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Mindfulness Meditation as a Remedy to “White Ignorance” and Its Consequences

Wioleta Polinska

[T]his is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen,
and for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them,
that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands
of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it.

—James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*¹

ABSTRACT

By employing recent work on epistemology of white ignorance, this article argues that racial prejudice impacts both whites and Blacks in a profound way that extends beyond the cognitive discrimination to the realm of psychological and physical well-being. Given that the mechanism of racial discrimination affects the whole embodied being of both victims and oppressors, theologians need to investigate ways of reducing prejudice that extend beyond the rational countermeasures that offer severe criticism of racist thoughts and behaviors. The latest research shows that various forms of meditations might offer effective means of reducing both implicit as well as explicit racial bias among the white population. Since Christian and other religious communities center their teachings on love and compassion for the “other,” tapping into the contemplative resources present in various religious traditions is an indispensable step toward reducing racial forms of prejudice. There is evidence that those discriminated against can also benefit from meditation. Because discrimination affects the mind and the body of those discriminated against, African American scholars have turned their attention to mind-body approaches. African American health psychologists, community health researchers, and legal scholars investigate ways that meditation practices could aid discriminated-against racial groups when legal, social, and cultural structures are steeped in prejudice. Given a growing body of evidence that links health disparities to psychosocial and bio-psychosocial stressors, this article examines studies that demonstrate specific health benefits that meditative techniques provide to the African American population. Beyond the area of physical and psychological health, attention is given to meditative strategies employed by Black legal scholars

and activists who are dedicated to transforming the criminal justice system through mindfulness and loving-kindness practices. Such contemplative strategies are part of “community engaged mindfulness” for lawyers, law students, and lawmakers, but also African Americans who struggle with systemic racism, as well as police officers who need to confront their own biases.

KEYWORDS: white ignorance, white supremacy, epistemic resistance, racist theology, Black theology, racial prejudice, discrimination, psychosocial stressors, health disparities, mindfulness meditation.

In his recent book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Black liberation theologian James Cone, ponders why white religious leaders were silent about “Christians” who carried out lynching atrocities. It would be easy to dismiss such acts by suggesting that they were deviant actions committed by a few marginal criminals who undermined the just law of the land. Cone refutes such a possibility by stating that lynching was “an extra-legal punishment sanctioned by the community.”² It was through lynching that the whites exercised their right to control the Black populations on the basis of a religious belief “that America is a white nation called by God to bear witness to the superiority of ‘white over black.’”³ Not only was lynching a media spectacle announced to the public in prominent newspapers, it was a popular event attended by as many as ten or twenty thousand men, women, and children. In what follows, Cone paints a picture of a macabre fair: “a family affair, a ritual celebration of white supremacy, where women and children were often given the first opportunity to torture black victims—burning black flesh and cutting off genitals, fingers, toes, and ears as souvenirs. Postcards were made from the photographs taken of black victims with white lynchers and onlookers smiling as they struck a pose for the camera.”⁴ In spite of such horrific “celebrations,” the white religious establishment, even the most progressive religious theologians, such as Reinhold Niebuhr, failed to see racism as a central theological issue. While Niebuhr criticized white racist prejudice, and identified examples of Black suffering, he lacked the empathy to feel Black suffering as his own and never made justice for Blacks an urgent concern of his theology.⁵ Cone argues that Niebuhr’s failure on this account has to do with his social formation. By identifying with the normative gaze of whiteness, Niebuhr preserved class solidarity over solidarity with the victims of white supremacy.⁶ In addition, Cone sees Niebuhr as making no effort toward friendships and intellectual connections with Black people, the very people who might have helped him to see the world from the vantage point of those terrorized by lynching. Most importantly for Cone, Niebuhr’s blindness to racial injustice displays “a defect in the conscience of white Christians” that continues on long after legal lynching was abolished.⁷ This is so for two reasons. First, white theologians then and now continue to overlook the urgency and centrality of the problem of race for theology and ethics.⁸ Second, Black America endures another form of lynching that is administered by the current criminal justice system, such as high imprisonment rates for Black men and the administration of the death penalty that is primarily reserved for people of color.⁹ According to statistics provided by The National Association for Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), African

