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Mindfully White: An Anti-Racist Affinity Podcast
Inspired by the Buddha's Teaching of the Four Noble Truths

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GMIND 7500: Thesis

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Abstract

The Buddha's foundational teaching of the Four Noble Truths offers a direct seeing into how suffering arises, its causes, and a pathway to liberation. This thesis focuses on racism as a specific form of suffering for Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) and offers a way for White people to consider how they contribute to its manifestation and what they can do to help end it. This re-formulation of the Four Noble Truths is; First, the truth of racism; Second, the truth of the cause of racism; Third, the truth of the end of racism; and Fourth, the truth of the path that leads to the end of racism. With this framework as a foundation, along with Ruth King's conception of Racial Affinity Groups (2018), the *Mindfully White: An Antiracist Affinity Group Podcast* was developed as a way for White people to share their personal stories and learn from each other in community. Through interviews, guided meditation, and personal reflection, the host, guests, and listeners are invited to share how they see and understand the truth of racism, its causes, and what they can do to lessen their impact on BIPOC through an exploration of their White identity.

Keywords: racism, anti-racism, Four Noble Truths, mindfulness, affinity groups, white identity, white privilege, white supremacy

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“Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.”

-Maya Angelou

Mindfully White: An Anti-Racist Affinity Podcast

Inspired by the Buddha's Teaching of the Four Noble Truths

I had a dream not long ago wherein the Statue of Liberty was being taken down and moved. We forget most dreams upon awakening; however, this one stays and feels cold in my bones when I return to the image. This may be reminiscent of Confederate statues that have recently been removed either by force or as part of a partial atonement for the United States of America's history of enslavement and civil war. These symbols of pain and glorification of White supremacy were recognized, by some, as no longer being part of what Americans must constitute as the living reality. It is an effort to move forward by acknowledging the past.

Similarly, upon more reflection about my dream, it became clear that Lady Liberty's symbolism is inaccurate. She is an aspiration, and she is not true. Her removal was yet another act of atonement because her presence continues the delusion stated in "The New Colossus" poem she holds. In part, it reads, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!" (Lazarus, 1883). While initially she was meant to celebrate the end of the Civil War and emancipation, she later became a welcoming beacon to immigrants (Zaru, 2019). Perhaps Malcolm X's characterization of what it feels like to be welcomed as an "American," certainly for People of Color, is more precise. This is from a speech he gave in 1964 entitled *The Ballot or the Bullet*:

No, I'm not an American. I'm one of the 22 million black people who are the victims of Americanism. One of the victims of democracy, nothing but disguised hypocrisy. So, I'm not standing here speaking to you as an American, or a patriot, or a flag-saluter, or a flag-

waver - no, not I. I'm speaking as a victim of this American system. And I see America through the eyes of the victim. I don't see any American dream; I see an American nightmare.

Whether one is experiencing the American dream or nightmare is significantly impacted by skin color. While it can also be affected by many other factors, like gender or class, this paper explicitly calls attention to racism and what White people can do to become more race-conscious and minimize suffering.

With mindfulness, challenging racism with skillful means and goodheartedness is possible. To traverse the systemic racism environment and its relationship to White supremacy culture, one must begin with some self-reflection alongside the folding in of knowledge and mental training. The practice of mindfulness has its roots in the 2,600-year-old tradition of Buddhism. Buddhist monk, Bhante Gunaratana, discusses mindfulness as a "special way of seeing life" (2014, p. 27). This way is about training to see reality exactly as it is, which, he notes, is not what we typically do. He further emphasizes that "We see life through a screen of thoughts and concepts, and we mistake those mental objects for reality. We get so caught up in the endless thought-stream that reality flows by unnoticed" (p. 27).

Racism is ultimately a disease of the mind, perpetuated by the distortion of reality or the screen of thoughts and concepts Bhante describes. Ruth King, a renowned African American author, educator, and meditation teacher, writes about racism as a heart disease. She states, "Many of us can live for awhile with a heart disease without knowing it, and others of us know we have a heart disease but are afraid or even in denial about it" (p. 9). King further asks two questions: "Why are matters of race still of concern across the nation and throughout the world?"

And what does it have to do with me?” (p. 9). We are better equipped to investigate our experiences and cure this heart disease with mindfulness.

Mindfulness, as positioned in this thesis, is only a part of the support system offered. To help directly address the two questions King poses, the Buddha’s teaching of the Four Noble Truths (the truth of suffering, the truth of the cause of suffering, the truth of the end of suffering, and the truth of the path that leads to the end of suffering) will frame a four-part inquiry, for White people, into the causes and cessation of racism, a form of suffering.

