



A Beginner's Guide for Meditating with Race

Introduction

Nothing we see or hear is perfect. But right there in the imperfection is perfect reality.
Shunryū Suzuki, Zen monk and teacher

As we begin to turn our attention inward, we often feel the soreness, tenderness, and vulnerability from the habitual ways we have met the rough edges of racial distress, and it is easy to feel overwhelmed. Although these feelings may be difficult to metabolize, it is possible to do so. Our thoughts and feelings are not permanent states; rather, they are crucial experiences to attend to, and it begins with understanding our minds. This is the role of mindfulness meditation.

Mindfulness has its roots in the 2,600-year-old tradition of Buddhism. The practice of mindfulness meditation supports us in experiencing more mental ease and harmony. It does not help us get rid of racial ignorance or ill will, nor will it erase anger or despair. Rather, it offers a way for us to slow down and investigate our experiences with care and wise attention.

Mindfulness meditation supports us in bearing witness to our racial distress and conditioning without distortion, elaboration, or judgment. We can notice, for example, how racial perceptions live, what thoughts we are giving birth to, and how we feel thinking about them. We can acknowledge where we get stuck and discover what supports letting go.

A side benefit to mindfulness meditation is that it reduces our heart rate, blood pressure, respiratory rate, oxygen consumption, perspiration, and muscle tension, and improves our immune system and neurotransmitter function.

Mindfulness meditation invites us to slow down so that we can experience our true nature in a loving and wise way. Meditation is not a quick fix. It's a practice; a practical way to be at peace in our own skin in this moment, regardless of our circumstances.

Core Principle: *Nothing is Personal, Permanent, or Perfect*

Mindfulness meditation is the practice of present-moment awareness, with an understanding that what we are aware of has a nature: What arises in the body, mind, and heart, is *Not Personal, Permanent, or Perfect*. Core to this form of meditation is an understanding of the nature of our existence. For example, that change is constant; that we are a series of ever-changing processing, and; we are not in control of having things go our way.

Like it or not, these laws of nature are true to all existence. For example, gravity has a nature—it's not personal. Once you understand gravity, you do not drop a glass and expect space to catch it. Seasons also have a nature—they are not perfect or permanent. Once you understand the seasons, you know how to dress and go out into the world. Relatedly, race is not who we are. Race is a social construct that points out the nature of diversity. In and of itself, race is not personal, nor is it a problem. The problem is how we perceive race, socially project onto race, and relate to race as if it were personal (all about our individual or racial group experience), permanent (the idea that views about race never change), or perfect (the idea that whatever is happening should be to my liking or meet my standard of what's right or real).

Despite appearances, and the painful truth that racial injury, ignorance, and injustice have spread virally throughout the world, these laws of nature hold true. In meditation practice, we begin to discern these laws, which, in turn, supports our understanding of how we relate to inner racial distress, its release, and ultimately our social response.

Sometimes people, especially people who have been repeatedly and deeply harmed by racial ignorance and distress, think that such inner contemplation sounds too passive, too compliant; they may feel they are giving up, masking, or glossing over injustice. But that's not it. To embrace our true nature is not to deny that racial injustice is not pandemic in society or that certain racial groups are not, in fact, targets of harm. Rather, it's about embracing the truth of what is actually happening in the moment with an understanding of its nature. Similarly, some people may use their understanding of these laws as a means of escape by arguing that race is just a concept so why dwell on it, or to avoid the direct experiences of racial distress, which can show up in meditation practice as confusion, numbness, fear, or shame. Yet these are the very experiences to be recognized, allowed, and understood more deeply.

Over the years, reminding myself that life is not personal, permanent, or perfect has kept me from falling into sinkholes of despair and destroying rooms with rage. It invites me to pause and turn inward. It gives me a chance to ask myself, "What's happening? Where are you gripped right now? Are you taking this situation personally—to be a personal experience instead of a human experience? How many people before

you have felt this way? Where else in the world are people feeling similarly gripped? Do you believe that how it is now is how it will always be? Are you distressed because you are insisting that this situation be other than it is, right here and now? How can you care for the pain you're in at this moment?"

Entrenched beliefs and closed minds are what wars are made of. Our challenge is to become more aware. When we are unaware of the nature and impact of our actions, we cause much unintentional harm.