Americans are incarcerated at nearly six times the rates of whites,¹⁰ they represent 42 percent of death row inmates,¹¹ and experience violent death at the hands of the police at a disproportionate rate. Black Americans are 2.5 times as likely as white Americans to be shot and killed by police officers.¹²

Contemporary philosophical and ethical reflections on epistemology of ignorance offer a much-needed framework to explore the shortcomings of what Cone refers to as white conscience. By employing recent work on epistemology of ignorance, I will propose that the mechanism of racial prejudice impacts both whites and Blacks in a profound way that extends beyond the cognitive discrimination (whether conscious or non-conscious) to the realm of psychological and physical well-being. Given that the mechanism of racial discrimination affects the whole embodied being of both victims and oppressors, theologians need to investigate ways of reducing prejudice that extend beyond the rational countermeasures that offer severe criticism of racist thoughts and behaviors. The latest research shows that various forms of meditation might offer an effective means of reducing both implicit as well as explicit racial bias. Since Christian and other religious communities center their teachings on love and compassion for the “other,” tapping into the contemplative resources present in various religious traditions is an indispensable step toward reducing racial (and other forms) of prejudice. As Cone reminds us, examples of flagrant racist practice in the past (such as lynching), as well as the injustice of the current social system, show that Christian teachings on love and compassion have not protected the largely Christian society from racist prejudice then nor now. To give urgent attention to racism in our society, as Cone demands, all effective approaches need to be employed to undo the social formation of racist blindness.

Philosopher Charles Mills, is probing the social formation of racist blindness. He describes this socializing mechanism of white ignorance in the following way:

[W]hen the individual cognizing agent is perceiving, he [*sic*] is doing so with eyes and ears that have been socialized. Perception is also in part conception, the viewing of the world through a particular conceptual grid. . . . At all levels, interests may shape cognition, influencing what and how we see, what we and society choose to remember, whose testimony is solicited and whose is not, and which facts and frameworks are sought out and accepted.¹³

What Mills brings to our attention is the fact that our perceptions are never naked; instead they are always filtered through a conceptual grid. This grid, in turn, is shaped by the biases of the ruling group so that the incoming data is interpreted selectively, and the disconcerting or problematic perceptions are filtered out or marginalized.¹⁴ As a result, one can validate white racial superiority based on a false belief as well as the absence of true belief.¹⁵ In other words, the white social lens distorts reality by refusing to acknowledge systemic discrimination, conveniently maintaining amnesia about the racial injustice in the past and present, and by nurturing hostility toward Black testimony to the contrary.¹⁶ Even Black people and non-racist whites can be affected by white ignorance since both can form mistaken beliefs due to the social suppression of the relevant knowledge, but without prejudice.¹⁷

Philosopher Elizabeth Spelman argues that this ignorance is a deeply entrenched epistemic resistance to know. She stresses that racial ignorance is not a matter of simple neglect, self-deception, passivity, or accidental lack of knowledge. Rather, it is an ignorance that is actively created and managed by a system of social institutions and conventions, as well as personal habits and attitudes. As she puts it, "managing to create and preserve it [white ignorance] can take grotesquely prodigious effort."¹⁸ The result of white ignorance is what Mills calls "racialized moral psychology," which allows whites to act in racist ways while considering themselves moral agents.¹⁹ As a result, actively maintained racial ignorance will produce authentic cognitive difficulties in identifying certain behavior patterns as racist. Racial ignorance might seem a matter of casual neglect or simple self-deception, but it is a painstakingly arranged form of epistemic resistance.

