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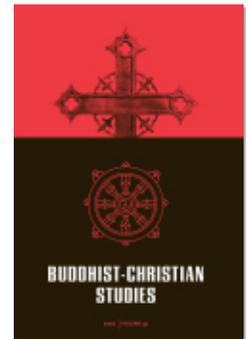
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“The Four Noble Truths: A Buddhist Theology for Undoing Racism”

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ABSTRACT

As we white Buddhists begin to deeply examine the sources of white supremacy in our practice, teachings, and communities, the foundational Four Noble Truths provide a powerful contemplative method. With racism deeply embedded in our culture as an emblem of our fundamental suffering, the invitation of the Second Truth is to deeply contemplate how this suffering has arisen historically, presently, personally, and societally. The social craving of white supremacy constructed systems of oppression to preserve power and wealth, and strategic coverup of these systems pervade our culture. The Third Truth recognizes that these systems have been constructed, and they can be dismantled and must. The Fourth Truth reminds us that we all play a role, but explores especially what we individually can do guided by the three trainings—discipline, meditation, and wisdom—to dedicate ourselves to actions that undo racism.

KEYWORDS: Four Noble Truths, racism, Buddhist ethics, white privilege, engaged Buddhism

Racism is one of the most important topics in our time, the undoing of which has the potential to transform all of us individually and as a human community. From my experience, addressing racism has been central to my spiritual journey as a Buddhist practitioner and my intellectual journey as a scholar, and I hope it will continue so for the rest of my life. I am inspired to bring these both together as a Buddhist theologian addressing how Buddhist teachings provide a foundation for undoing the violence of racism.

When addressing racism, it is customary to begin by naming our own sociocultural location, especially naming our own privilege. This is especially important for white people. We name our location because privilege exists and is often unacknowledged, and when this occurs privilege manifests as a kind of arrogance and blindness, exploited and ignored at the same moment. When sociocultural location is not acknowledged, it can cause great harm because it drowns out socially marginalized voices and claims unearned power. I write as a white, heterosexual woman, educated,

and in a profession that brings great respect and status, especially for men. I'm a college professor and a dharma teacher in a Tibetan Buddhist lineage. Earlier in life, I faced many obstacles filling power roles more often occupied by men, but over the decades, there has been increasing respect given to women in roles like mine, in spite of enduring patriarchy. It has not come easily. My parents were college educated, but I came from a rural state where it was common that members of my community did not go to college. I am healthy, with only the normal effects of aging affecting my abilities. Much of my privilege has been unearned, associated with my race, my ethnicity, and my middle-class upbringing.

I also want to acknowledge my friends of color—whether they be academic colleagues at my university or in the larger circles of religious studies, Buddhist studies, or contemplative studies, or whether they are my dear dharma brothers and sisters. Through their generosity, bravery, and honesty, they have taught me how this privilege has removed me from the necessity of thinking about race every minute of every day. They have shared their own experiences and humiliations, their depressions and anger, their depth of spiritual and emotional resilience, and their utter humanity. They have humbled me, and it is because of them that I have anything to say today.¹ All of these humans have confirmed for me the tremendous goodness of humanity, and the core yearning for wholeness, kindness, and human connection at the heart of life. I thank them for their authenticity and patience.

What I have learned is that we white, heterosexual, educated people of faith, endowed with great privilege and power, have a responsibility to do our part in waking up to the harms of racism in our world. It's time for this work to be done by white people; it's further oppression to expect people of color to be the first ones to address racism and the damage it inflicts. We white people have a responsibility to name racism, to understand how it works in our lives, and to undo it slowly, deliberately, steadily on a personal, communal, and societal level. I have learned that this is a painful process, one that I initially dreaded, and periodically dread again. I constantly find new obstacles and new blind spots in my makeup. But this process has the potency to not only humanize us and open us up but will also help us grow into the kind of beings we have always aspired to be. While I tend to shy away from looking racism in the face, the fruits of doing so have made me feel I am genuinely on a spiritual path that can speak to my fear, save me from crippling blindness, and connect me in unparalleled ways to all of humanity.