Mindfulness meditation is not about feeling good or being peaceful or experiencing a preferred experience. It is about being present - here and now - with an understanding of the nature of mind. These laws of all existence are difficult to grasp in the heat of racial distress. However, with mindfulness practice, we can begin to recognize, through our direct experiences, that we can know a deeper freedom—a freedom that is not dependent on outside circumstances being different.

It is impossible to be unbiased when we are unaware of how we have been conditioned in racial likes and dislikes, fears, aversions, and judgments. Racial distress is a real experience. Instead of being enraged, unconscious, or fearful of other races, or convinced we know everything we need to know about race, we can learn how to establish the mind and heart in clarity and stability, which will greatly support us in responding to the racial horrors that surround and divide us with wisdom and grace.

Bring an Ancestor with you

In the work of racial healing, we may discover that we have inherited what's unfinished from our parents and ancestors. The meaning of our practice is deepened when we remember that we are not just doing this inquiry for ourselves. Bringing an ancestor with us can support our racial inquiry, understanding, and healing.

Reflect for a moment: Is there someone in your bloodline whose relationship to race affected your life? Perhaps a keeper of the family history? Or someone who hated another race without apology? Or maybe there was a racial secret that was kept that everyone knew about but couldn't talk about. Maybe someone in your life left a mark on your heart and changed how you saw life—maybe a mind-set or view that you knew was wrong that you could not interrupt, or a view or belief that you knew was right but your efforts to nurture it were overpowered.

Bring the threads of your racial legacy and inheritance to your mindfulness practice to be seen, honored, and transmuted through your awareness. Think about which ancestor(s) you want to bring along to transform the lineage business, and to remind you that your journey supports past, present and future generations.

Establish an Intentional Container

To begin, identify a comfortable, quiet space where you can sit each day. This has a regulatory effect on your nervous system. I encourage beginners to apply the 5/5/5 Plan—meditate for five minutes a day, five days a week, for five weeks in a row. By the end of the five weeks, you will have a new habit. Sit long enough to feel yourself shifting toward ease. If you can't sit, simply occupy a seated position for ninety seconds. It is natural that your sitting period would extend. Work toward sitting an hour each day as an act of mental daily hygiene.

Begin and end your meditations with intention. Early on, I began each meditation by lighting a candle while silently stating my intention to non-harming. Next, I paid respect to my teachers and ancestors by calling out their names. After meditating, I offered a prayer of gratitude dedicating the benefit of my practice to all conscious beings throughout the world, without exception. I then blew out my candle. I would journal what I was feeling and any insights gleaned, and I would end in simple silence.

Create a simple yet meaningful meditation ritual that frames your intention. Eventually, such a practice will be internalized and carried throughout your day. A container for practice includes consistency. Consistency reprograms the mind toward calm and stability and supports clarity and insight into our racial conditioning.

Attend to Posture

To begin, identify a comfortable, quiet space where you can sit each day. This has a regulatory effect on your nervous system. I encourage beginners to apply the 5/5/5 Plan—meditate for five minutes a day, five days a week, for five weeks in a row. By the end of the five weeks, you will have a new habit. A consistent meditation practice reprograms the mind toward calm and stability and supports clarity and insight into our racial conditioning.

You want to establish a posture that is relaxed yet upright. Consider the needs of your body and make necessary adjustments.

- Your sit bones are firmly planted on your seat or cushion and your spine is vertical without tension.
- Your shoulders and hips are in alignment, and your hands rest open with palms up or down on your thighs. Feel this balance throughout your body.
- If sitting on the floor you can cross legs, if comfortable for you. If you are seated in a chair, place the bottom of your feet firmly on the floor with your knees about hip width apart. Allow yourself to feel a sense of balance from the inside throughout your body.
- Your eyes can be open with a soft gaze or they can be closed.
- Your teeth are slightly ajar, which naturally relaxes the jaw, and your lips are lightly touching each other.