This mechanism of white ignorance addresses Cone's question as to why white religious leaders were silent about "Christians" who carried out lynching atrocities. Even progressives like Niebuhr, could speak of racism and, at the same time, remain blind to the urgency of racial injustice. This mechanism also explains why Christian communities could celebrate lynching and still perceive themselves as good, church-going Christians. Likewise, contemporary injustices present in the criminal justice system are also largely invisible due to the distorting presence of racial ignorance. It is not accidental that past and present systemic discriminations are veiled in "structured blindness and opacities."²⁰ The veiling is there to obscure the meaning of racist beliefs and behaviors so that the white privilege prevails. One learns how to misinterpret the world, but with the full assurance that these flawed perceptions will be confirmed by "the white epistemic authority, whether religious or secular."²¹ As Cone reminds us, only a small group of whites (whether religious or secular) opposed lynching, and the white majority today still fails to fully recognize its legacy as well as contemporary forms of injustice against Blacks.²²

Cone identifies Niebuhr's and other white people's blindness to racial injustice as "a defect in the conscience of white Christians."²³ In fact, the latest research suggests that most of the discrimination escapes our awareness²⁴ due to socially distorted knowledge.²⁵ Psychologist Daniel Kahneman describes the mechanism of our cognitive processes that employs both fast and slow thinking.²⁶ If slow thinking relies on a careful deliberation of data based on evidence, fast thinking makes intuitive decisions based on hundreds of incoming factors and past experiences.²⁷ Thus, fast thinking is an efficient source of instant ideas, but it is also error-prone due to unexamined biases and stereotypes. If we consciously aim to prevent discrimination when our thinking is "slow," prejudice can slip easily into our fast thinking, which occurs on the unconscious level. In principle, the more deliberate slow thinking can veto the stereotypical associations produced by fast thinking. However, even when our thinking is "slow," we maximize the efficiency of our thinking by still relying on fast thinking in some capacity, which, in turn, opens us up to misinformation even in our conscious reflections.²⁸ In other words, what we consider to be a rational conclusion might already be influenced by the automatic and biased judgment of our fast thinking without our realizing that this is so.

While Cone, Mills, and Kahneman address primarily the cognitive effects of white ignorance (whether conscious or non-conscious), other scholars point out the bodily consequences of such ignorance. Philosopher Shannon Sullivan, argues that white ignorance operates primarily on the physiological level with specific consequences in people's bodily constitution (whether white or Black).²⁹ What is at stake is not just white people's bodily gestures or their style of interaction with others. Rather, Sullivan suggests that

[w]hite racism also can help shape white people's biochemical make-up and activities: for example their serotonin and other neurotransmitter levels, the activity patterns of their autonomic nervous system, their predisposition for gastric tachyarrhythmia, their levels of hormone production, and so on. We might say that the tenets of racial contract need to be examined not just morally and epistemologically, but also biologically.³⁰

Sullivan is concerned about the moral and epistemological costs of white ignorance, but she thinks that the standard account of white ignorance overplays the mental at the expense of bodily processes. Instead, she presents an account of white dominance that attempts to overcome the mind-body split by emphasizing white privilege on the level of physiology. It is no accident, argues Sullivan, that African Americans and other racial minorities experience higher rates of hypertension, poor cardiovascular activity, and other medical conditions correlated with increased mortality. The reverse is the case for the many white Americans who experience a lower incidence of these conditions. Specifically, the age-adjusted death rates from diabetes, septicemia, kidney disease, and hypertension and hypertensive renal disease are more than two times higher among African Americans than among whites.³¹ A 2009 study reported a rate of heart failure among African Americans under the age of fifty twenty times higher than among the same age group of white Americans.³² In addition, when hospitalized for heart failure, African Americans have a 45 percent greater risk of death or decline in health status than whites.³³ According to Sullivan, such a state of affairs should not be considered a normal or a neutral physiological variation. Instead, relatively good health of many white Americans is a clear example of white privilege for a group of people who "systematically benefit, medically and otherwise, from their race."³⁴ To support her claim, Sullivan presents numerous studies indicating that chronic stress and anxiety are correlated to injurious health conditions such as cardiovascular disease and hypertension.³⁵ Of course, white people of all classes and wealth levels also experience chronic stress and negative health associations. At the same time, even after adjusting for socioeconomic status, racial differences in health problems among Black and white Americans persist.³⁶

