



# Living Our Histories, Shaping Our Futures: Buddhist Practice and Anti- Racist Education for White People<sup>1</sup>

by Jessica Locke<sup>2</sup>

“They are, in effect, trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it” (Baldwin 2007, 16–17). James Baldwin included this devastating yet compassionate diagnosis of white people’s racial ignorance in his famed “Letter to My Nephew,” published at the Centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1963. Addressed to his teenage nephew, the letter contemplates his nephew’s future as a Black man in the United States, comparing those prospects with Baldwin’s father’s frustrations and heartbreak at his own experience of racism.

This one sentence has long struck me as a clear, pithy expression of not just the root of racial bias and oppression, but also the human condition more broadly. We dwell within our histories – the residue of our past experiences, our family lineage, and the cultural and political mores within which we have been socialized. Even our language and systems of thought have histories that we take up and enact in our own thinking and self-expression. In

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Buddhism, teachings on karma and interdependent arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*) illuminate the immense historicity of the lives that we lead – that whatever we experience is an effect of a constellation of causes, and that the lives we lead today are conditioned by habitual patterns of thinking and behaving that we have cultivated and re-inscribed across innumerable lifetimes.

This all may sound rather deterministic, as if we have no choice but to be hurled forward by the weight of our own habits in perpetuity. And perhaps in our more cynical moments we think that's true, when it seems impossible to fathom what it will take to release ourselves from the histories in which we dwell, the histories in which we at times seem to be trapped. But really the entire Buddhist tradition is predicated upon the belief that the shape of our inner lives is pliable, that it can be intervened upon and reshaped, and that its trajectory can be reset in the direction of compassion and wisdom.

That pliability of our inner life is also what we must invoke when we seek to challenge racist norms and perceptual habits in the interest of racial justice. I think this task is especially urgent for white people – including and perhaps especially liberal white people who want to be a part of dismantling white supremacy. I count myself within that category, but I also know that I have been raised, socialized, and educated in a society that centers whiteness as the “norm.” I take seriously Baldwin’s point that even well-meaning white people are obstructed by the ways that white supremacy has conditioned our thought without us even realizing it. The sedimented history of white supremacy powerfully conditions all of our thinking, and an important task for white liberals is not just to politically or philosophically disavow racism but also to question how our own thinking continues to enact habitual patterns rooted in racism and work to unweave those patterns.

## The Ethics of Our Inner Lives

So how *do* we get out from the weight of our sedimented histories, our habitual ways of thinking, feeling and perceiving by which we continue to be both the author of and the audience to our suffering? When I contemplate the available trajectories from our history into our future, I often turn to the contemporary philosopher Bell Hooks – a pioneering thinker in philosophy of race, feminism, and cultural criticism who has long cited Buddhism as an important influence in her personal path. Hooks writes that “there must exist a paradigm, a practical model for social change that includes an understanding of ways to transform consciousness that are linked to efforts to transform structures” (Hooks 1989, 201). In Hooks’ comment I hear an exhortation toward the kind of deep inner work that affords genuine liberation and relationship with others – the path that she refers to as the path of love. That work of transforming consciousness does not replace the work we must also do ‘on the ground’ through direct action to change the institutional structures that perpetuate racial injustice and oppression. As Hooks says, transforming consciousness must be *linked* with transforming those institutional structures. But, for white people, the effectiveness of our attempts to engage in direct action will be thwarted – if not counterproductive altogether – if we have not contended with and uprooted the ways we replicate racist habits in our own thinking.

I see the work of interrupting and addressing the deep conditioning that shapes the habitual patterns of our inner life – the work of ‘transforming consciousness’ – as a question of moral phenomenology. The term ‘phenomenology’ refers to a Western philosophical tradition founded in the 20th century that sought to understand how human beings come to experience the world the way they do. The phenomenologist studies phenomena (that is, whatever ‘ap-

pears' to us in our world) and, in so doing, comes to understand the experiencing subject herself. What within our own consciousness structures our experience? What makes us experience our world the way we do, with the particular meanings and qualities that supervene upon the objects of our world? Different phenomenologists have approached these questions in different ways, but the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology developed an understanding of habit that I have found very useful in understanding the ethical ramifications of experience. For Merleau-Ponty, our perceptual habits develop over time through repeated engagements with the world, gradually investing our world with particular meanings and values. The particular significances that supervene on the objects of our world are not objective traits of those phenomena; they are the product of subjective habituation that shapes the structures through which we experience our world.