This contemplation is built around the Buddhist teachings of the Four Noble Truths, foundational in almost all schools of Buddhism. Racism is conceived here as the core suffering of human life, and undoing racism becomes the journey and the goal.²

FIRST NOBLE TRUTH

The first Noble Truth of suffering is a great place to begin examining Buddhist approaches to anti-racism work. This first teaching of the Buddha in Sarnath launched the first turning of the wheel of dharma, and it begins our contemplation as well.³ The Buddha began with suffering because it is a universal human experience,

one that removes us from mere speculation to the experience of embodied heart, opening us up for a genuine spiritual journey. There is no doubt that racism causes continuing, tangible suffering in our world, very specifically disparagement, humiliation, and physical and emotional harm that has lasting impacts. It brings violence into community; it estranges us from each other and from ourselves. The harms are exponential and longstanding, and they are enduring, immediate, and current, allowing us to begin right now.

The suffering of racism opens up Buddha’s teachings on interdependence, especially in the Mahāyāna teachings.⁴ They acknowledge that suffering is not just individual; suffering of anyone affects all others, whether they know it or not. The impact of suffering within the web of life affects the entire web. Of course, the suffering of those oppressed has become obvious every day in the news, from the violence of police shootings and false imprisonments to the marginalization, denigration, and disrespect for people of color in the public square. What is not so evident is the suffering of the oppressor—the fear, narrowness of view, diminishment of human connection, and underlying guilt and shame—that works in perhaps less visible ways.

In the early 1970s, at the time of my first teaching position, I was recruited by the Human Rights Commission of the State of Washington to be one of five cases filed against Western Washington University, showing a pattern of sex discrimination. This lawsuit opened wounds on many levels. It was an intense and devastating experience to be openly discriminated against by my employer and my academic colleagues. It was even worse to be subsequently punished in a nasty backlash for being part of a lawsuit against the university. This four-year experience led to my almost leaving academia for good; instead, I came to teach at Naropa University at the end of 1977. We won our lawsuit, but I had a sustained, embodied experience of being demeaned and despised as one of the first women faculty the university had ever hired. Being hated for my sociocultural location and for resisting is indelibly imprinted on my heart. The experience of being blatantly shunned and insulted, and even physically threatened by the president of the university, has stayed with me for decades.

In the years since, I have learned about intersectionality, the patterns of oppression sustained by those in power in a white, heterosexual patriarchy.⁵ Third Wave feminism has moved beyond the exclusivism of middle-class white women like me to recognize interlocking patterns of oppression. This has brought me naturally to concern about racism. Knowing in my body what it is like to be oppressed has given me an intuitive connection with people of color who are oppressed. Seeing my own current privilege and protection, I know I am part of a system of oppression, and this brings great fear, dis-ease, and shame to my experience. As a Buddhist, I have learned that acknowledging suffering is a powerful incentive to practice, reflect, and wake up to patterns that perpetuate suffering. As Zen Buddhist singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen sang, “Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything, That’s how the light gets in.”⁶ Suffering is the perfect gateway to deeper connection and healing the world.

Buddhists deeply committed to waking up begin by acknowledging personally, communally, and societally the devastating harms of racism.

SECOND NOBLE TRUTH

The great fifth century Theravāda master Buddhaghosa wrote that when we feel suffering deeply, the most natural heartfelt response is to look deeply at the causes of suffering, and this is the next contemplation.⁷ What are the causes of racism? How do those causes work in my own experience? In the classical texts and practices of Buddhist traditions, contemplation of the second Noble Truth is a journey of finding not one single cause, but a network of interrelated causes, and the same is true for contemplating the harm of racism.

Buddhism teaches that the causes of suffering are rooted in habits of mind, each of which are also conditionally caused. The first habit of mind is *trṣṇā*, craving. This is described as the tendency to want more, a kind of impulsive habit to seize, grab, and need more without even knowing why. Ten years ago, Nell Irvin Painter's *The History of White People* shocked me into an inner journey of recognizing social craving as the cause of racism. In American history, those in power constructed identity and race so as to preserve and extend their own power and wealth. This is where slavery, servitude, immigration quotas, and Jim Crow came from. Painter shows that whiteness is a race, socially constructed to preserve land, money, and privilege for those in power, and excluding and exploiting others to ensure that preservation.⁸ These power structures justified their actions through engineering scientific studies, a criminal justice system, and political and social institutions to cover over the motive for this social engineering. I was dumbfounded when I learned from Black friends that, for example, the GI Bill and its supporting Federal Housing Administration (FHA) loans that boosted the acquisition of wealth and property at the end of World War II, benefiting my parents' entire generation in the 1950s, was denied to veterans of color. This one small fact made me realize my unknowing part in an overbearing system of oppression.⁹