Epidemiologist Nancy Krieger, confirms Sullivan's findings.³⁷ Krieger reviews study after study that exemplify how social impacts "become literally embodied into physio-anatomic characteristics that influence health and become expressed in societal disparities in health."³⁸ That is, psychosocial stressors are uniquely patterned so that some groups are exposed to unique stressors, such as racial discrimination. This unique pattern of stressors, such as discrimination, is reflected in social inequality

in health.³⁹ Furthermore, she insists that bodies “tell” stories that people cannot or will not tell, either because they are unable, forbidden, or choose not to.⁴⁰ In other words, even if our knowledge is often obscured due to white ignorance, our bodies’ physiology reflects the distribution of power, disease, and health. Specifically, Krieger interprets the increased risk of hypertension in African Americans as a consequence of a particular local embodiment. In her own words:

“[E]mbodiment” reminds us that a person is not one day African American, another day born low birth weight, another day raised in a home bearing remnants of lead paint, another day subjected to racial discrimination at work (and in a job that does not provide health insurance), and still another day living in a racially segregated neighborhood without a supermarket but with many fast food restaurants.⁴¹

The combined effect of all of these stressors is woven into the very physiology of bodies with the resulting health disparities.

In addition to the stressors listed by Krieger, there is evidence that African Americans receive a biased treatment when attended by physicians. Studies have found that physicians prescribe less pain medication to African Americans than to white patients, whether adults or children, and they are much less likely to recommend a helpful treatment (cardiac catheterization) for heart disease to Black patients.⁴² It has also been shown that pediatricians prescribe fewer narcotics to Black children who undergo surgery than to white children, as a result of their unconscious racial bias.⁴³ Thus, even the very professionals who are supposed to be restoring people to health unknowingly reflect bias against Black patients. Therefore, we need to pay attention to stories told by our bodies because their physiology provides not only a more holistic account of social discrimination, but also because, as Krieger puts it, bodies do not lie. By examining the constitution of our bodies, we have an opportunity to unveil the cognitive distortions of white ignorance and face the physiological data detailing social inequality.

Work by Sullivan, Krieger, and hosts of other scholars remind us that the damage of white ignorance extends beyond the ethical, legal, criminal, and religious realm. James Baldwin, Black gay social critic, was correct to affirm that his compatriots “have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it,”⁴⁴ but even he did not account for the damage done to Black bodies through the chronic presence of psychosocial stressors. Likewise, Cone’s strident criticism of white theology does not account for the harm done to Black physiology. The fact that the social world is inscribed into muscles and tissues, and the hormones and chemicals rushing through our bodies shows that the effects of inequality are far-reaching. If the fallout of white ignorance is more damaging than ever imagined, what is an appropriate response? What can be done about such a methodical practice of white blindness, particularly when such a practice often eludes awareness? What effective means can be offered to combat what Cone identifies as “a defect in the conscience of white Christians”? Given the link between social inequality and race-related health disparities, Sullivan proposes that the battle against white racism must extend to “biological

and medical levels, as well as economic, political, aesthetic, and other social levels."⁴⁵ She balks at the recommendation of one study that emotional self-management skills might improve healthy functioning of the heart.⁴⁶ Sullivan interprets interventions such as heart rhythm feedback training or deep breathing exercises as revealing the bias of white class privilege. From her perspective, regardless of the racial or economic background of the authors, such recommendations address only the emotional-cardio problems of middle- and upper-class whites rather than non-whites.⁴⁷ She concludes that the primary "intervention" needed to improve African American cardio health is not heart rhythm exercises but "interrupting white domination."⁴⁸

Ultimately, nothing short of ending white domination will bring healing that extends to ethical, legal, religious, and health realms. While the end goal for all concerned about racial equality is clear, it is not so evident how to arrive there. Since a large portion of the population is unaware of their prejudice due to deeply entrenched social grit, the solutions are not readily available. One hopeful resource to consider is the managing skills that come from various forms of meditative practices, the very suggestion that Sullivan finds repugnant. It is true that such practices will not correct the current system of injustice since they do not offer any immediate social results. Sullivan is mistaken, however, when she suggests that offering such practices is necessarily a sign of white privilege and that they address only the needs of middle- and upper-class whites. In what follows, I will offer examples of studies conducted by African American scholars who argue that various forms of meditation offer promising resources for healing to those who suffer from discrimination. In addition, I will examine how meditation has been shown to be a resource for those who wish to overcome their often unconscious prejudices.

