

Mindfulness and the Beloved Community

by Charles Johnson

If we wish to understand the special meaning that the Buddhadharma has for blacks in America—and why in the 21st century it may be the next step in our spiritual evolution toward what Martin Luther King Jr. called the “beloved community”—we need look no farther than the teaching of mindfulness, which is the root and fruit of all Buddhist practice. In Sanskrit, the word for mindfulness is *smṛiti*, which means “remembrance, recollection, or memory.” One important variation on *smṛiti* is *smṛitimat*, which means “possessing full consciousness.” Bhikkhu Bodhi explains this core Dharma teaching succinctly when he says:

The task of Right Mindfulness is to clear up the cognitive field. Mindfulness brings to light experience in its pure immediacy. It reveals the object as it is before it has been plastered over with conceptual paint, overlaid with interpretations. To practice mindfulness is thus a matter not so much of doing but of undoing: not thinking, not judging, not associating, not planning, not imagining, not wishing.

For black Americans in the post–Civil Rights period, this systematic undoing of the cultural indoctrination, the “conceptual paint” we have received from a very decadent, violent, materialistic, and Eurocentric society, is crucial for our liberation, personally and as a people. The situation of being a racial minority in a predominantly white country—this provincial, Western fishbowl, or “wasteland,” as T. S. Eliot described it—is rife with ironies and dangers. One of the greatest ironies is that black Americans for centuries had to be open to more than one cultural orientation. We had to know how to “read” American society in at least two ways—first in terms of what we knew about the enormous contributions African Americans have made to this country since the time of the 17th-century colonies, a knowledge gleaned from other black people and from unrecorded stories transmitted by family members and friends, which whites ignored, didn’t know, or marginalized in their history books and “mainstream” media. Secondly, we had to understand, as any social (or racial) outsider must, the cultural formations of a WASP society simply because such intimate knowing of the white Other was necessary for navigating successfully through America’s institutions (schools, jobs, social situations, etc.).

That “double consciousness,” as W. E. B. Du Bois put it 100 years ago in *The Souls of Black Folk*, creates a valuable critical distance. When you look at American materialism and decadence, DuBois said in 1926, “you know in your heart that these are not the things you really want. You realize this sooner than the average white American because, pushed aside as we have been in America, there has come to us not only a certain distaste for the tawdry and flamboyant but a vision of what the world could be if it were really a beautiful world.”

We know that until recently the white Weltanschauung was myopic and blissfully ignored the history, lives, and philosophical visions of people of color, privileging and prioritizing instead the ideas, texts, and experiences of whites as the universal standard for the good, the true, and the beautiful. This is, of course, to be expected in a country where those of European descent still control so much of the cultural apparatus that shapes public (and popular) consciousness. If one is in the majority, unenlightened, and holds the reins of power in the realm of samsara—the world of racial dualism, egotism, and Them vs. Us—one naturally defines the world in one's own (white) image.

There is much of great value in the Western world, but many WASPs too often are, sadly, hesitant to experience the world beyond the parochial fishbowl they have created. This is a form of spiritual and intellectual laziness we black people cannot afford if we hope to survive in a society long hostile to us. From the beginning of our Western experience we have been positioned, culturally, to be open to all racial Others, to explore and absorb multiple visions of human experience, Western and Eastern. We are a people forged, as writer Albert Murray once said, as “Omni-Americans.”

That openness to, say, the East can serve us well in contemporary America. For in today's Western fishbowl, the American mind, black or white, is conditioned day and night to resemble the famous “monkey mind” described by the 19th-century philosopher Vivekananda in Raja Yoga:

There was a monkey, restless by its own nature, as all monkeys are. As if that were not enough, someone made him drink freely of wine, so that the monkey became still more restless. Then a scorpion stung him. When a man is stung by a scorpion, he jumps about for a whole day; so the poor monkey found his condition worse than ever. To complete his misery a demon entered into him. What language can describe the uncontrollable restlessness of that monkey? The human mind is like that monkey, incessantly active by its own nature; then it becomes drunk with the wine of desire, thus increasing its turbulence. After desire takes possession comes the sting of the scorpion of jealousy of the success of others, and last of all the demon of pride enters the mind, making it think itself of all importance. How hard to control such a mind.