Craving is sustained by *avidyā*, ignorance, which is an underlying tendency to deny that individuals and systems could be so blatantly greedy, ruthless, and self-serving. Instead, we white people think of ourselves as entitled to the benefits of our experience, through hard work, responsibility, and being decent citizens. What we miss is how privilege works. Peggy McIntosh describes, "privilege exists when one group has something of value that is denied to others simply because of the groups they belong to, rather than because of anything they've done or failed to do."¹⁰ This may refer to wealth, opportunity, power, recognition, social standing, or respect. The most prevalent form of privilege associated with racism has to do with "unearned privilege"—privilege that has come merely because of our sociocultural location, not because of any particular achievements or hard work. The reverse side of privilege is oppression—how wealth, opportunity, and reward are denied to people merely because of their sociocultural location, requiring compensation through

over-achievement in education, accomplishment, and exceedingly hard work against all odds.¹¹

When I first learned about the structures of privilege, I immediately protested, but this cannot apply to me. And all this seemed counterintuitive, because I simply did not see the systems of oppression in place that affected my friends and colleagues of color. I live in a progressive community in Boulder, CO. Surely no one is oppressed racially in my progressive city! This is where I encountered the underlying ignorance in my life that keeps systems of privilege and oppression working for me personally, and in my white, heterosexual, patriarchal communities. Allan G. Johnson calls this “the luxury of obliviousness,” one of the cornerstones of privilege.¹² Because of my unearned privilege as a white, mature woman of Swedish-German stock, with good health and relatively unencumbered life, I have been favored and given the benefit of the doubt in many professional and social situations. I have had the luxury of ignoring privilege and oppression and have made assumptions about the experiences of others. That is how privilege works. Allan G. Johnson writes, “Being able to command the attention of lower-status individuals without having to give it in return is a key aspect of privilege.”¹³ As James Baldwin put it, “To be white in America means not having to think about it.”¹⁴ I have learned from my friends and colleagues of color that I have been oblivious to their experience of oppression.

Opening up to the ignorance that shields white Buddhists from seeing the systems of privilege and oppression that we unwittingly, blindly participate in every day is an important aspect of the practice for awakening. In Tibetan schools of Buddhism, in the analysis of the second Noble Truth, it is said that ignorance is sustained by investment in ego-clinging.¹⁵ In this context, we could say that the luxury of obliviousness is investing in our white egos, and the systems that perpetuate our belief in them, ignoring the consequences of doing so.¹⁶ Part of the pattern of ignorance that keeps white people from acknowledging privilege is what has been called “white fragility.”¹⁷ Sociologist Robin DiAngelo describes the disbelieving defensiveness that white people exhibit when their ideas about race and racism are challenged—and in particular when they feel implicated in white privilege. Why, she wondered, did her feedback prompt such resistance, as if the mention of racism were more offensive than the fact or practice of it?

This is another layer of denial associated with ignorance, according to the Buddhist teachings. *Avidyā* is not just sleepiness; according to the texts of the abhidharma, *avidya* refers to the stubborn refusal to acknowledge the truth of the nature of things.¹⁸ DiAngelo, who is white, speaks of how mainstream white society is set up to insulate whites from racial discomfort, so that they fall to pieces at the first mention of white supremacy or racism. She remarks that whites lack the “racial stamina” required to engage in difficult conversations. This is another way that systems of privilege keep us from really looking at racism. “I believe,” she writes, “that white progressives cause the most daily damage to people of color To the degree that white progressives think we have arrived, we will put our energy into making sure that others see us as having arrived.”¹⁹

Ouch! As a white, privileged Buddhist involved in progressive causes, I have to admit that this is true. I've learned this from my friends and colleagues, and now witness this every day when I can remove the layers of denial. I chafe at the notion that I am racist, and I aspire to more fully see and understand the racist systems that benefit me while harming people of color, including my dear friends and colleagues. As I deeply examine the causes of the suffering of racism, I must admit to my collusion in those very systems.

