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MEDITATION LIFE COACHING MINDFUL LEADERSHIP

## Being Mindful of Race

### *Guidelines for Forming Racial Affinity Groups & Inquiry Questions*

Excerpt from *Mindful of Race* by Ruth King (Sounds True, 2018)

There is no shift in consciousness around race – neither knowing our part nor healing – without the grit that relating to each other makes possible. Therefore, I recommend Racial Affinity Groups (RAG) as an ongoing forum for investigating and transforming our “individual” and “collective” racial conditioning.

In a RAG, our work is intensely personal. We have the opportunity to share our experiences and histories, examine our impulses, reinterpret meaning, and see clearly our role in racial harming and healing. Racial separation into same race groups, in this sense, is not unwholesome. Rather, it brings us into clear intention and is a critical step in developing, from the inside out, racial intimacy, literacy, and skillfulness. Regardless of how you identify racially, no one is exempt from the need to intimately examine racial conditioning.

To begin, invite two to seven people of your race to join you in raising self-awareness and literacy for the purpose of reducing racial harm and increasing racial harmony from the inside out. Most groups have reported that to stay focused on race, it is helpful to select people that are similar to your racial identity and gender. I encourage groups to make a minimum of a yearlong commitment, meeting at least monthly for no less than three hours. The following structure could be useful in your RAG meeting:

- 30 minute meditation
- 60 minute sharing and discussion
- 15 minute gratitude and reflections
- 15 minute sitting meditation
- 15 minutes next steps

Leadership should be shared and/or rotated. Roles may include meeting location, sending reminders, determining meeting topics, leading meditations, guiding discussions, and next steps. Many RAGs also combine sharing meals. Sharing responsibility supports group kinship and cohesion.

Make coming together as simple as possible. In the first few meetings as the group is still forming, I encourage members to simply meditate together, share intentions, explore how you can best support each other’s commitments. Initially, the focus should be more on listening and connecting.

The intention of a RAG is to create a safe place to take risks and explore racial ignorance, aversion, and urgency mindfully. Discussion topics should be focused on understanding the group member's racial conditioning at the individual and group identity levels. The group should not focus on addressing social issues or learning about other races. Rather, the RAG is to discover intimately your relationship with your own race with like others. Some groups have explored genealogy, family programming, museum visits, book study, racial traumas, or whatever is current for each member.

Waking up together is not insignificant. The intimacy of a small group makes the emotions and vulnerability we feel more intense. Our experiences will fluctuate from being aware that we are unskilled, to having what we are unaware of pointed out, to noticing, even being surprised by our own goodness. When we add the shame and embarrassment that leaks out when we discover what we don't know, or we say or do something that exposes our ignorance, aversion, or selfishness, our commitment to the group can be challenged. For these reason, the following guidelines have been helpful in forming and sustaining a Racial Affinity Group.

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| 1.  | Attend your racial affinity group (RAG) eager to listen, learn, and be heard.  |
| 2.  | Commit to your RAG. Individuals coming and going or distracted with outside interests negatively affect safety and the quality of disclosure.  |
| 3.  | Throughout your RAG gathering, maintain a priority of respect for the humanness of each person participating.  |
| 4.  | Only the person sharing may speak. There is no interruptions or "cross-talking."   |
| 5.  | The person sharing determines the level of disclosure and vulnerability they will express.   |
| 6.  | When speaking, take your time. Speak slowly and experience your words.   |
| 7.  | When someone is sharing, others should pay attention to what is being said as well as the courage it takes to say it.  |
| 8.  | Relax and release expectations. No opinions, judgments, or dislikes are to be expressed (verbally or non-verbally) toward the person sharing.  |
| 9.  | Tune into your own experience – how you are being touched and shaped by the gifts offered. Be curious about your inner experience not just your thoughts.  |
| 10. | No questions should be asked of the person sharing. Listeners should receive what is being said as a gift that is being slowly unwrapped. You can't know what the gift will be until it has opened, and it is always opening. Maintain compassionate patience and curiosity. |
| 11. | While gentle clarifying questions can be useful, listeners are not to probe, argue, seek agreement, or invoke forms of retaliation. Nor should listeners speak of their own story when someone is sharing. Do not take attention away from the person speaking.              |
| 12. | When you feel uneasy, be aware of how you feel while also staying present to what you are sharing or to what is being shared.  |

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| 13. | At any time during your RAG, when things become too intense or uneasy, you can pause in silence together. Begin by relaxing and checking in. You may track your experience in silence (unpleasant, shamed, pulsing, hiding, etc.), or if the person speaking is willing, they may track their experience out loud while others bear compassionate witness. |
| 14. | Whatever is said in the RAG <b>stays</b> in the RAG.   |
| 15. | When you want to talk about something that was said during your RAG once the group time has ended, ask permission of the person before engaging.   |
| 16. | Whenever you are expressing your concern, make presence and deepening the relationship your priority.  |

**Remember:** It is common to experience distrust, embarrassment, and fear when sharing personal information. These feelings can trigger the impulse to strike out, shut down, or to remain superficial in your interactions. Choosing to remain engaged without judgment or fear of retaliation will often result in a more honest exchange and deeper connection.

