated or belligerent, or just shut down. We feel unclear, unskilled, angry, and cautious. Our mind plays habit songs that get in the way of our ability to connect and be open to what's right here. For example, the following comments are common narratives expressed from participants in the Mindful of Race training.

## Whites commonly say

- I don't see color. Aren't we all the same?
- Race is an illusion. Why are POC so attached to this concept? Let it go!
- I'll just listen. I know I have a lot to learn. Besides, I'm likely to say something stupid and get nailed again.
- I don't know what I don't know. POC need to teach me about race; tell me what to do.
- Why are POC so angry with me? I wasn't living at the time.
- I don't know how to have this conversation without feeling blamed, guilty, frustrated, or angry.
- I'm oppressed in other ways, so I know what it feels like to be a POC.
- We can't really talk about race because there aren't enough POC in the room.

## People of color commonly say

- Right, we're going to talk about race. This means that in addition to being disturbed by white people's ignorance, I'm going to have to teach white folks what they choose to deny knowing—amnesia of whiteness.
- I'm angry about race, but if I talk about it, I'm labeled the angry person, and nobody listens.
- Right, we're going to talk about race. That means we're going to talk about black folks and white folks. I'm neither! Why should I care? I'm invisible.
- Race is a concept. Why can't I just get over it?
- When will white people take responsibility for their collective impact on other races throughout the world?
- I don't want to keep educating white people about race. They need to do this for themselves.
- I don't need to be friends with white people. I just want them to stop getting in my way and stop doing harm.
- I'd like to be able to focus on something other than race for a change, but people who look like me keep getting harmed.

How did we get here? How do we understand these standoffs and this dread, even with people who willingly want to change? How do we transform these habits of harm that are common within relative reality? We can't heal if we can't talk to each other, and we can't talk to each other until we understand why we can't talk to each other.

While language and concepts are useful for organizing and navigating our relative or relational reality, we are also beyond concept. Ultimate reality is what we aspire to in spiritual practice—a felt sense of universal belonging, peace, and harmony that is beyond the limits of concept. Yet, at the core of racial suffering is a forgetting that we belong. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of this eloquently:

All life is interrelated, and we are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. . . . I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be—this is the interrelated structure of reality.

This “interrelated structure of reality” points us toward the idea of ultimate reality or nonduality—our kinship in each other's lives. Yet we must first understand the ways in which we have been conditioned to relate to each other before we can know the true freedom of this wisdom. Race, in and of itself, is not as problematic as the meaning or the value we have historically placed on race and how this value impacts our direct experience with ultimate reality—that kinship of harmony.

It's easy to feel overwhelmed and discouraged by the repetitive motion of racial injury and injustice, yet there is no immediate outer solution. There is no getting around that fact that each of us is challenged with navigating the relative reality

of race—the fact of these bodies in various shapes, colors, sizes, and experiences—so that we may know freedom. That freedom is our birthright—a freedom unconditioned, a peace we can know in the very midst of racial ignorance and distress.

Racial disease has to do with our histories, habits, and hearts. To understand racial habits of harm—the ways we avoid more genuine connection and healing as individuals and racial groups—is to dive below our knee-jerk responses, beneath the words themselves, to examine our conditioning. This requires us to work with our mind in order to transform our heart. We must be willing to be uncomfortable. In fact, we might consider discomfort a wake-up call inviting us to inspect the ways we have been programmed to blame or distrust each other and, in so doing, how we have learned to live with a heart disease.

Ultimate reality and relative reality are to be understood as two expressions of one truth, two sides of one coin. Ultimate reality is often associated with the ocean, and relative reality, with the waves; ultimate reality is like the sky, and relative reality is all that appears and disappears in the sky. Relative reality makes the knowing of ultimate reality possible, and we can't know ultimate reality outside of our bodily experiences.

We are made up of habit. We are all conditioned by each other in relative reality. The good news about habits is that, with awareness, they can change for the better. The following chapters are offered to help us understand the habits of mind that got us here and how we can get the blood circulating again through the heart of humanity.



## Individual and Group Racial Identity

Racial identity is a dynamic part of relative reality. In this chapter, we explore our racial conditioning—how we were taught to belong to a particular race and to relate to racial “others.” We will examine race and its power dynamics from two unique expressions: as individuals with diverse experiences and as members in racial group identities. We will also explore how our habits of mind are reflected in the world.

### Parental Conditioning

From the beginning, our parents conceived our very being and gave us our names. We were held and shaped in the womb and made in the mold of our ancestors. We inherited our ancestors’ DNA, and we were hardwired to their nervous system.

According to neuroscientist Dan Siegel, in his book *Mindsight: The New Science of Personal Transformation*, the autonomic nervous system—which regulates bodily functions that we are not conscious of, such as breathing, the heartbeat, and digestive processes—is older than our physical form:

The nervous system begins in the embryo as the ectoderm; the outer layer of cells becomes the skin. Certain clusters of these outer cells then fold inward to form a neural tube—the spinal cord. . . . The whole

nervous system sets up its basic scaffolding, its core architecture, during development in the womb. Genetics are important for determining how neurons will migrate and then connect to each other.

We could say that the nervous system, the heart of relational well-being, is literally the skin that shapes and defines what we typically refer to as a self, hardwired with cellular memory. The very fibers of our being were passed down from our ancestors. In this sense, the regulation of bodily functions or impulses is, to some degree, preconditioned. Given the sensitive membrane that defines us, this gift from our ancestors, we can perhaps comprehend how intimately woven our nervous systems are to past and present conditioning, including racial conditioning. This may explain why we may feel anxious or frightened when we come into contact with certain races but can't readily explain why.

