



# Mindful of Race

## INSTITUTE

### A Beginner's Guide for Meditating with Race

#### Introduction

*Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.*  
~ James Baldwin

As we 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.

*I imagine one reason people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain.* ~ James Baldwin

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 practice 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 to Mindfulness: *Nothing is Personal, Permanent, or Perfect***

Mindfulness meditation is the practice of present-moment awareness that discerns the true nature of our existence: That change is constant; that we are not solid but rather a series of ever-changing processing, and; we are not in control of having things go our way. In other words, what arises in the body, mind, and heart, is *Not Personal, Permanent, or Perfect*.

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 personal, 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 in 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 understanding and reassurance 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 more deeply understood. Our challenge is to practice awareness.

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 existence can be difficult to grasp in the heat of racial distress. However, with 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. Such freedom supports racial connection and healing.

Entrenched beliefs and closed minds are what wars are made of. 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. When we are unaware of the nature and impact of our actions, we cause much unintentional harm.

Racial distress is a real experience that manifest in our thoughts and actions. 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.

### **Establish Intent for Practice**

We are habitual beings. Some of our racial habits are intentional, and others are unconscious. The ways we have been conditioned to think about race and respond are all habits. The good thing about habits is that we can create new ones. This requires intention.

Consider: Why are you doing the inner work of racial healing? Why does it matter to you? What impact do you hope your mindfulness practice will have? What intentions can you invoke and commit to that would support inner wellbeing and social harmony?

Consider the following such practices or define a few simple and doable practices of your own:

- For peace, my own and that of others, I will practice compassion by not killing the spirit of or deliberately harming other living beings.
- For wellbeing, my own and that of others, I will practice kindness by willingly and ardently learning about myself as a racial being and my impact on others.
- For contentment, my own and that of others, I will practice generosity by not taking more than I need and not taking what has not been earned.
- For wellbeing, my own and that of others, I will practice kindness by not engaging in sexual thoughts and actions that are harmful, denigrating, and oppressive.
- For safety, my own and that of others, I will practice kindness by not speaking in ways that are false or divisive.
- For wellbeing, my own and that of others, I will practice courage by speaking and acting in ways that share responsibility and alleviate the weight of racial oppression.
- For peace, my own and that of others, I will practice compassion by doing my part to dismantle structural racism and other forms of racial injustice.
- For peace, my own and that of others, I will practice compassion by embracing my kinship to all races and to all of life.
- For safety, my own and that of others, I will practice restraint by not clouding my mind with mind-altering intoxicants and habitual insensitivity, disrespect, and obliviousness.

## **Gratitude Practice**

Gratitude is the basis for grace and relaxation. Reflect and acknowledge the unceded indigenous people who cared for the land you now occupy. Imagine them in peaceful reverence to the land for the benefit of all sentient beings as you offer quiet appreciation for their labor and care.

Now, reflect on a wise ancestor, elder, or teacher – someone who cared or cares for you through their lived example or remembrance. Imagine them nearby, offering you warm regard for your good heartedness. Receive their warmth and well wishes.

Take a few moments to open and acknowledge the many forms of grace that affords you the privilege of practice. Allow the experiences of gratitude to intensify, bathing every cell in your body in warm regard. Then rest in whatever stillness, spaciousness, and presences that is here and now.

## **Bring an Ancestor Along**

In the inner 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 deepen our racial understanding, connection, 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 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.

## **Maintain Consistency**

Identify a comfortable and quiet space where you can sit each day. If you are new to meditating, start with a short amount of time and gradually increase the time. 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. If you are not resisting, it will be natural for your sitting periods to extend.

The benefits of a consistent meditation practice are cumulative, both subtle and profound. They include regulation of the body and nervous system, balanced emotions, attunement to others, greater capacity to question and endure racial complexity, and deeper understanding of our impact and interconnectedness with others. Consistency in practice supports inner stability and clarity, fostering insight into our habits of racial harm and healing. Consider sitting daily and consistently an act of mental hygiene.

## **Remove Distractions**

Your meditation practice will be affected by what you eat and drink. Avoid meditating on a full stomach. Sugar, alcohol, and excessive carbohydrates have a sluggish effect on concentration and physical comfort. You afford discipline to your practice when you eliminate distractions. If possible, remove all electronic devices from sight or reach. When we remove habitual distractions, we become more aware of our impulses without acting on them. This is a power only we can give ourselves.

## **Attend to Posture**

Establish a posture that supports awareness and relaxation. Consider the needs of your body and make necessary adjustments, including sitting on a cushion or chair, lying down, or standing. If seated, seek balance at six points:

1. Your sits bones are firmly and evenly planted on your seat or cushion.
2. Your spine is vertical without tension, as if the top of your head is being pulled up toward the sky.
3. Your shoulders and hips are in alignment, and your hands rest open with palms up or down on your thighs. Feel this balance on the inside from the buttocks, up the spine, into the shoulders, down the arms, and into the hands.
4. Your legs are crossed, if that is 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. Use a pillow at your feet if they do not firmly touch the floor. Allow yourself to feel a sense of balance on the inside in the full volume of your legs and feet.
5. Your eyes can be open with a downward diffused gaze a few feet in front of you, or they can be closed. Sense the balance of your eyes making contact.
6. Your teeth are slightly ajar, which naturally relaxes the jaw, and your lips are lightly touching each other. Rest the tip of your tongue just behind your front top teeth. Feel the fullness of the mouth and a sense of balance within the mouth.

Establish these six points of awareness prior to any sitting meditation practice.

## **Dedicate Your Practice**

As you end your meditation, dedicate the benefits of your practice to all of the influences and conditions in your life that made it possible for you to practice. Imagine dedicating whatever ease, insight, and wellbeing you experienced in your practice to all conscious beings, near and far. Breathe in appreciation for the privilege to practice; Breathe out spreading your wish that all conscious beings benefit from your practice of racial

awareness and wellbeing. Know that your body and breath are joining with earth, air, and all beings in the alchemy of good will.

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

### **Guided Practice: Cultivating Ease**

Notice the experience of settling into the fullness of your whole body. Allow your mind to rest in this fullness. Breath 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.

Continue to practice in this way. Take as much time as you can to rest in the stillness of the body and the movement of the breath, noticing the quality of heart and mind that is present here and now.

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This simple grounding meditation supports us in directly knowing 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 racial habits of harm.

As you move throughout your day, 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?

In the early stages of mindfulness 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 problems 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 turn away. In this beginning practice, simply redirect your attention to the stillness in the body and movement of the breath; ease and inner stability will develop over time supporting deeper insight and wise action.

### **Deepen your Mindfulness 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 insight.

This practice further 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
- Southern Dharma Retreat Center, NC

## **Mindfulness 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
- Time to Stand Up, Thanissara
- The Experience of Insight, Joseph Goldstein

## **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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