Mindfulness meditation originated in the Buddhist tradition, but its practice has received plenty of attention in contemporary psychology, outside of its original cultural and religious context. Since the late '70s Western clinicians have incorporated mindfulness practice into various mental health programs, from treating anxiety, stress, depression, and pain, to assisting those with eating disorders and alcoholism.⁴⁹ Recent studies have shown that mindfulness meditation reduces prejudice against Blacks, and racial minorities.⁵⁰ The mechanism of diminishing prejudicial attitudes has to do with the fact that mindfulness fosters a present-centered awareness that returns attention to breath. The goal of meditation is to arrive at a non-attached, yet fully engaged state of mind. This is achieved by reversing our customary ways of thinking (automatic associations), constant evaluating, and constant drifting into our past or future.⁵¹ The non-judgmental attitude leads, in turn, to forming an open-minded, flexible state of mind that is receptive to "what is." Specifically, when applied to prejudicial attitudes, participants of one study were encouraged to mindfully become aware of one's prejudicial thoughts and feelings without attempting to change them.⁵² This exercise of simply observing emotions and thoughts without any judgment elicits a non-reactive state of mind and, therefore, reduces the impact of the prejudicial cognitive content. This might seem to bring about the opposite of the desired effect, as those who exercise bias against the racial "other" are encouraged to accept the prejudicial feelings and ideas. While the aim of mindfulness is to

cultivate a non-judgmental mind toward one's own thoughts (prejudiced or not), it does not end there. Rather, one develops the non-judgmental, accepting awareness of one's own thoughts and emotions to cultivate a less judgmental and compassionate stance toward others.⁵³ It is when one does not feel overwhelmed by the pull of one's own biased emotions that one can be more aware of the mechanism of one's automatic social evaluations. Thus, mindfulness offers a possibility of opening a conscious space that allows for reduction in automatic racist associations.

Beyond becoming aware of our automatic associations, mindfulness appears to decrease implicit bias among its practitioners. In one study, even a brief (ten-minute-long) mindfulness meditation caused a decrease in implicit bias against Blacks.⁵⁴ This is a significant finding since explicit, self-reported measures of prejudice are not reliable because people often alter their explicit expressions to appear less biased.⁵⁵ Furthermore, an automatic, implicit form of prejudice is difficult to change once formed, even in the face of new or contradictory evidence.⁵⁶ It is well established that an implicit (automatic) bias against an out-group can fuel discrimination even if individuals are consciously attempting to affirm egalitarianism toward all.⁵⁷ Thus, mindfulness meditation seems to offer an important technique to reduce implicit bias toward discriminated groups.

In addition, it has been shown that another form of meditation, loving-kindness meditation, decreases implicit bias against Black people.⁵⁸ This form of meditation affirms a close connection between self-compassion and compassion for others. Loving-kindness meditation is a Buddhist form of meditation in which one pronounces the following blessing: "May I be peaceful, happy, and light in body and spirit. / My he/she be peaceful, happy, and light in body and spirit. / May they be peaceful, happy, and light in body and spirit."⁵⁹ This meditation is first directed to oneself with an aim to bring healing and reconciliation within ourselves. Only then the practitioner applies this meditation to others, starting with a friend, then with somebody neutral to us (strangers), somebody with whom we experience difficulties interpersonally (so-called enemies), and finally extending it to all the sentient beings in the world. This meditation presumes one's interdependence with others so that greater inner harmony radiates throughout the web of relations, starting with those closest and ending with those most distant. According to this view, reality is not built of separate entities, but rather each being is inextricably linked to all other beings.⁶⁰ Every part of the universe affects every other part.