Our individual existence has also depended on food grown from the earth, water for bathing and drinking, sunshine and fire for warmth, and other bodies to know our own. We have been dependent on guidance, feedback, transport, and the actions of others to affirm us. We have been loved by nature, plants, animals, teachers, and strangers and supported by the fine minds of medicine, the skilled hands of healers, and, for many, the wisdom of spiritual guidance. We are not separate from our environment or the families we grew up in.

Our parents and their parents shaped our early views and beliefs. As children, our caregivers' expectations were programmed into our minds through reward and punishment. We learned to read body language and adapt to energy. As a result, we learned to perceive the world through our parents' image. Much of who we are—including our appearance, skin color, gestures, talents, habits, beliefs, and actions, as well as our

relationship to our own race and to other races—is inherited from our parents and ancestors and is, without examination, passed on to the next generation.

On vacation recently in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, an adolescent white boy was sitting on the beach with his father. The young boy and I had just purchased similar wristbands from a vendor, and I turned to him and said, “These are great, right?” The boy did not speak to me. Instead, he looked at his father as if to say, “I shouldn’t speak, right?” The father didn’t respond to his son, who was looking at him with tough-boy, yet pleading eyes. I, too, looked at his father expectantly when the boy didn’t respond. The father then said to me unapologetically, “He doesn’t like you.” I said, “He doesn’t know me.” I could feel the intent of diminishment from the father and could see the son hanging on every unspoken word. I could also feel the instant heat shoot through my body, a heat distinct from the sun we were all sharing. The boy continued to look at his father, the father looked on, and I moved on. I felt sad for the boy and for the heart that produces such hateful programming. While I didn’t take the incident personally, it did leave a sour taste in my mouth that the sweetness of my mango margarita couldn’t mask.

Like it or not, the ways of our parents and ancestors are with us, even when we don’t know them, don’t like them, or don’t remember them. Our sense of self and our family both require each other and complete each other. Even though we grow up and change, we are who we are because of our parents and ancestors. In fact, what we have come to know as our individual selves is more an experience of relativity or kinship with agency—the ability to make choices and be influenced or shaped by the choices of others. The bottom line is that, whether intentionally or unintentionally, we pass on a patterning to present and future generations.

## Early Trauma and Race

As individuals, we have all had a range of experiences—many joys and sorrows that have shaped our lives. Each of us has experienced physical and mental hardship, and some of us have carried an indescribable weight from past wrongs. We all have the indelible markings of trauma, timeless wounding, and the dignity of survival. Early traumas shape how we relate to life and to race.

I grew up in South Central Los Angeles. In our family of eight, we raised each other. Our family and the working-class neighborhood where I grew up were preoccupied with surviving. My mother worked multiple jobs, including being the choir director for our church. We were hardworking and responsible. We paid our taxes, were faithful churchgoers, looked after each other, and were intensely active in the civil rights movement. In our neighborhood, people struggled with mental illness, domestic violence, addictions, and stress-related health challenges. There was financial and emotional distress in most families due to widespread unemployment, discriminatory hiring practices, police brutality, and gang violence. Growing up, I experienced significant trauma and despair that shaped my individual and racial identity.

For example, I can never quite shake the image of my great-grandmother, day in and day out, pacing the floor in ceaseless worry about her children and grandchildren. She was in her eighties, and she worried because, despite a life of social activism, she could not protect our black bodies from the hatred and harm that infested our community. I remember how helpless I felt not being able to comfort her. She died with a broken heart when I was just seven years old, and it was then that I decided, *I'm not going out this way. There's got to be a better way.*

A second potent trauma for me was when I gave birth to my son and said to my mom, “I feel excited, and I’m also scared,

and I don't know why." To which she replied, "Because you've brought another black boy into the world." I will never forget the solemn look on her face. It was as if she were saying, *Better toughen up, girl!*

In my family, we were raised to distrust white people. My mom told us that white people were not trained to care for us. I was frightened by her response and felt a bit claustrophobic, because in every direction it appeared to me that black bodies were expendable. So, I toughened up. You could say I became an example of Tina Turner's song lyrics: "Who needs a heart when a heart can be broken?"

Two years after the birth of my son, my father, forty-nine and a successful business owner, was shot and killed by his girlfriend in a jealous rage. I was seventeen, and oddly, I don't remember feeling traumatized. What I remember most was how tightly I held on to my two-year-old son in the back seat of a black limousine as we drove across town to bury my father but were stopped every few blocks by the National Guard because of community lockdown due to the Watts Riots. This shock left me questioning the value of life and plunged me into years of righteous rage. One result was that, at the age of twenty-seven, I had open-heart surgery for a mitral valve prolapse. Strangely, the white surgeons, whom I was taught not to trust, had my life in their hands and, in fact, had more access to my heart than I did.

I'm from a lineage of warriors and worriers, raised in an atmosphere of racial anxiety and racial jeopardy plagued by fear. To this day, I feel deep sadness for my great-grandmother who worried herself to death, for my father who was killed at the prime of his life, for my son who couldn't understand my need to cling to him, and for my own heart, which needed more than I could give it at the time. These traumas are part of my racial inheritance. The senseless and incessant suffering