

How to Fight Racism Through Inner Work by Jill Suttie

Mindfulness meditation may hold the key to grappling with interpersonal racism, says Rhonda Magee, because it helps people tolerate the discomfort that comes with deeper discussions about race. And it can help cultivate a sense of belonging and community for those who experience and fight racism in our everyday lives.

For more than 20 years, Magee has worked to address issues of race, racism, and identity-based conflict while teaching law at the University of San Francisco. Over the years teaching hundreds of students about the many ways that racism affects law and justice, she came to realize that we can't just think our way out of racism or other biases—we need to go deeper than intellectual understanding if we are to truly address bias in ourselves and others.

Enter her new book, *The Inner Work of Racial Justice*, which combines stories and analysis to illuminate recent research on bias and mindfulness. In doing so, it provides an introduction to mindfulness meditation and compassion practice. I spoke with her about the book and her reasons for turning to mindfulness as a way of confronting racism.

Jill Suttie: What do you mean by “inner work” and why do you think people need to focus on it when combatting racism?

Professor Rhonda Magee

Rhonda Magee: Racism and other forms of bias are pervasive in our culture. So, most of us have inherited ways of thinking about ourselves and others that are fairly reductionist—notions of race, gender, and other things that give us a limited sense of who we are. We can all see the harm that this causes, the polarization and identity-based violence in our time.

I think we're called to challenge not only these behaviors, but the reductionist thinking that contributes to them, but we can't do it without creating some spaciousness in ourselves to understand how we hold these ideas in our own brain, body, and experience. Because cultural trainings and conditionings run so deep, we need to meet the challenges of un-training ourselves with a similar level of depth.

Inner work is about addressing this—really looking within to see how we've been trained and conditioned through lenses of race, gender, and the intersections of those two, day after day, living in cultures that constantly feed the sense that we are different from and even should be afraid of each other. By inner work, I mean practices of mindfulness-based awareness and compassion. These practices help us unpack a deeper sense of who we are in ways that redress what I see as a poverty of imagination around what it means to be human, to be alive.

JS: Don't you think someone suffering racism might be resistant to the idea of needing to work on their inner self rather than work on changing society?

RM: Yes, and at the same time we need an ecological approach to justice that includes inner work, interpersonal work, and intercultural systemic work—meaning, working within ourselves and between ourselves, and then working to change the systems that we're living in.

By no means do I mean to suggest that all of the work of racial justice has to be done "within." But we do need to create a place, a narrative, a set of practices to support entering into that part of the work, so that we're not tempted to think racial justice is mostly about doing something "out there." Deep training in mindfulness allows us to see that, for all of us, there's an inner dimension to racial justice, even while we work to change cultural systems around us.

JS: There's some research that suggests being more mindful might lead to less political action. Are you concerned about that?

RM: This depends on how we're framing "mindfulness." If you think of it as highly individual—something to be supported by an app for your personal well-being—then, yes, it probably could contribute to disengagement or pacification. But the traditional teachings of the Buddha, from which most of what we call mindfulness evolved, are about how we might better engage with others and the world.

The historical Buddha dealt with many of the challenging social realities of his time—for example, allowing women into the order of practice in ways that other religious or other wisdom traditions at the time didn't. He specifically countered and addressed the caste system in his time; he worked with kings and others in power to influence the way they exercised power in the direction of minimizing harm.

Inspired by these teachings, I have always viewed mindfulness as being about inner and outer awareness and action. Mindfulness arises only in community. As the Buddha famously said to his disciple, Ananda, community is not half the awakened life; it's all of it. How we treat others is all of what mindfulness is all about.

JS: Your book's target audience appears to be broad—to appeal to both people who inadvertently perpetuate racism and people who directly suffer the effects of racism. How can mindfulness help both?

RM: Research has helped us see that mindfulness can be of benefit in many, many ways. First, when I use the term mindfulness, I mean a rich tradition of practice, study, and communion—not just a solo practice for training your mind in ways that some refer to as "McMindfulness." With deep practice, we can begin to understand how this inner work helps us with automatic ways of seeing and categorizing each other.

There's actually research that shows mindfulness helps reduce implicit bias—not just around race or gender, but also around homelessness, age, etc. So, there's some reason to believe that basic, simple awareness practices can help disrupt that automatic, biased way of thinking. This helps us more consciously choose how we engage with one another—whether we see ourselves as victims of racism or we're people trying to minimize harm in the world by working with our privileged status in certain contexts.

The practices also help us victims of stereotype or bias repair our sense of woundedness and increase our sense of belonging and interconnectedness. The practices can teach us to manage our emotions if we're getting triggered into feeling stress or vulnerability that naturally comes with a long history of lived experience dealing with bias.

They can also heal some of the trauma of living as a target of violence, micro-aggressions, or other forms of bias and help make us actually less likely to succumb to "stereotype threat"—the psychological stress caused by the perceived risk of confirming a negative stereotype about oneself in a given context when a related social identity characteristic is raised—which studies have shown can decrease the performance of, say, women taking a science exam in a classroom setting in which gender has been recently highlighted.

JS: In your book, you write about something you call "ColorInsight." Can you explain how this fits into addressing racism?