In moral phenomenology, this process takes on ethical weight when we consider the basic fact that the whole 'scene' of our moral life unfolds within a world that is inflected by our habituated ways of perceiving. When it comes to our moral life, the ways in which ethical questions and phenomena push or pull us – or whether they even appear to us as ethically significant at all – are shaped by our habits of perception. What we perceive as ethically charged and the quality of that ethical charge itself will depend upon our moral habituation.

Although each of us experiences our world with a seamless, ready-made sense to it, everything in it actually comes to us invested with qualities and significances that are particular to us. Merleau-Ponty writes that, for the experiencing person, the world "speaks to him on the topic of himself and places his own thoughts in the world" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 134). The world we have is one that reflects our own pre-reflective, affective values back to us.

How we perceive something is therefore a crucial component of our ethical lives.

This picture of ethical life may differ from how most of us think about our morals. Oftentimes, we think of ethics in terms of moral or political values – explicit, intellectual commitments that we would codify and defend using reasoning. In moral phenomenology, however, we see ethics is not just about holding ‘correct’ views but also involves the pre-reflective, affectively tinged perceptual habits that are often harder for us to pinpoint, much less critique. This becomes an especially pressing task when we find that there are ways that we perceive others and experience our lives that do not align with the values or virtues that we would otherwise hope to live by.

## **Training the Mind to Unweave Self-Cherishing**

This certainly comes up in Buddhist practice, a discipline that has long been keenly attuned to the challenge of transforming the structure of our experience in the interest of ethical growth. According to Buddhist ethics, at the heart of the human condition is our problematic reification of the self. Our ignorance about ‘the way things truly are’ – which is to say, interdependent and impermanent – causes us to entrench ourselves in a fictitious, erroneous identification with the self. This gives rise to a territorial defense of the self and its interests and an aggressive stance toward anything that poses a threat to the integrity of our self-enclosed cocoons of ego, a dynamic known as ‘self-cherishing.’ The afflictive emotions that follow from our ignorance polarize our world in an exhausting battle of self-other dualism. Ending our suffering and engendering the wisdom and compassion that allows us to be of benefit to the world requires getting out of this habitual drama of the ego. This is a ‘thumbnail sketch,’ as it were, of Buddhist psychology. The ethics of contesting this self-cherishing that is at the

heart of our suffering and our ethical infelicities can be understood as a moral-phenomenological project.<sup>3</sup>

The various traditions of Buddhist practice offer us an abundance of methods for undermining this habit of self-cherishing. For example, the Tibetan Buddhist *lojong* ('Mind-Training') tradition is a revered method for cultivating *bodhicitta* ("awakening mind" in Sanskrit) in order to undo the primal habits of self-cherishing. *Bodhicitta* names the realization of one's own selflessness and the emptiness of all phenomena, as well as the compassionate commitment to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings. *Lojong* offers many approaches and practices that aim to reorient the practitioner away from self-cherishing and toward the compassionate orientation of other-centered altruism. The most famous of these are Atiśa Dīpamkara's (11th cen. CE) aphoristic teachings, collected in the *Seven-Point Mind Training*. Eminently accessible and folksy, most of these aphorisms present pithy ethical teachings, while two of them give basic instructions for the practice of *tonglen* ('sending and taking'). Altogether, the main idea behind this text is to practice reversing the habitual tendencies that stem from self-cherishing – over and over and over again.