While it may be controversial to center this project on White people, well-respected teachers and leaders encourage working together. For example, Rev. Angel Kyodo Williams (2016), a Black writer, activist, and ordained Zen priest, says, “There’s zero space for White folks to really claim suffering around living in a racialized society. There’s no space, it seems to me, for White people to actually get down to the conversation” (p. 158).

This project will ultimately propose a storytelling medium through which White people share their attempts at removing the veil of ignorance. It will include the realities of waking up to Whiteness in all its forms. As a preface to that, the following aspects will be addressed through an adapted version of the Buddha’s Four Noble Truths: First, the truth of racism; Second, the truth of the cause of racism; Third, the truth of the end of racism; and Fourth, the truth of the path that leads to the end of racism. This last truth requires creativity and exploration to expound fully and is where self-reflection and sharing will reveal the path through stories of direct experiences.

A Note on Intersectionality

The concept of intersectionality provides a way to understand potential layers of suffering. It is defined as “ the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups” (Merriam Webster, n.d.). Kimberlé Crenshaw, the law professor and civil rights advocate who coined the term, saw that social identities can overlap and that all inequality is not created equal. For example, while a White woman and a Black woman may experience gender discrimination, the Black woman may also be subject to racial discrimination. A White woman's median wealth is somewhere in the \$40,000 range. A Black woman's median wealth is \$100. (Steinmetz, 2020). Ibram X. Kendi, a renowned historian, author, and anti-racist activist (2019), refers to this as gender racism. Black women often have to earn advanced degrees before earning more than White women with bachelor degrees. He states that Native and Black women experience the most poverty, while White and Asian men make the most. Well-educated Black women are more likely to miscarry a child than a White woman with an eighth-grade education.

Intersectionality is a complex set of maps to navigate. Gender racism is only one of several combinations of privilege and discrimination. Immigration status, first language, sexual orientation, disability, and how one looks (hair, weight, clothing) also need to be considered. As McGee (2019) writes, “It’s critical to bring nuance to our discussions of the privileges associated with whiteness” (p. 85). To do so brings the chasm between Black and White America more into focus. Even so, this project recognizes that the myriad experiences of White people and BIPOC will not all be directly addressed, and does not want to insinuate that each racial group is a monolith. Instead, this glacial endeavor is meant to reveal itself along the way on an individual

level, so that nuance and personal learning are inspired by the contents of one's own lived experience.

The Four Noble Truths

While the culminating project will take on a secular tone, almost every fiber will have Buddhist roots. Though on purpose, so that the audience is more expansive, it is a point of tension also. Diverse Asian heritages have preserved Buddhist teachings, without which there would be no western form of secular mindfulness from which so many have benefitted.

While a certain few prominent White Dharma teachers are credited with beginning to popularize American Buddhism in the 1970s, it was Asian immigrants who started practicing here over a hundred years ago, welcoming White people into their communities. In the West, White mindfulness teachers retrofit the Buddhist teachings for their audience, other White people, and often to the dissatisfaction of Asian-American Buddhists (Han 2021). Jon Kabat-Zinn struggled with this immensely as he crafted the popular Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program. He says, "I wanted it (MBSR) to articulate the Dharma that underlies the curriculum, but without ever using the word 'Dharma' or invoking Buddhist thought or authority, since for obvious reasons, we do not teach MBSR in that way" (2011, p. 282). He wondered if it was ok to "stretch the envelope" or if it would cause more harm than good. While he was knowledgeable of and deeply connected to the teachings of the Buddha, he knew that he could reach and help more people with chronic pain by leaving the Dharma explicitly out of the 8-week stress reduction program. Ultimately, his answer was "no" when he asked himself if he was ignoring the Dharma in favor of just a few meditation techniques. This was because the Dharma was still built into the ethical framework and structure of the program.

The current work seeks a similar recipe by developing a podcast for a lay audience while also being profoundly informed by Buddhism. In particular, an adaptation of the Four Noble Truths. I believe that with the right intention, there's a way to do both/and rather than either/or.

In *Untangling Self*, Buddhist scholar, teacher, and writer, Dr. Andrew Olendzki suggests a modern approach to utilizing the “four truths formulation” as he puts it – “ as a template for social, economic, political, and environmental transformation” (2016, p. 106). He further notes that it can be used as a four-part process of inquiry that anyone can use, anywhere and for any reason: acknowledge suffering exists by naming the ways it is happening; see what causes can be identified; ask what theoretical solutions might be possible, and begin to take small steps to end the causes of the named suffering.