Sitting Meditation Practice

Stillness of the Body; Movement of the Breath

Notice the experience of settling into the fullness of your whole body. Allow your mind to rest in this fullness. Breathe into it. Begin to notice the stillness of the body and allow the breath to be experienced in this stillness. Notice the body steadying itself. Feel directly the body's movement, its graduation, and its gradation toward stillness. A natural awareness is made available to you simply through stillness, through calm abiding in the body.

Next, begin to open your awareness to the movement of the breath—not to the thought of breath, but to the movement of breath and where the breath touches and moves the body. You can Experience the sensations of the movement of the breath inside the body. Take your time becoming intimate with this experience.

There is no need to manipulate the breath—just notice what it's like to breathe, the experience of breathing. For example, where do you experience the rise and fall of the breath in the body? Be curious about how the breath is moving through the stillness of the body. Notice that the body is still, while the breath is moving. Both experiences are happening together—you are still while still moving.

Thoughts, emotions, and other sensations will arise in the body and mind as you practice. There is no particular reason for it, nor is it a problem. Keeping the body as relaxed as possible, rest in the full experience of the stillness in the body and the movement of the breath. Let both the body and the breath be known; let them be your primary focus.

Now, give attention to any experiences of calm in the body and mind. Slowly scanning the body, take the next few moments to notice how your body is experiencing calm and ease, however small. Bring full awareness to the inner experience of calm. Allow the experience of calm to permeate and bathe each cell in your body, all the internal organs, and all the space within the body. Take as much time as you can to rest in the stillness of the body and the movement of the breath.

When struggling with my own thoughts, engaging others, or in the thick of a racial conflict, I try to keep at least 50 percent of my awareness on the body and breath. I often ask myself silently, *How is the body feeling? Where is the breath? Can I be more at ease?*

Become curious about what supports you to be calm? What are some of the more common conditions that cause you to lose calmness? Are you aware of when calmness shifts? Which habits of mind generally flip you out of a state of calm? How does calmness affect your relationship to racial distress or your impact on others? How does it inform what you do next?

Sitting meditation practice supports us in knowing, from the inside out, that we can rest in the body and use the breath as a calming inner resource, despite external

circumstances. This is an essential practice for establishing the stability we need to investigate our habits of harm.

A few more thoughts on Stillness Practice

In the early stages of sitting practice, you may experience a range of thoughts and emotions that shifts your focus away from presence. For example, you may experience the mind desiring to fix racial injury or plan a strategy to address social injustice. There may be thoughts of revenge or ill will, doubt, worry, restlessness, sluggishness, or boredom. Don't be alarmed by your thoughts and don't give up. In this beginning practice, redirect your attention to the body and breath; more ease and inner stability will develop over time and that will support deeper understanding and inform wise action. Make sure you are seated comfortably in a chair, on a cushion, or lying on the floor. You can also stand while doing this practice.

I encourage you to continue this practice daily. Start with five minutes. If you can sit for a half hour, that's even better. Sit until you can sense the experience of settling. There will be times when you may need to do something active or more strenuous before your sitting practices. That's fine. Do that, and then sit.

Walking Meditation Practice

Core to being mindful of race is our ability to “stand” the truth of what is right before us and to walk aware of our intent and impact. Doing so requires that we live as fully as we can within the body in the present moment. Walking meditation is a mindfulness practice that supports such awareness, balance, and ease.

Walking meditation is helpful when you feel agitated or when you find yourself knotted in thinking. This practice shifts you from your head, through your body, down to your feet—to the ground of the matter. It supports relaxation and mental and physical balance and stability. The practice is simple because it is the practice of going nowhere, yet it brings you directly into presence and supports you in staying present. You are not trying to achieve anything or fix anything. The practice is simply about grounded awareness—an awareness that reduces obsessive thinking and other distractions—and is an excellent way to be present throughout the day. The practice I offer here is what I have found helpful in strengthening my ability to be centered despite racial chaos and circumstances.

Allow a minimum of fifteen minutes for your walking practice. To begin, find a quiet place where you can walk back and forth for anywhere from fifteen to twenty-five steps in each direction.

Begin by standing, bringing full awareness to the bottom of the feet equally balanced as they make contact with the floor or ground. Keep the body upright and relaxed. The chest and head are raised. The upper body should not be leaning ahead of

the feet. Don't allow the chest to collapse or the spine to curl. The gaze is downward and not tightly focused. You can place the right hand over the left wrist or clasp the hands behind the back. Establish these connections with ease, releasing tension throughout the body.