THIRD NOBLE TRUTH

Buddhism has always been soteriological, showing that after the descriptive diagnosis of the first two Noble Truths, it is committed to showing the prognosis and the prescription in the third and fourth. The third Noble Truth promises that whatever is created through causes and conditions can be dismantled through undoing those very causes and conditions.²⁰ Racism was created by human motivations seeking to centralize and maintain wealth and power in the hands of the few. It has been perpetuated by systems of oppression—discrimination in laws and the criminal justice system, in education, business and finance, medicine, and public life. Only by acknowledging the motivations and the systems can we bring systemic racism to an end.

Because of interdependence, the very best way to have broad impact in waking up to racism is to wake up personally, realizing that this contributes to everyone's wakefulness. Meanwhile, the wakefulness of my friends and colleagues of color has contributed richly to my own waking up, a debt I can never repay. This is how cessation will occur.

For example, Naropa psychologist Carla Sherrell and I have been exploring the structural spiritual bypassing in the contemporary mindfulness movement. Mindful spaces tend to be white spaces, dominated by unnamed values that imprison the body in norms of stillness, silence, and compliance led by white mindfulness teachers unconscious of the effect these values may have on African-Americans in particular. I have learned that environments like this replicate conditions of slavery, especially when presided over by white teachers, making it difficult for people of color to fully participate in the mindfulness revolution. We have suggested very specific ways that these white spaces could be infused with inquiry and sociocultural sensitivity while still genuinely transmitting the healing practice of mindfulness.²¹ Identifying a harmful structure can be followed with specific remedies to show the encouraging, constructive message of the truth of the end of suffering.

FOURTH NOBLE TRUTH

But how do we accomplish the radical changes necessary to ameliorate the damages of racism? While there are many facets of the path for overcoming racism in our society, I want to focus especially on what I can do as a white, privileged woman contributing in small ways to the cessation of racism in our society. Classically, the truth of the path

is accomplished through the joining of wisdom, ethics, and meditation, the “three trainings.”

First, I can practice acquiring the wisdom to overcome racism by continually educating myself about the dynamics of privilege and oppression, the troubled history of racism in our country and the world, and the details of how racism pollutes even the systems meant to take care of citizens in our society. For the last ten years, I have consistently read books that have enlightened me about power and privilege, and while it has been painful, with resistance surfacing as I turn every page, as a Buddhist I love the feel of the blindfold being removed, revealing a more nuanced, clear, and naked world. Continuing this journey is an essential part of my Buddhist journey.

But I cannot learn only from books; my blind spots require reality to open up my eyes. In 2015, I was stunned when some of my students joined a camp on the Green at my little university, protesting the racism of Naropa’s classrooms and community.²² They remained in little tents for six weeks, through a snowy April and a rainy May, holding town halls every noon to address how Black Lives Matter related to our Naropa community. They spoke of the choice of required textbooks, of classroom dynamics and power structures, of hiring decisions and procedures of the Faculty Senate, of unacknowledged privilege. After three weeks of deep listening, the core faculty of Naropa University reviewed the demands the students presented—and concluded that they were all completely reasonable. We had paid lip service to anti-racism, but we had not yet done the work. Unanimously, we voted to accept their demands and to create task forces to address them. We apologized for missing the boat, and we have done some of the work we committed to. The work continues at Naropa University.

Second, the ethics of undoing racism has to do with deeply acknowledging the fundamental goodness of all humans—the unconditional yearning for wholeness, kindness, and human connection that we all share. Even the most biased and violent of racists loves his children and community, but labors under the illusion that there are not enough resources for everyone. They feel tremendous fear of losing status, wealth and power, but this is misguided. Demographer Richard Frey has written about the tendency of some Americans to yearn for a time when the country was white. He observes that it’s too late: the rapidly growing “new minorities,”—Hispanics, Asians, and multiracial Americans—along with Blacks and other groups, are transforming and reinvigorating the nation’s demographic landscape.²³ He discusses their impact on generational change, regional shifts of major racial groups, neighborhood segregation, interracial marriage, and presidential politics. And he speaks about the blessings of our diversity, mitigating the declining growth and increasing age of our white society. He assures us, there is plenty for everyone, and our fullest potential will come from embracing our growing diversity. Not only are all the individuals basically good, but our increasingly diverse society will deliver the fruits of the vitality, productivity, and cultural richness of that diversity.