With this essence, the traditional teachings and secular approach will coalesce to create a practical means for exploring and dissolving the racism that exists within and amongst White people, with an emphasis on normalizing conversations about race and with community support.

The First Truth: The truth of racism

First, let's define racism. Ijeoma Oluo's New York Times Bestseller, *So You Want to Talk About Race*, explains it in two ways. The first is that racism is any prejudice against someone because of their race. The second is that racism is any prejudice against someone because of their race when power systems reinforce those views. Oluo suggests that the first definition tends to “reduce issues of race in America to a battle for the hearts and minds of individual racists” (2018, p. 27). In contrast, the second definition recognizes that racist behavior is part of a more extensive system. The second truth of American racism, which will address

causation, will consider both renderings of the word. While this paper will not cover how racism affects every non-dominant group, it will highlight universal themes.

Racism is not unique to the United States. However, Buddhist monk, scholar, and meditation teacher, Bhikkhu Analayo (2020) points out that racism in America is “particular to the type of racial oppression that emerged in the modern period as a product of the colonial enterprises of European powers, where the slave trade motivated a tendency to dehumanize Africans to justify treating them as a commodity” (p. 2284). The same is true regarding dehumanizing Indigenous People to validate genocide. Kendi (2019) cites that between 1980 and 2015, the Latinx and Black communities more than tripled in the United States due to a series of legislation (Refugee Act of 1980 and Immigration Act of 1990). Previously, immigration laws limited the non-White population to keep America “American,” meaning White. This history of slavery and murder and its justification lives on today through a modernized lens.

One of those modernized lenses is that everyone can make themselves whatever they want -- the American Dream. Under the Trump administration, the US Citizenship and Immigration Services Acting Director suggested edits to “The New Colossus Poem” on the Statue of Liberty. The new version would read, "Give me your tired and your poor who can stand on their own two feet and who will not become a public charge" (Ingber & Martin, 2019). In a 1967 NBC interview with Martin Luther King Jr., he said, “I believe we ought to do all we can and seek to lift ourselves by our own bootstraps, but it is a cruel jest to say to a bootless man that he ought to lift himself by his own bootstraps.” Kendi also points out that racism, internalized over time, has led some Black people to believe that struggling Blacks are primarily responsible for their conditions. He says, “I thought only White people could be racist and that Black people could not be racist, because Black people did not have power...I had no sense of the reactionary

history of this construction, of its racist bearing” (p. 140). Further, this view oppresses People of Color even further while giving Whites more power. The purpose of pointing out Kendi’s observation that even People of Color can be racist is not to charge them with fixing the problem but rather to show how deeply woven racism is in everyday American life and the suffering for all therein.

Meta-analyses show repercussions of American history; the impact of racism on mental health is substantial for BIPOC (Cook et al., 2019; Paradies et al., 2015). Additionally, structural racism impacts education, employment, the criminal justice system, and the environment. Oluo (2018) points out that race plays a significant role in defining one’s success in life, with substantial differences in wealth, health, life expectancy, infant mortality, incarceration, and more. She notes, “We cannot look at a society where racial inequity is so universal and longstanding and say, “This is all the doing of a few individuals with hate in their hearts.” It just doesn’t make sense” (p. 29).

Now let’s look at the Buddha’s teaching of the first noble truth. It requires a comprehensive awareness of suffering. Bhikkhu Bodhi, a renowned American Theravada Buddhist monk, writes, “Just as an ailing patient needs a doctor who can make a full and correct diagnosis of his illness, so in seeking release from suffering we need a teaching that presents a reliable account of our condition” (1998, p. 4). Adapting this truth to racism means giving a complete and accurate account of it as Americans.

The Buddha taught that life and suffering were inseparable. Similarly, a Black, Indigenous, and Person of Color (BIPOC) in America may feel that racism is inseparable from their experience. Bodhi describes the Pali word for suffering, *dukkha*, as a “basic

unsatisfactoriness running through our lives...”, and while it can show up in obvious ways (like grief or anger), “it usually hovers at the edge of our awareness as a vague unlocalized sense that things are never quite perfect” (1998, p. 6). Racism has this quality as well; it can be obvious or insidious. Reverend Angel Kyodo Williams (2016) offers this about the first noble truth to understand the approach to waking up.