Begin to walk at a pace that maintains awareness and balance. With each step, feel the heel of the foot firmly touching the floor or earth, followed by the ball of the foot, including the large and small toes. Put equal weight on all four points as the foot touches the floor. Feel the foot firmly planted on the floor and notice how this foot balances the body, making it possible for the other foot to rise, swing, and plant itself on the floor. Again, feel the foot firmly planted and balanced on the floor. Maintain a pace that keeps you most present. After you have taken fifteen to twenty-five steps, stop and be aware of the transition from one direction to the next; the pause, the pivot, the turn, and the standing with two feet together, hips' width apart, before one foot is lifted for that first step. Repeat your walking meditation for a minimum of fifteen minutes.

A few more thoughts on Walking Meditation

Consider walking meditation physical rehab for a bruised heart and overworked mind. This practice, regularly repeated, sends a message to the mind that we can carry our own weight and balance our own lives. This is not a thought; this is a potent, direct experience of stability, quietude, and ease, and a lovely inner resource to cultivate as you investigate race and racism.

Just as there is much movement on the earth, the earth itself offers us a sense of stillness. Such is true with our bodies. With momentum and consistency in this practice, we can begin to experience the stillness of the earth joining with the stillness in the body, and we can feel that there is no separation. This connection supports us as we move through our day-to-day lives—we can tap into stillness, regardless of the racial chaos that swirls around us. The steady pacing programs the brain to trust that we can rest in presence and move through the world centered and awake.

Walking meditation is a simple, powerful healing medicine that develops mindfulness in our moment-to-moment lives. Just as we took our first steps as a child and discovered we could exercise more stability, such is true over time with walking meditation. We discover, in walking, a wise and balanced effort from the inside out.

Kindness (Metta) Meditation Practice

Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and we know we cannot live within. - James Baldwin

We all have ways of protecting ourselves from racial harm. We may strike out, walk out, or numb out, depending on the situation. Yet underneath all of our actions, despite appearances, is a shared and deep desire for kindness—to both offer it and receive it. We all wish to be able to stand in the center of racial ignorance and distress without parking our hearts at the door.

Kindness is the water of humanity. Without water, we harden. Kindness is an attitude, an aspiration, and a practice. It is also core to spiritual life and religions. In the tradition I'm trained in, we practice *Metta*, which is the Pali word for unconditional kindness—friendliness and genuine acceptance. *Metta* is part of a constellation of heart practices referred to as the *Brahmaviharas*, or divine abodes. *Metta* is a genuine desire for all beings, without exception, to be safe from inner and outer harm, to be healthy and content, and to live with ease.

Metta is the antidote to such distress. It is the natural expression of the free mind; a state of mind that the heart naturally dwells in when we are not burdened by mental distress or racial distractions. It is often described as a feeling of well-being not dependent on external conditions, a quiet stream that is flowing at all times—a stream we can open to or know intimately through mindfulness practice.

The practice of *metta* supports us in priming the mind to embrace racial fear and distress in an atmosphere of nonresistance. The practice supports us in minimizing escalation and distortion by gathering the mind, focusing the mind, and steadying the mind in the present moment. It supports us in regulating our mental climate by adjusting the thermostat to care. When we do this, we are inviting the heart to open to warmth and genuine acceptance.

A *metta* practice will not make what we don't like go away, nor will it make what we do like stay. Through this mindfulness practice, we are not trying to change what we are facing. Rather, we are freeing ourselves in the moment by loving ourselves, and we are training ourselves to embrace what is right here, right now, with friendliness and intentional goodwill. But most important, it is about maintaining goodwill toward all, even toward our antagonists. *Metta* practice can serve as a radical blood transfusion, purifying generational patterns of racial ignorance, innocence, and hatred and opening the heart.

Guided Metta Meditation

Establishing a sense of care and kindness for yourself is key to developing a mindful lens to explore our racial conditioning and the way that it may have caused harm to others or ourselves. Traditionally when practicing *metta* we begin by offering loving kindness to ourselves. The first kind act is to sit comfortably during the meditation. Allow the body to be at ease.