How about meditation? Dismantling racism is humbling work, with moments of nakedness and exposure, humiliation, fear, and anger for white people like me. It has

also been heartbreaking to really get how violent racism has been for women, men, and children of color; this has pierced me to my heart. I have learned that the best way to tread the path of dismantling racism is the practice of cultural humility.²⁴ As the teaching manual for my Buddhist community defines it, “cultural humility is a lifelong process of humble self-reflection that supports cultural difference In practicing cultural humility, we deepen and develop our personal, interpersonal, and societal relationships in order to bring about a more enlightened society.”²⁵ Cultural humility is the practice of recognizing the socially constructed nature of our own identities, and those of others. This means recognizing what I have inherited from my family and communities of origin, especially the messages about race and privilege. How have I been acculturated to act in various settings, and what messages have I been given about my right to be there, the rights of others, and the stereotypes about who people are based on their sociocultural location.

Cultural humility is not about being politically correct. Sociocultural location is a complex matter, involving many forces from childhood with many cultures and sub-cultures. There is no way we could develop mastery of all the causes and dynamics at work in any given situation. Shambhala senior teacher Charlene Leung writes, “Misunderstandings occur, and even good intentions can have a negative impact on others. The starting place for cultivating cultural humility, then, is to develop an attitude of inquiry, sensitivity, and active listening.”²⁶ This means recognizing when my own cultural conditioning blinds me to the pain of racism. When I make certain snap assumptions about a stranger on the bus, a student in my class, a professional in the public square based on the color of her skin, I can hold that judgment in the cradle of loving-kindness, seeing that it is the product of unexamined values from childhood. But I can also deeply reflect on how these judgments hold me back from my full humanity even as I deprive the other of hers, and then develop deeper, humble curiosity about who this person is. I can wake up to the harm my habits of mind have caused, and resolve not to make the same judgments again, reestablishing my connection and care in the network of life.

CONCLUSION

When I engaged my educational journey of learning more about racism, and waking up to whiteness, I did not anticipate that it would become such a core aspect of my Buddhist practice. I realize that I was probably initially motivated mostly by guilt and shame, and a sense of dutiful responsibility to step up to the task. What I have experienced has been surprising. When puncturing through the luxury of obliviousness, beginning to understand privilege, and beginning the long slow journey of cultural humility, I have begun to experience the world quite differently. The pain of racism continues to be heartbreaking, but it is occurring in a vast field of openness, gentleness, and curiosity about all that I have to learn. I have made many new friends and am discovering who they are. The world is a much richer place, holding open secrets beckoning to me. Even in the humiliating moments where my privileged habits shut down the social space around me, there is much more kindness in the world

than I had ever imagined. And mostly I am confirmed in the sense of beauty, compassion, and power of humanity yearning to fulfill its full potential.

NOTES

1. I am grateful to Gaylon, Arawana, Charlene, Aarthi, Carla Marie, Carla, Regina, Stephanie, Dominique, Eboni, Rev. Guo, Ramon, Jaylyn, Ian, Bhanu; I am also grateful to Lama Rod Owens and Rev. angel Kyodo Williams for their ongoing courageous work. Rev. angel Kyodo Williams, Lama Rod Owens, et al., *Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love and Liberation* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2016).

2. Scholar Ann Gleig wrote of “The Dukkha of Racism” as she described the anti-racism activities occurring in American Buddhist communities. *American Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Modernity* (New Haven and London, 2019).

3. Ajahn Sucitto, *Turning the Wheel of Truth: Commentary on the Buddha’s First Teaching* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2010).