How difficult, indeed, especially for black people who know America is still, for the most part, a racially balkanized nation, and who find here so many negative images of themselves mirrored back by popular culture. Fortunately, the Buddhadharma provides, through mindfulness and other meditational practices, time-honored techniques for taming the labile mind. For undoing the received and generally biased interpretations of the world (and Madison Avenue's endless propaganda of having and getting) with which this society bombards all its citizens. Those practices deliver to us, phenomenologically, a perception of the world before it has been mediated by the language of samsaric influences, for mindfulness is, if nothing else, the practice of radical attention. Of clear seeing. Of listening, which is one of the attributes of love, or metta (lovingkindness). When we practice moment-by-moment mindfulness, or vipassana (“insight meditation”), as outlined in the Mahasatipatthana Sutra, we carefully and dispassionately observe all that arises and passes through the mind, but without clinging or attachment,

“contemplating feelings as feelings...mind as mind...[and] mind objects as mind objects.” After decades of practice, we trust, as Shakyamuni Buddha counseled his followers, only what is empirically given in our direct experience, and we let go the illusions created by social conditioning, by a flawed, Eurocentric educational system, and by a language steeped in metaphysical dualism. (As Thomas Hobbes once said, “Speech has something in it like a spider’s web.”) The result, as Alex Kennedy reminds us in *The Buddhist Vision*, is that the practitioner of Dharma tames his mind, knows where his thoughts have come from, is able to distinguish what in the mind is the product of past conditioning and what is genuine. He lives in the here and now. He is epistemologically humble, respecting the mystery that lies at the heart of Being. And he knows as well that whatever we find of value in our life’s experiences—all the teachers and texts and practices—are simply tools to serve our enlightenment and liberation. After we have crossed to the “other shore,” we can “let go” of these tools, just as one would not cling or be attached to a boat after it has taken us across the sea (of suffering).

Among the unnecessary baggage that mindfulness allows us to let go is the tragic belief in a separate, enduring (black) self. It slashes away, as effectively as does Ockham’s Razor (which says we should avoid postulating entities to account for what can be explained without them or, scientifically, when presented with two hypotheses that explain something, it’s best to select the simpler one), the narrow, obscuring ego. When that ego is gone we experience what Thich Nhat Hanh calls our “interbeing,” his neologism for dependent origination (*pratityasamutpada*). As Dr. King put it, “We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

Through mindfulness, the Four Noble Truths, and the “three jewels” of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, African Americans will experience a long-deferred peace. In fact, we will be peace embodied. We will experience not only solace in the face of life’s general sufferings (sickness, old age, and death) but also a clarifying refuge from white racism, and certain crippling, *samsaric* aspects of black American life, by which I mean the socially conditioned thirst and attachment too many black people have for transitory, material possessions and ephemeral pleasures that have been so long denied. Reams have already been written about the devastating effects that black-on-black crime, drugs, gang violence, the high incarceration rate for young black men, and the preponderance of single-parent homes have on our fragile communities. These *dysteleological* aspects of black life do not simply have sociological and economic causes. Behind those we find deeper layers of selfish desire, much self-inflicted suffering, and the chimera of the ego. Such problems can only be addressed if the Revolution first begins within each and every one of us. Only if we can let our hearts flower open 24/7 to a life of nonviolence (physically and verbally) and to *ahimsa* (harmlessness) toward all sentient beings who, after all, want only the same two things we do—happiness and to avoid suffering. And only if we tame our tempestuous “monkey minds” through the daily practice of mindfulness, which can be realized anywhere and at any time: when we sit, walk, wash the dishes, or do any worldly task, for in Buddhism there is no distinction (or dualism) between the sacred and profane.

As the great dialectician Nagarjuna revealed to us, samsara is nirvana. The everyday is the holy. The dream-world of samsara—of so much suffering—is the projection of our and others’ sedimented delusions and selfish desires (Bhikkhu Bodhi’s “conceptual paint”) onto nirvana. Yet, samsara is logically prior to and necessary for our awakening to nirvana, which in Sanskrit means “to blow out” (nir, out; vana, blow). When that is achieved, we—as a people—will know greater joy, freedom, and abundant creativity; and we will realize, like the poet Bunan, the transcendent beauty and liberation that lies beyond a false sense of dualism:

The moon’s the same old moon,
The flowers exactly as they were,
Yet I’ve become the thingness
Of all the things I see. v

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