Since loving-kindness meditation extends compassion to all beings, even those whom we find difficult to embrace, it is not surprising that this form of meditation results in reduction of an implicit bias toward Blacks. The reduction of bias was accomplished during the six-week loving-kindness meditation even though the practice of meditation did not explicitly address specific social groups as the target of compassion.⁶¹ This finding is supported by many other studies that have demonstrated positive results of loving-kindness meditation on interpersonal relationships.⁶²

Studies examined so far have focused on benefits of various kinds of meditative practices on those who express prejudice or discrimination, but there is evidence that those discriminated against can also benefit from mediation. It is well documented

that there is a strong correlation between perceived discrimination and negative mental and physical health outcomes.⁶³ Research has shown that mindfulness meditation is a successful strategy in dealing with a variety of mental health issues and in promoting general well-being and self-worth.⁶⁴ Since, as discussed earlier, there is a growing body of evidence that links health disparities to psychosocial and biopsychosocial stressors, it is crucial to examine the potential benefits of mind-body practices that could reduce such health inequalities. Several studies have demonstrated specific health benefits that various meditative techniques provide to the African American population. Studies led by African American health psychologists and community health researchers, Natalie Watson, Angela Black, and Cheryl Woods-Giscombé, show that mindfulness meditation reduces race-related psychosocial stress among African American women.⁶⁵ Women in Watson and Black's study found mindfulness easily accessible, congruent with their daily schedules, and cost-effective when compared to other health practices.⁶⁶ Woods-Giscombé and Black focus on the health disparities found among African American women, specifically their disproportional rate of morbidity and mortality.⁶⁷ While they recognize that system-wide health policy changes are needed in order to address the root of social health disparities, they also acknowledge the important role of mindfulness and loving-kindness meditations for those exposed to psychosocial stressors. Since these meditations are person-centered, they can assist Black women in awareness of habitual patterns of responding to stress in order to prevent undesirable health outcomes. Another study directed by Woods-Giscombé investigated the cultural relevance of mindfulness meditation for African American adults. The participants of this study have reported an enhanced self-awareness, better stress management, and improved purposefulness. Furthermore, they identified several similarities between mindfulness mediation and their own spirituality (contemplation, quietness, and being still), all pointing to cultural relevance of meditation to Black community.⁶⁸

These studies are supported by many other findings. For example, chronic kidney disease is four times more prevalent among African Americans than among Caucasians and is a high risk factor for cardiovascular disease and mortality.⁶⁹ In one study, a single session of mindfulness meditation lowered blood pressure and heart rate in African American males with chronic kidney disease.⁷⁰ Another study assessed African American adolescents with essential hypertension, a condition that is linked to high mortality and that is much more prevalent among African Americans compared to other racial groups.⁷¹ Students with hypertension who practiced mindfulness meditation during a three-month period experienced significant reductions in blood pressure and heart rate.⁷² Other meditative approaches were shown to be effective in treating a range of health problems related to cardiovascular disease among African Americans.⁷³ Thus, mindfulness meditation represents one valuable mind-body practice that offers low-cost and non-pharmacologic prevention and treatment for psychosocial diseases experienced by racial minorities.

Of course, this is not to suggest that those who are discriminated against (African Americans and other racial groups) are responsible for learning how to better adjust to racial inequality. Ideally, legal, structural, and cultural transformations would

bring about a just society without prejudice and negative stereotyping. Rather, as Woods-Giscombé and Black argue, both personal mind-body strategies and systemic changes are needed. Specifically, meditation practices are important because

without person centered approaches, individuals could be left floundering and without adequate support or resources to manage multiple sources of stress while waiting for system-wide social and structural changes to be executed. Enduring and exhibiting strength to survive during the relatively long process of social change can contribute to the disproportionate rates of morbidity and mortality that currently exist.⁷⁴

Until such transformations occur, the question at hand is what strategies should be offered to those who suffer from such social wrongs? Woods-Giscombé and Black stress the urgency of this issue by asking “What can be done *now*?”⁷⁵

