

June 2, 2015

To my dear Dharma Colleagues,

Thank you for your interest in undertaking this exploration of race, specifically of the white race as it operates in Western culture. This course is designed to help us individually and in discussion groups to look at the construct of whiteness, to contemplate it internally and externally, personally, interpersonally, historically and systemically.

In so doing, we are already against the stream for part of the phenomena of whiteness is to remain ignorant of itself. So by stepping into this space, by naming and desiring to deconstruct it, especially those of you who are yourselves white, you are already unwinding its spell. Every victory on this road is to be celebrated so let me first just say with all sincerity, hurray and thank you for your practice!

In the course of examining my own racial identity, it's become more and more clear to me what works and what doesn't work. I have come to believe fervently in the necessity of non-judgmental awareness. That is, investigation, even fierce investigation, but always with compassion. It is my hope then that in undertaking this inquiry into white identity, we will commit to a ground of kindness. I hope that we can be very honest, say what needs to be said, examine what needs to be examined, and to be continuously kind to conditioning. For my experience is that only when the mind and heart are relaxed and truly available can there be transformation.

Let me pause here to say that I am speaking here from the perspective of a white person raised in the United States. So when I say "we" or "our," I am addressing here my white Dharma siblings and want to acknowledge that the dynamics are almost certainly experienced differently for people of color and for white people in other parts of the world.

So let's begin with that compassion: there's good reason we find this work so challenging! In the US, whiteness is made, by whiteness, invisible. In my own life, I was taught not that I was "white" but that I was "normal" (well except for the fact that I was a girl who liked other girls but that's a topic for another day!). Being "just a normal person," I was trained to believe that any advantages I have achieved in this life, whatever they are, owed to my merit, hard work or at most to my "good fortune." The notion that I have and continue to benefit enormously from not just historical but the ongoing oppression of others was quite understandably disturbing to my sense of self. It goes against my training and against my ego's ideals. There also arose an uncomfortable self-consciousness in realizing that I was an unknowing member of a group with certain non-universal and, worse, rather deplorable attributes. Suddenly I became aware that people of color knew something about me that I didn't know, that I was, for instance, wrong in conceiving myself as "normal" and that I was unknowingly benefiting from and even perpetuating the dominance of white people. People of color knew I was white and they knew, so much better than I, what that meant in this world. Someone showed me a new kind of mirror and the image was far from flattering. And the revelations just kept coming. With each realization into a more complete and accurate understanding of my culture and history there came a resistance, gross or subtle, as part of my identity was painfully revised.

Thank goodness for the practice. I would not have stayed present but for compassion and the invitation to examine cause and effect. The Dharma clarified that my misunderstandings were conditioned. Furthermore, upon investigation, I could see these as almost inevitable for everything in my white

culture would have it so (thus preserving itself). And of course this would challenge me deeply for how painful it is to recognize my role in oppression when I don't experience myself as "doing anything wrong." The only upside to these realizations seemed to be my interest, shaky at times, in truth. And yet there was something more.

The truth is that I didn't know I was suffering. The understanding of deep interdependence means that operating in a culture that objectifies, exploits and oppresses, even and especially when hidden from the dominant view, divides the heart against itself. It can be deeply challenging for to lean into this, to be willing to look and not waiver is to open to suffering on a massive scale (it also invites a wide variety of disturbances into relations with white family and friends.)

But this is what I want to share and why I wanted to write this letter. The upside is so much greater than I knew, so much greater than just "accepting the hard truth" like a bitter pill. I submit that the upside isn't even to do less harm to people of color although that is a necessity. The upside is wholeness. I have found that, just as promised, if I can turn towards the suffering of racism, against my ego's self-protecting tendencies, I do experience pain ... yet come to suffer less. Some resistance is released. Some wall is dissolved. I may be bewildered and disoriented but I am strangely more whole. From this place there seems the potential to be, with time and practice, more honest, courageous and perhaps truly useful to the causes that move me. My relationships with people of color are more authentic. I can occupy my own location of privilege with more honesty and so much less to defend.

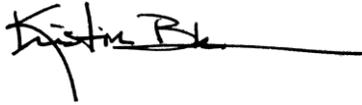
As white practitioners of the Dharma, in the context of BlackLivesMatter, hostile immigration barriers, environmental injustice and IdleNoMore, we are compelled to contemplate ourselves, our race, our culture, our institutions and our true history as a people. That these movements are not our fights by necessity but only by choice should give us a hint about the depth of our responsibility. The Dharma provides the inspiration and guidance for a rather brutal undertaking: the deconstruction and reconstruction of identity with the magnificent reward which is the cessation of suffering. On many levels, the fearless deconstruction of our white identities is by itself radical and potentially transformative, internally and externally. When we redefine ourselves, we can act in authentic collaboration with people of color, quietly or with a lot of noise, to take on the deluded systems that bind and divide us all.

While the materials and practices offered here can be explored individually, even better is to find a small group of people to undertake this training together, meeting regularly and taking one session at a time. In the company of others, we can bring all the gifts of the Dharma (steady mindfulness, kindness, compassion, wise investigation, patience, perseverance, etc.) to ourselves and one another as we are inevitably challenged to examine our own unconscious views and habits regarding race. We might be encouraged by someone's willingness to be vulnerable and or a view is named that we didn't know we also carry. Most of all, we can offer authentic support to one another in the Bodhisattva work of unwinding our own racial bias.

We are upon it. The practice is available to us right here in our Dharma programs and communities. We might like to think otherwise, given our sincere intentions, but our Western Buddhist sanghas are not immune from the pattern of racism and may be especially vulnerable given our sense of nobility. Therefore, as aspiring leaders in sangha, it is essential that we summon all the tools of our practice in supporting ourselves and one another in engaging with this particular form of suffering. As uncomfortable, as painful, as disconcerting, as overwhelming as it may be, we have the opportunity to

respond individually and collectively, supporting one another in seeing through delusion and making a new way. In this program, and given all that is going on in the world as we come together, I believe we have an incredible opportunity to know deeply the ways that racial divisions, and all forms of division, maintain our suffering. And in so doing we can not only make ourselves more whole but radiate whatever understanding we develop out to our world.

Thank you for joining me on this journey to our collective freedom. May we be wildly successful!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kristin B.", followed by a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Kristin Barker

Member of the 5th cohort of Spirit Rock Meditation Center's Community Dharma Leaders training program