RM: Many of us have been raised with the idea that it's best not to talk about racial issues, and that to fight racism we must be "colorblind." But bringing mindfulness and compassion practices to bear on experiences around race can help deepen our insight into how we see race, and how racism factors in all our lives. That's ColorInsight.

Even those of us trained in mindfulness live in societies that look at race and perpetuate messages around race in particular ways. So, while we may believe that we're less racist because of our training, we're all part of a culture affected by these messages. If we are trained against understanding how we do see race, if we can't understand that and we can't talk about it, we will be less able to address it. Our children will continue to suffer from racism, and so will our communities. I often hear from the young people I teach that they don't know how to turn toward discussions of race, or they feel a sense of threat from the "other" because of the messages they've heard.

Developing ColorInsight—the capacity to analyze race and racism in our own lives and in the social settings we are in, with compassion as we go—can help them enter into these discussions more deeply.

JS: When you use the term "deep mindfulness," it seems daunting to me. What advice do you have for someone wanting to work on racial justice, but not necessarily wanting to create a deep mindfulness practice?

RM: My book wasn't written only for people who are deep practitioners; it's actually written for anyone with an interest in working to fight racism in our times. I open the book with a practice called "the pause"—a very gentle, very portable, easy way of helping create some deepening awareness about what we're dealing with in any given situation.

For example, if we see a Facebook post or Twitter tweet or something in the news that makes us want to run away or to fight or to act out of anger, mindfulness can help us pause for a moment, notice how we're reacting, and bring a kind or friendly energy to the situation. Being able to pause helps us to understand why we're reacting and allow for broader moral and social imagination around how we respond.

Mindfulness can also help people understand more about the experiences of those on the other side of the racial veil. Sure, we can try to listen to people share their lived experiences; but I also want to disrupt the temptation for people to say that they have no idea what it's like to put themselves in the shoes of another's humanity—in other words, to imagine what it's like to be the only one in a room surrounded by people who look

different from me and to experience stereotyping. I hear that a lot from students: They hear bad stuff is happening, but they don't know what it's like to be a victim of racism, or what to do about it.

Mindfulness helps strengthen our capacity to empathize with others, to work with the emotions that get in the way of helping minimize harm, and to access what we can do. We see that racism isn't just other people's problem. We all have a role to play and can help make a difference right where we are.

JS: Research suggests that having positive contact with people who are different from us decreases bias. Does your book support this idea somehow?

RM: Absolutely! Time and again research shows that we can minimize bias by bringing people together. But we haven't taught or applied that research robustly; if anything, we've moved away from rather than toward efforts to desegregate and bring people together in the meaningful ways that may actually disrupt prejudice. Instead, we get caught up in stories of fear, forecasting the challenge of being together. If someone says, "We're going to talk about race," the temptation for many of us is to pull back, right?

As human beings, we feel challenged when we are invited into discussions about race without a lot of support. The book is meant to offer that support through mindfulness practices and compassion for ourselves and others. When we're asked to talk about race, we can sit with the discomfort and gain a sense of confidence, increasing our capacity to go through the difficulty, which will lay a foundation for richer, more regular contact. In this and other ways, the practices can support us in becoming more able to navigate the differences, the conflicts that our different experiences in the world make.

We've seen examples of how contact between people from different backgrounds can be itself a vehicle for lessening bias—like in the International Space Station, where people from all over the world came together to make it happen, in musical bands, and the like. I wrote the book to help people recognize and grapple with bias and its impacts, to help us stop recreating spheres of separation and inequality. What gets in our way of acting on our better intentions? We need to get more honest about that and more practiced in supportive, nurturing ways of being with each other.

JS: What are your hopes for the book's impact?

RM: It's meant to be a book that can support a book club, a family, or a group of people at work to really turn towards these issues and address the poverty of both imagination and experience together that I'm speaking of here—deepening people's sense of abundance about what it means to be alive and how to be alive together in these times. I hope the book can increase people's capacity to disrupt structures of oppression that minimize access to ways of flourishing, making some of us, literally, more vulnerable to unhealthy outcomes in the world. Any one of us can play a role in working with the delusions we have around race that get in the way of making love more available in the public sphere.

My own experience around doing this work fills me with hope. There is so much potential for human beings to grow, yet we've all been wounded and we all suffer from this. Some people even call racism a disease. We are all suffering as a society and as individuals because of our inability to come together: We don't have health care that's effective; we can't get our head around gun control, criminal justice reform, climate change, or what we need to do about it, and this confusion is impacted by our inability to imagine worlds and systems that work better for all of us. It's all interrelated.

We can do better. Our culture's (frankly) infantile way of dealing with our history of racism and how that still shows up today has to change if we're going to get through this period. The invitation to mindfully turn toward those things we've been trained to think we can't handle, with confidence and compassion, is how we'll get there.

The Inner Work of Racial Justice: Healing Ourselves and Transforming Our Communities Through Mindfulness (TarcherPerigee, 2019)

For more inspiration, join this Saturday's Awakin Call with Leslie Booker on Cultivating Compassion -- Lessons from the Front Lines of Criminal Justice. More details and RSVP info [here](#).