Meditative strategies are not the only approaches available to ameliorate the consequences of social injustice. For example, there is plenty of research demonstrating that meaningful intergroup contact significantly reduces prejudice between conflicting groups.⁷⁶ However, the problem is that the social networks of whites are 91 percent white, and 75 percent of whites have entirely white social networks without any minority presence.⁷⁷ Ideally, we would live in fully integrated neighborhoods, and be a part of fully integrated religious congregations, schools, and places of work. Given that structural segregation persists and opportunities for overcoming racial prejudice from intergroup contacts are limited, we need to explore all options that help to address racial inequality. Meditative practices are of particular value because as Mills and others makes us aware, white ignorance often eludes consciousness. This convenient amnesia about racial injustice is troubling especially when those whose religion calls them to love their neighbors and their enemies, perpetrate the opposite. What Cone calls “a defect in the conscience of white Christians” needs to be urgently addressed in a variety of disciplines. Recent scholarship provides evidence that meditative techniques offer an effective means of addressing both explicit and implicit prejudice. Furthermore, meditation might be helpful to those who experience prejudice. Since discrimination affects the mind and the body of those discriminated against, African American scholars have turned their attention to mind-body approaches. Study after study shows that various meditations offer a defense against psychosocial stressors and physical and psychological harm arising from discrimination.

Both those who are targets of discrimination and those who perpetrate it might benefit from practicing meditation. Rhonda Magee, an African American professor of law at the University of San Francisco, advocates mindfulness-based stress reduction strategies for perpetrators of racial injustice as well as for those who are suffering from it. While she recognizes that such strategies will not end racism, “mindfulness and other contemplative practices do support ways of being in the world that reflect less of the biases that each of us holds, whether we are deliverymen, students, teachers—or men and women with badges, authorized to shoot to kill.”⁷⁸ True to her commitment, Magee is dedicated to transforming the criminal justice system through mindfulness

and loving-kindness practices. She teaches contemplative strategies to lawyers, law students, and lawmakers; to African Americans who struggle with systemic racism; and also to police officers who need to confront their own biases.

When in 2015 the San Francisco press revealed that police officers engaged in racist text messaging, Magee organized a series of community meetings at the request of the members of this predominately African American community. In organizing such meetings, Magee was also responding to San Francisco's District Attorney's office request to understand issues of bias in law enforcement from the perspective of the Black community. Members of the police department were present at the sessions, but the focus of the sessions was to create a sense of safety for the distressed Black community.⁷⁹ Magee calls her efforts toward community healing, "community engaged mindfulness," the practice of bringing mindfulness awareness into community-engaged social justice work.⁸⁰ Such community engagement operates simultaneously on three levels: personal, interpersonal, and systemic. Personal practices aim at increasing capacity to learn from our own experiences of social suffering and learn from the suffering of others. On the interpersonal level, her approach offers supportive practices that encourage collaboration "across lines of real and perceived cultural, racial, and other dimensions."⁸¹ Finally, on the systemic level, community-engaged mindfulness aims at relieving structural inequality, including material suffering. During the sessions, Magee invited participants to sit in a circle, and silently reflect on reasons for their coming to the event. She asked that they focus on their breath, on the presence of their body in the room, and on the support in the room for each one of the participants. From this place of support, she asked them to answer the following questions: "What problems do you see at the intersection of racial bias and law enforcement (profiling? [*sic*] Cultural issues? Disrespect? Others?) that need to be addressed? / What steps would you suggest be taken next to organize and identify community views and needs? / What specific policies or practices would you suggest be called for from City leadership?"⁸² Answering these questions led the participants to develop specific suggestions that were passed onto the DA's office. In addition, in the post-intervention survey the participants confirmed the value of such sessions—the participants identified mindfulness as an important asset toward a renewed sense of collaboration aimed at diminishing the structural violence threatening the Black community.⁸³ While this is just one instance of a community-engaged mindfulness intervention, Magee stresses the value of such interventions for distressed Black communities.⁸⁴