Take, for example, the two lines that read, "When the world and its inhabitants boil with negativity, / Transform adverse conditions into the path of enlightenment" (Chekawa Yeshé Dorjé 2006, 83). We all have moments when the world seems to be 'boiling with negativity' – when nothing is going our way, when it seems so hard to find a friend and so easy to find enemies, and every surface of our world seems to be sharpened to an edge. Often, we respond to hard times by either resenting them ('Why me?') or trying to abbreviate our exposure to them as quickly as possible ('Make this go away'). But the instruction here asks us to act 'out of character,' one could say. Rather than responding with aggression or aversion to negative experiences, we can view them positively. We do

this not as an act of martyrdom – of ‘taking on the sins of the world.’ Rather, the pain of taking the vicissitudes of life personally is a teaching, an indication of where and how we are engaged in self-cherishing.

This is not at all a quietist stance that says that if we are wronged or suffering, we should do nothing more than blame ourselves for hurting; injustice and oppression can still be confronted on this view. At the same time, we can always examine how and why we react to hardship – and what we define as hardship in the first place. Am I angry or indignant because my self-cherishing is getting ‘poked,’ or am I acting and speaking from a clear-eyed ethos of care for the well-being of myself and others? Sometimes the distinction between these two is subtle, and sometimes we can experience both at the same time. But from the standpoint of *lojong*, the critical issue is to *make use of* the negativity and adverse conditions that we ordinarily want to reject, to use it to root out our own self-cherishing whenever and however we can find it. Reversing the directionality of our habitual self-cherishing in these instances is the heart of *lojong*.

*Tonglen* likewise requires that we go against the grain of our self-cherishing. Many wonderful teachers have offered us opportunities to learn and practice *tonglen* in a teaching environment, so I would like to encourage readers to learn this practice from a qualified teacher if they so desire. But for the purposes of this article, I will explain this practice in outline to draw out its moral-phenomenological components. In *tonglen*, the practitioner uses the rhythm of the in- and out-breath to work with the polarities of self-cherishing. Atiśa’s instructions for the practice of *tonglen* read: “Train in the two—giving and taking—alternately. / Place the two astride your breath” (Chekawa Yeshé Dorjé 2006, 83). Quite simply, self-cherishing dictates that we want to hold onto positive things and repel negative things. In *tonglen*, we reverse that pattern by ‘breathing in’ that which we usually avoid and ‘giving away’ that which we

usually cherish as we exhale. Some teachers include a simple visualization with this, such that we ‘breathe in’ dark muck (representing everything we usually reject) and ‘breathe out’ bright luminous light (representing all of the positive merit and good things that we offer to others). When we do this, we are using the powerfully symbolic and embodied vehicle of the visualized breath to undermine our habitual patterns of self-cherishing.

As instructions for cultivating *bodhicitta*, the *lojong* tradition offers us powerful methods for undoing the habituation of our self-cherishing. In so doing, we work to revise the phenomenological structures through which we have a world – uprooting the entrenched polarities of self and other that are the expressions of our ignorance, the source of our suffering, and our main obstacle to being truly, compassionately beneficial to all sentient beings. In this way, we are familiarizing ourselves with a new way of experiencing the world – little by little planting the seeds of other-centered compassion and altruism.

This is one paradigm for ‘transforming consciousness’ that has been tried and tested for centuries. Importantly, it shows us that there is a distinction to be made between ‘understanding’ the view of emptiness and truly ‘realizing’ the powerful yet subtle truth of our intimacy with others and the world. We can be well-versed in the dharma without necessarily being all that compassionate; we may be able to effortlessly deploy Buddhist jargon without having brought the experience to which that jargon was intended to point down from our head into our heart. This view of ‘transforming our consciousness’ shows the importance of being willing to be changed by the teachings at the level of the very structure through which we experience the world.



## Making a Practice of Decentering Whiteness

It is fair to say, then, that Buddhist practice – in its many forms – offers us tools to shape our inner lives. It tells us that it is possible to work with the phenomenological polarities of our experience so that we can become wiser and more compassionate. I see a structural similarity between that process of moral-phenomenological practice in Buddhism and what white folks are doing when we practice anti-racist education. In both instances, we are reorienting some of the fundamental structures through which we have a world – the perceptual habits rooted in the self-other binary and the perceptual habits rooted in norms of whiteness.