4. Lopsang Gyatso, *The Four Noble Truths* (Ithaca: Snow Lions Publications, 1994), 17–24.

5. The notion of intersectionality was introduced by Kimberle Williams Crenshaw to show how different aspects of social and political identity discrimination relate to gender discrimination. Intersectionality is one of the hallmarks of Third Wave feminism that reignited political engagement in the feminist movement. Kimberle Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, et al., *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings of the Movement* (New York: The New Press, 1996).

6. Leonard Cohen, “Anthem,” at https://www.google.com/search?ei=jbbsW7n-MY2HjwT7u4zYCg&q=leonard+cohen+Anthem+lyrics&oq=leonard+cohen+Anthem+lyrics&gs_l=psy-ab.3..0l3j0i22i30l7.113535.120714..121103...0.0..1.198.3279.23j11.....0....1..gws-wiz.....35i39j0i67j0i20i263.p9nVN_mDygl, accessed August 13, 2021.

7. VSM 19.2. Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, Bhikkhu Nyanamoli (Berkeley: Shambhala Publications, 1976), Volume II, 693.

8. A great summary of these points by another author can be found in Allan G. Johnson’s, “Where White Privilege Came From,” at <https://www.agjohnson.us/essays/whiteprivilege/> Excerpt from “Sociology as Worldview: Where White Privilege Came From,” *The Forest and the Trees: Sociology as Life, Practice and Promise*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014), 147–160.

9. Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011). Observations about the GI Bill also became a cornerstone for Debby Irving in her book *Waking Up White: Finding Myself in the Story of Race* (Elephant Room Press, 2014).

10. From Allan G. Johnson, *Privilege, Power and Difference* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2006), 21.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., 22.

13. Ibid., 22.

14. Quoted in Ibid., 22. For a heartbreaking account of how a parent prepares a young African-American son for life under white supremacy, see award-winning Ta-Nahisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (Spiegel and Grau, 2014).

15. Chogyam Trungpa, *The Truth of Suffering and the Path of Liberation* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2010), 7–32.

16. I would call this a system of “white supremacy.” For years, I found this phrase triggering and extreme, but there is no reason to mince words. Ignoring patterns of privilege,

denying my privilege of whiteness, is causing me to contribute toward systems of white supremacy, and those systems are causing harm to everyone, myself included.

17. Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's so Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018).

18. In the Abhidharma-kośa, "Vasubandhu claims that we should understand avidyā as that which is opposed to knowledge," not just lack of knowledge. It is also called "that which is mistaken for knowledge." Emily McRae, "White Delusion and Avidyā: A Buddhist Approach to Understanding and Deconstructing White Ignorance," in *Buddhism and Whiteness: Critical Reflections*, eds. George Yancy and Emily McRae (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., 2019), 48.

19. DiAngelo, *White Fragility?* 5.

20. Gyatso, *The Four Noble Truths*, 52–64.

21. With Carla Sherrell, "Structural Spiritual Bypassing in the Contemporary Mindfulness Movement," in *Social Justice, Inner Work, and Contemplative Practice: Lessons & Directions for Multiple Fields*, ed. Sheryl Petty. Initiative for Contemplation, Equity and Action (CEAI), Contemplative Mind and Society, Vol. 1, No. 1, July 2017, 75–94, at <http://www.contemplativemind.org/icea>

22. Sarah Kuta, "Students camp out to protest 'institutionalized racism' at Naropa University," *Boulder Daily Camera*, April 23, 2015, at <https://www.dailycamera.com/2015/04/23/students-camp-out-to-protest-institutionalized-racism-at-naropa-university/>, accessed August 13, 2021.

23. William H. Frey, *Diversity Explosion: How New Racial Demographics are Remaking America*, 2nd ed. (Brookings Institution, 2018).

24. A term coined by two women of color specializing in public health, Melanie Tervalon and Jann Murray-Garcia. See "Cultural Humility versus Cultural Competence: A Critical Distinction in Defining Physician Training Outcomes in Multicultural Education," *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved* 9, no. 2 (1998): 117–124.

25. *Shambhala Educators' Resource Manual* (Halifax: Kalapa Media, 2016).

26. Charlene Leung, "The Healing Practice of Cultural Humility," *Lion's Roar*, July 16, 2018, at <https://www.lionsroar.com/the-healing-practice-of-cultural-humility/>

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