This is so because race and related issues are charged with potential for emotional reactivity, and in this context the benefits of self-regulation offered by mindfulness are evident. Magee provides an example of responding to a view that since Black people commit most of the crimes, racial profiling is justified. Of course, one could respond to such a position with an outburst of emotions, but she suggests that it might be more effective to continue the dialogue in a more compassionate manner, while clearly indicating why one disagrees with this position, and without an attachment to a specific outcome of the conversation. When facing stressful situations, mindfulness allows for a flexible response to consider more effective action, rather than an automatic, knee-jerk reaction.⁸⁵

Furthermore, mindfulness is valuable when dealing with racial inequality because it may lead to a sense of interconnectedness with others. Here, Magee follows the teaching of Thich Nhat Hanh, a Zen Buddhist monk, who discusses the danger of the division into “us” versus “them.”⁸⁶ To him, taking sides implies a reactive and dualistic response that ultimately leads to polarization.⁸⁷ Mindfulness and other forms of meditations aim at destroying the convenient division of the world into “us” and “them.” At the heart of reconciliation is love that embraces the whole of reality.⁸⁸ Therefore, the well-being of each individual is interlinked with the well-being of the whole human race.⁸⁹ This is to suggest that we need to think of solutions that embrace the well-being of all people, both victims and perpetrators. Magee recognizes that such an approach might sound like renunciation of the advocacy of social justice. However, she concludes that taking into consideration perspectives of other people (“across lines of real and perceived cultural, racial, and other dimensions”⁹⁰) makes one’s own considerations and one’s own actions on behalf of social justice more skillful and effective.⁹¹ In addition, while those who experience injustice are in desperate need of healing, the perpetrators of injustice also require healing that awakens them to compassion for those they discriminate against.

Most studies have examined secular forms of mindfulness meditation, but initial research on Christian contemplative practice has shown similar benefits.⁹² If religious structures have contributed to white ignorance and encouraged a Christian “defective conscience,” tapping into contemplative resources in the Christian tradition might offer a hopeful strategy to counter both explicit and implicit forms of prejudice. Whether mindfulness meditation or Christian contemplation, these practices offer concrete, low-cost solutions that address the needs of those discriminated against as well as those guilty of discrimination. Turning to a variety of meditative exercises might have an additional important benefit. By moving toward a more compassionate stance to the Other, both groups might collaborate more effectively at devising strategies that promote justice for all and bring needed changes in ethical, legal, religious, and psychosocial realms.⁹³

NOTES

1. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 5.
2. James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 3.
3. *Ibid.*, 7.
4. *Ibid.*, 9.
5. *Ibid.*, 41, 52, 57.
6. *Ibid.*, 46.
7. *Ibid.*, 32.
8. *Ibid.*, 52.
9. *Ibid.*, 163.
10. “Criminal Justice Fact Sheet,” The National Association for Advancement of Colored People, <http://www.naacp.org/criminal-justice-fact-sheet/>, accessed June 14, 2017.
11. “Facts about the Death Penalty,” Death Penalty Information Center at <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/documents/FactSheet.pdf>, accessed June 14, 2017.
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Yes, But No," *Washington Post*, July 11, 2016, at https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2016/07/11/arent-more-white-people-than-black-people-killed-by-police-yes-but-no/?utm_term=.125d31dde399, accessed June 16, 2017. The death toll of Black people killed by police in 2016 alone is 258 (39 of them were unarmed). See Julia Craven, "More than 250 Black People Were Killed by Police in 2016," *Huffington Post* at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/black-people-killed-by-police-america_us_577da633e4b0c590f7e7fb17, accessed June 14, 2017.

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14. *Ibid.*, 25.

15. *Ibid.*, 16. See also Rev. angel Kyodo williams, "It's Not about Love after All," in Rev. angel Kyodo williams, Lama Rod Owens, and Jasmine Syedullah, *Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love and Liberation* (Berkely, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2016), 101–104. Rev. angel Kyodo williams describes the mechanism of white ignorance as an unwillingness to see "the superiority of whiteness . . . in everyday interactions as unconscious bias, micro-aggressions, and a tendency to exert control over cultural norms and space" (102). As a result, the white majority finds "a never-ending litany of excuses to maintain power over rather than power with—to dominate" (*ibid.*).

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