**Post Reflections:** Following a RAG gathering, or daily, you may find it helpful to reflect and journal on one or more of the following questions:

- How do you feel about what you are discovering about yourself?
- What still frightens you? Saddens you? Shames you? Enrages you? Engages you? Why?
- What can you do to further enhance your ability to be mindful of race?
- What can you celebrate about your life today? About others?

The point of a RAG is to show up and wake up together. We have an opportunity to experience racial kinship and share, even transform, the burden of racial ignorance and distress. With more self-awareness, we extend this same kindness, curiosity, and respect to everyone we encounter within and outside of our group. We fortify our commitment to not cause harm to others and ourselves, and through our example, we better serve all of humanity.

### Racial Inquiry Questions

The following questions are helpful reflections in your mindfulness sitting practice as well as explored within your Racial Affinity Group. Spend some time each day reflecting on a question or two from the list below. Some of the questions may serve as a stimulus and others may invite you to do a bit of research outside of your sitting or RAG practice. And still other questions may stimulate more questions. Use these questions as a mindfulness practice; to become more aware of how you are relating to them. Drop them directly into stillness and notice the experience you are having exploring them. Notice whether the relationship you are having with the question supports distress or release. There is no rush to get through the list or anywhere other than here.

To begin, take three intentional deep breaths, focusing on your exhale. Begin with a body scan, inviting physical and mental tension to soften as you bring kind attention to each area of the body starting at the top of the head, moving slowly and with ease throughout the body down to your toes. Allow yourself to experience this softening on the inside of the body, not just the sounds of your words, but also the actual experience of the movement of awareness through your own body. As you feel more settled, imagine your mind resting in the full of your body. Take a few breaths here and simply linger and rest in awareness. When you feel settled, contemplate the following questions with as much ease as possible. As you explore these questions and begin to notice tension in the body or mind, take a few breaths and re-ground in the body before returning to this question.

#### As an Individual

1. As a child, what were you taught about who you are as an individual?
2. What traumas marked your life?
3. When did you first discover you were a race? What were the childhood events that solidified you as a racial being?
4. What are the roots of your racial lineage? Given your lineage, what has your race gained or lost?
5. What personal experience pains you to recall when you reflect on race?
6. Where in your life do you feel numb, shut down, dismembered, disrespected, or disconnected? What events do you believe gave birth to these experiences?
7. What views did your parents, caretakers, ancestors, or elders have on race? How did they impact you? What elders or caretakers are still alive in your family? Would you be willing to have an open conversation with them about race? If not, why not?
8. How has your racial conditioning, past or present, impacted your perceptions, attitude, and response to racial distress and injustice?
9. If racial shame, anger, or guilt hadn't blur your vision, what do you imagine you would see clearly or feel directly?
10. What has your relationship to your own race kept you from experiencing, knowing, or understanding about other races?
11. What recurring hardships do you experience as it relates to race?
12. Why do you believe matters of race are still matters of concern today?

#### As a Member of a Racial Group

1. What racial identities have shaped how you have come to know yourself? What beliefs or actions would have jeopardized membership in your racial group – past and present? What risk can you take today that you could not take in the past?
2. What role did your ancestors play in racial oppression? Racial healing?
3. What's racially unfinished, forgotten, ungrieved, or shameful in your racial lineage? What impact might such owning have on your relationship to racial solidarity?

4. What has membership in your racial group protected you from knowing, experiencing, or trusting about other racial groups? Why was this believed to be necessary?
5. What do you have in common with others in your racial group? What diversity exists among you? What are you curious about as it relates to your racial group?
6. In what ways do you need to distinguish yourself?
7. What are you reluctant to share or speak out loud with your race? With other races?
8. Under what circumstances do you notice race? Talk about race? What thoughts, feelings, and emotions are commonly stimulated in these situations?
9. What beliefs do you have about other racial groups that create inner distress? How do these beliefs impact your relationship to race and racism?
10. What can you talk about or own about your racial history that you couldn't discuss in the past (the past could be earlier today)?
11. What stops any one race from knowing another race?
12. How do you work with other members of your racial group to raise awareness and challenge the status quo?

#### As a Leader

1. What leadership practices currently exist that ensures racial equity?
2. How do leaders inside the organization define racial equality? Quotas? Turnover?
3. How does racial inequity and racism manifest in policies, practices, and procedures? How do you discover and confront them?
4. How often do leaders talk about race, talk about themselves as a race, or talk about their impact as a racial group on other races? What would it take to make this an ongoing practice? What impact might this have?
5. What systems are in place to ensure that POC have safe and easeful access to senior leaders? How open are leaders to change?
6. Under what circumstances do you avoid addressing known racial inequities and harm? When this happens, what are you attempting to safeguard?
7. How do you become a credible ally to people of color?
8. How do you support white leaders in waking up to race and their racial impact inside the organization?
9. Do leadership practices ensure that POC are genuinely welcomed into dominant culture? How do we know?
10. Do POC have leadership allies?
11. As a leader, do I model my value for racial equity?