This is not to say, however, that practicing the dharma serves as an adequate antidote to our unconscious racial biases. I feel compelled to enunciate this distinction because, all too often, I have found within Buddhist practitioner communities a tendency to use the dharma itself as a vehicle for complacency about racial ignorance. Over the years, I have participated in and facilitated various workshops on diversity and white privilege for Buddhist practitioners, and at some point a variation on a theme emerges: “Fortunately, as Buddhists we know that these racial categories are ultimately empty;” or “Fortunately, our community doesn’t have these problems [of racism]. It’s really a problem out there [among non-practitioners, or among political conservatives];” or “Our sangha is very close-knit and loving; race isn’t really an issue here.”

This brand of spiritual bypassing fails to appreciate the patterns of white supremacist thinking that are reflected within our own practice communities and in our own thinking. It unrealistically assumes that, because we are Buddhists who have dedicated untold hours on the cushion to working with our minds, we are immune to the racist messaging that is transmitted daily throughout the wider

culture. It enacts a gesture of separation from the culture's history that keeps us from understanding it and effectively challenging it.

Buddhist practice, on its own, does not free us from the sedimented history of white supremacy. But understanding how and why Buddhist practice works can help us understand what it would take to truly contend with the histories that are carried forward into the present by our racialized perceptual habits. In this sense, I find it useful to study the moral phenomenology of Buddhist practice alongside the moral phenomenology of white anti-racist education. Through the lens of moral phenomenology, there is a striking similarity between cultivating *bodhicitta* and Hooks' proposed anti-racist task of transforming consciousness.

At the phenomenological level, whiteness functions as a perceptual habit. (This is distinct from structural racism, in which social and political institutions disempower and oppress Black, indigenous, and people of color.) The term 'whiteness' names the ways in which norms, meanings, and valuations in a culture center, empower and confer value upon white people, while decentering, disempowering and devaluing Black, indigenous, and other people of color. The norms and valuations of whiteness function as tools of racist pedagogy, teaching each of us whom and what is valuable, 'normal,' or ideal. For example, asking an Asian person, "No, where are you from?" carries the implicit message that, "Whether or not you were born here, you're still foreign." It tells that person that, regardless of how many years or generations she or her family has been here, she is still 'Other.' The ubiquitous 'otherizing' of attitudes like this is usually not intentional, but it still displays an unconscious view that people of color need to explain themselves and their presence in the United States in a way that white Americans do not. That is, whiteness is the unraced norm and the standard against which other races are contrasted as marginal.

Recall the Merleau-Pontian assertion that “the world speaks to us on the topic of ourselves.” For many white people, the world speaks to us on the topic of our whiteness, but it does so by making whiteness disappear from view. Part of what it means to have privilege and to be centered in a culture is that we are not aware of that centering or that privilege as such; it is just part of the ‘element’ in which we find ourselves. To the extent that we are raised in and have inculcated norms of whiteness in our education and upbringing, we take up and integrate these norms and valuations as part of the basic, fundamental structure of our world. From the standpoint of moral phenomenology, whiteness is part of our habitual perceptual structure. We see the world *through* these racialized perceptual habits, but we do not see the habits themselves (even though they may be evident to the people of color who are targeted as ‘Other’ by the norms of whiteness). There is something troublingly solipsistic about this state of affairs; from within the cocoon of white normalcy, we cannot really encounter others truly and genuinely. The fullness of the humanity of those that have been ‘marked’ as ‘Other’ is obscured.

There is nothing ultimately *true* or *real* about whiteness and the system of valuations that affirm its centrality in American culture, but the lived experience of its regulative power is still potent. Although whiteness is a cultural, historical phenomenon, to the extent that we have inculcated whiteness as a norm, it will also function as a structure of our experience – as part of the pre-reflective, affective values that shape how we receive and respond to our world. Social psychologists studying implicit bias have helped us to understand how this shows up in mundane but consequential social interactions. For example, one of Jack Dovidio’s most well-known experiments on implicit bias showed that white study subjects were likely to discriminate against hypothetical job applicants with stereotypically Black-sounding names, even if those white study subjects professed values of racial egalitarianism (Dovidio and

Gaertner 2000). In other words, even these well-meaning, liberal white people perceived Black people through a lens of ‘Otherness’ – projecting upon them a subtle but demonstrably negative valence.