We begin by settling into our breath and body as practiced in sitting meditation. When you are ready you can softly touch into the area of your heart, softening there as much as possible. It can be helpful to imagine, visualize yourself at a time of your life, perhaps as a child or the child inside of you. Offer care to yourself by silently dropping words of kindness into your cells, your veins. Below are possible phrases you can use and feel free to be creative, creating words of your own. Take your time, allowing them to resonate in your heart and body.

Kindness Phrases

May I be safe from inner and outer harm.
May I be happy and content.
May I be healthy and strong.
May I live with ease and well-being.
May whatever blocks my heart be dissolved.
May I know joy and freedom.
May I have food, shelter, and good care.
May I be free from animosity and hatred.
May I know peace.
May I be a good friend to myself.

The strong, soft stability that we can develop when we care for ourselves in this way supports opening our hearts to others. Traditionally, after ourselves, we next offer metta to a dear one who has offered us wisdom and unconditional care. If helpful, see them in your mind and heart, feeling their love and energy.

Our heart continues to grow in resilience laying the groundwork to offer kindness to the people or systems that are challenging to us, that may have hurt us through racial ignorance or harm. When you are ready, as much as feels right, open your heart to them, sharing a sense of kind regard. If visualizing them is helpful do so in a way that feels safe, perhaps seeing them out a window passing by. Use the kindness phrases to stabilize your practice and take your time, never abandoning your own heart.

As our hearts open, we may notice an inclination to open more and more. Our understanding deepens. Just as we wish these things for ourselves, we know that all beings, without exception, also wish to have this same kindness and well-being. Consider your family, a racial group, tribe, community, or the entire human race. Take some time to imagine the extent of their racial suffering and notice how you are touched by it. Reflect on your sincere wish that they be free from racial suffering and that all beings, without exception, be free from racial suffering.

Closing Thoughts on Meditation Practice

Consider attending a mindfulness meditation (Vipassana) retreat to deepen your practice. Such a retreat offers you an opportunity to learn of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness as taught by the Buddha, which is a radical practice of self-compassion and respect. This practice supports us in softening the rough edges of racial distress so we can untangle our habits of harm and respond to racial distress more wisely, internally and externally. I would go so far as to say that we need these practices to support us in staying present to the horrors of racial suffering while also experiencing inner freedom from it. Yes, I said freedom! Knowing from the inside out momentary freedom is a potent stabilizer when facing racial distress. Another way to say this is that we can know increasing moments of freedom within racism and despite it.

Free Audio Meditation Resources

- Dharmaseed: <https://dharmaseed.org/teacher/539/> - free guided meditations and talks by Ruth King and other renowned meditation teachers
- Liberate Meditation App: <https://www.facebook.com/liberatemeditation/> - a meditation app by and for the Black, Indigenous, and People of Color community - download for free @ <https://liberatemeditation.com/>
- Insight Timer: <https://insighttimer.com/ruthking> - free guided meditations by Ruth King and other teachers

Meditation Retreat Centers:

- Flowering Lotus Retreat Center, MS
- Insight Meditation Society, MA
- Spirit Rock Meditation Center, CA
- Insight Retreat Center, CA

Meditation Classics for Serious Beginners

- Mindfulness in Plain English, Bhante Henepola Gunaratana
- Mindfulness, Joseph Goldstein
- Radical Acceptance, Tara Brach
- Boundless Heart, Christina Feldman
- A Path with Heart, Jack Kornfield

About Ruth King

Ruth King is the Founder of Mindful of Race Institute, LLC, and is a celebrated author, educator, and meditation teacher. Formally an organizational development consultant to Intel and Levi Strauss corporations, King currently teaches the Mindful of Race Training Program to leaders, teams, and organizations, weaving mindfulness-based principles with an exploration of our racial conditioning, its impact, and our potential.

King teaches mindfulness meditation retreats worldwide and develops meditation practitioners at Spirit Rock Meditation Center, Insight Meditation Society, and the Mindfulness Meditation Teacher Certification Program. She has a Master's Degree in Clinical Psychology from John F. Kennedy University, CA, and is the author of several publications including her most recent, Mindful of Race: Transforming Racism From The Inside Out.

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