This shows that, for white folks raised within and unconsciously conditioned by norms of white supremacy, genuine anti-racism will require not just adopting ‘correct’ views about racial justice, but also asks that we do the deep work of challenging the harmfully racialized aspects of how we experience ourselves, others, and society. Undoing racialized perceptual habits also requires a project of reworking the habitual, phenomenological structure of our experience – hitherto shaped according to norms of whiteness.

We cannot meaningfully contend with the unconscious habits of whiteness by pointing out that it is an empty racial category or that it is undemocratic or immoral. These critiques may be correct, but assenting to them intellectually does not actually amount to unweaving the perceptual habits that affirm the centrality of whiteness as a standard of value in our thinking and our culture.

As in Buddhist practice, we need to actively engage in practices of moral-phenomenological education to challenge habits of whiteness. There are many skillful means for doing this coming from activists, social psychologists, contemplatives, and philosophers. I am inspired, for example, by the contemporary political theorist Chris Lebron, who writes about the power of Black literature as a tool in what he calls “racial democratic education” (Lebron 2015). Lebron highlights the role that imagination can play in white people becoming receptive to the narrative of a Black person’s experience, because “imagination holds the possibility of freeing Americans from an ideology that many do not in fact reflexively affirm in any case” (Lebron 2015, 161). For white readers, drawing our minds out of our habitual experience and re-orienting ourselves – even if only temporarily – to the lived experience of someone who

exists outside of the ‘center’ of whiteness that we ordinarily occupy creates the basis for an experience of a wider, shared humanity. This short-circuits and undermines the habitual patterns of our racial perceptions that usually go unchallenged or unnoticed.

This ‘literary practice’ of decentering whiteness is just one example of how we can make an exercise of uprooting our racialized assumptions and habits. But it bears emphasizing that a practice like this is not a complete anti-racist pedagogy unto itself, nor is it adequate as stand-alone anti-racist intervention. I believe that for any white person to commit to anti-racism in good faith, we need to begin with ourselves, genuinely seeking to question and interrupt the racist valuations that we have received and that we may unwittingly re-enact in our daily lives. But doing this is just the first step. We also need to *engage* by seeking out ways to be of concrete benefit to anti-racist movements in our communities.

Of course, there is no perfect formula or ‘quick fix’ for unlearning racist norms and values. Shifting the moral-phenomenological structures through which we experience ourselves and others is a long-term, challenging endeavor, and while Buddhist practice does not take the place of anti-racist pedagogy, in many ways it can help prepare us for it. Buddhist practitioners spend a lot of time on the cushion becoming familiar with our minds and learning how to be friends with even the most uncomfortable states of mind. This kind of bravery to ‘hold our seat’ is a skill that we can put to use when challenging our biases and the norms that uphold our own privilege. We can use the same practice guidelines that have been so fruitful for working with our minds – making friends with whatever arises, staying grounded in the body, remaining attuned to the resource of a big mind – for approaching this work.

To be sure, this kind of ethical work is not easy. It requires that we become intimately familiar with the parts of ourselves that may be hardest for us to draw out and work

with without shutting down. It would be much easier, perhaps, to simply follow a rule book – subscribe to moral commandments or espouse the ‘right’ views publicly without necessarily doing the intra-personal work that reflects those commitments. But I believe that this is really where the ‘rubber hits the road’ with our practice. Can we use the skills that we develop in our practice in order to relate to some of the most heartbreaking aspects of our society and ourselves with a clear mind and an open heart? Can we abide in the ‘hot seat’ of deep personal work – the kind of work that will make us more available to others and better equipped to benefit others rather than cause harm? We have the tools and instructions to transform our consciousness and to illuminate even the most deeply-entrenched parts of our ethical lives. Although we are shaped by our histories – and at times perhaps even feel trapped by them – these histories have futures as well. The shape of our moral habituation is more pliable than we realize. Taking responsibility for the structure of our inner life is ambitious, but in doing so we stand to profoundly reshape some of the most consequential structures through which we experience and engage with our world.

## Post Script

When I was invited to write a piece on dharma and anti-racism for *Insight Journal* last fall, I could not have known that its eventual publication date would end up falling just weeks after the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, nor could I have anticipated the massive, sustained popular uprising calling for justice in their names and in the names of so many other Black victims of racist violence and the wave of police violence with which that uprising has been met. Anti-racist work has always been urgent, and now that urgency has galvanized a wider and more diverse array of people and communities in the United States (and

beyond) than ever before. This is a moment in which we are drawing forth and seeking to break what may very well be the original ‘habit’ of American culture. It seems that *if* we do this right something genuinely transformative could be in the offing. I hope that this piece can in some small way add momentum to that process by discussing one critical area in which white people are called in this moment to challenge white supremacy: in our own pre-reflective habits of perceiving, thinking, and feeling. This is a lifelong project, a commitment that we must renew and sustain for the long haul. I have included a list of books and articles that have been useful for me as I have done this work that I hope may be similarly useful to others.

In addition to this ‘recommended reading,’ I would like to emphasize once more that although questioning our perceptual habits is powerful, lifelong work, it is not *the only* work. Critical self-reflection is indispensable, but there is more to anti-racism than self-reflection. This doesn’t mean that we all should become full-time activists or anti-racist ‘influencers’ overnight. Black leaders and communities have been at this for centuries. We would do well to follow their lead, amplify their voices, support them and their work financially and otherwise, and participate in their movements while being mindful of not centering ourselves or seeking applause as we do so. When we share power, we are practicing another form of de-centering whiteness – not just in our habits of perception, but in our relationships, institutions and society. That, too, is the work.

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## Appendix: Additional Recommended Reading

*In addition to the works cited above, here are some of my favorite texts that, each in its own way, invite us to ‘turn the mind’ – to reorient our assumptions, re-examine our habitual ways of thinking, and enter into a practice of transforming consciousness.*



- Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*  
Gloria Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*  
James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (or really any of his works)  
Daina Ramey Berry and Kali Nicole Gross, *A Black Women's History of the United States*  
Pema Chödrön, *Start Where You Are: A Guide to Compassionate Living*  
Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*  
Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility*  
Reni Eddo-Lodge, "Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race"  
Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *The Golden Gulag* (also look for her many print and podcast interviews and articles)  
Ruth Wilson Gilmore and James Kilgore, "The Case for Abolition"  
Bell Hooks, *Writing Beyond Race* and *Ain't I A Woman* (and many, many more)  
Thubten Jinpa, *Essential Mind Training: Tibetan Wisdom for Daily Life*  
Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun, "Elements of White Middle Class Dominant Culture"  
Traleg Kyabgon, *The Practice of Lojong: Cultivating Compassion through Training the Mind*  
Chris Lebron, *The Making of Black Lives Matter*  
Rhonda Magee, *The Inner Work of Racial Justice*  
Zenzu Earthlyn Manuel, *The Way of Tenderness: Awakening through Race, Sexuality and Gender*  
Fleet Maull, *Radical Responsibility*  
Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands*  
Mia Mingus, "Transformative Justice: A Brief Description"  
Ruth Morris, "Why Transformative Justice?"  
Naomi Murakawa, *The First Civil Right*  
Lama Rod Owens, *Love and Rage*  
Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*

Geshe Lhundub Sopa, Leonard Zwilling and Michael Sweet. *Peacock in the Poison Grove: Two Buddhist Texts on Training the Mind*

Alex Vitale, *The End of Policing*

Rev. Angel Kyodo Williams, Lama Rod Owens, and Jasmine Syedullah, PhD, *Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love and Liberation*

Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

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<sup>3</sup> Although there are various systematic interpretations of Buddhist ethics, I am sympathetic to Jay Garfield’s argument that much Buddhist ethics can best be understood as moral phenomenology (Garfield 2015; 2012).