In the teachings of the Dharma, the first teaching is that life is suffering. It’s not a thought, it’s not an idea, it’s not something that you should take as you go off onto the second Noble Truth—it’s teaching. It’s something that you actually have to come to know. And if you don’t truly know, know intimately that “life is suffering,” then you cannot know what it means to seek liberation. (p.155)

Applying this same perspective to racism, one sees that it’s about creating conditions that eliminate the *dukkha* of racism. This leads us to the second definition of racism described earlier and the second truth of the cause of racism.

The Second Truth: The truth of the cause of racism

In the Buddha’s teaching of the second noble truth, a complete account of the causes of suffering must be understood. The Buddha sees the true origin of *dukkha* as the unwholesome mental states of greed, hatred, and delusion, otherwise known as the ‘defilements.’ Bodhi describes greed as “the desire for pleasure and possessions, the drive for survival, the urge to bolster the sense of ego with power, status, and prestige”; hatred as “rejection, irritation, condemnation, hatred, enmity, anger, and violence”; and delusion as “the thick coat of insensitivity which blocks out clear understanding” (1998, p. 8). When one looks closely, these roots are illustrative of the causes of racism also.

It's essential to keep in mind that racism was designed to support an economic and social system for mostly rich White men and not motivated by hatred of BIPOC. Oppression was the vehicle for profit and comfort, and racism justified it (Oluo, 2018). Law professor Rhonda MaGee (2016) notes that throughout the colonial period, starting in the early 1600s, the new field of anthropology provided false scientific narratives to legitimize racism. Religious, political, legal, and anthropological ideologies aligned to create Whiteness. Recalling Oluo's (2018) second definition of racism – any prejudice against someone because of their race, when systems of power reinforce those views – one sees greed and hatred emerge with an understanding that only a collective of deluded minds could uphold it. The following sections delineate major causal themes for racism that relate to whiteness; white delusion, white supremacy, and white privilege.

White Delusion

Emily McRae, a professor whose research focuses on Buddhist ethics, wrote an essay on White delusion in *Buddhism and Whiteness* (2019). In it, she expounds on the concept of *avidyā* (ignorance, confusion, delusion), noting it as the most foundational of the three defilements (ignorance, hatred, and desire), which functions by “projecting false views and assumptions and taking them to be real and accurate” (p. 48). McRae emphasizes that *avidyā* is primarily an “active misapprehension of reality” (p.44) that reinforces itself through personal and social habits. She further observes the stark similarity to White delusion characterized by an “active refusal by Whites to confront basic facts about our social world” (p. 44) that is maintained with effort.

From the standpoint of Buddhist psychology, the driving force behind maintaining delusion is presumably craving and aversion. And it is the cessation of craving that ultimately leads to the cessation of suffering. McRae (2019) notes that “craving, the sense of “I want” and

“I must have,” and aversion, the sense of “I don’t want” and “I can’t possibly tolerate,” are fundamental constituents of a variety of dysfunctional mental and emotional states” (p. 54). These psychological factors, she states, are what keep one from facing reality.

As an example, one profound yet often subtle and unconscious way that craving and aversion play out in everyday life by White people is through racial microaggressions. Sue et al. (2007) define these as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group” (p.273). Such microaggressions include, but are not limited to, the assumption that someone wasn’t born in the U.S., assigning intelligence based on race, color blindness, belief of criminal status, and the idea that communication styles of White culture are ideal (Sue et al., 2007). These acts are predicated on the idea that oneself or race is superior and should be the standard to which all others adhere.

Witnessing one’s own delusion is an opportunity to examine cravings and aversions in action and how they contribute to maintaining a deluded mind, which turns into a collective of minds, and ultimately systems. As King (2018) notes, “In and of itself, race is not personal, nor is it a problem. The problem is how we perceive race, socially project onto race, and relate to race as if it were personal, permanent, or perfect” (p. 75).

White Supremacy

Perhaps the most repugnant delusion is White supremacy, “a racist ideology that is based upon the belief that white people are superior in many ways to people of other races and that therefore, white people should be dominant over other races” (Saad, 2020, p. 12). Upholding that delusion allows a culture and thereby a system to exist.

Anti-racist trainer Elizabeth Martinez (1998) defines White supremacy culture as a “historically based, institutionally perpetuated system of exploitation and oppression of continents, nations, and peoples of color by white peoples and nations of the European continent of the purpose of establishing, maintaining, and defending a system of wealth, power, and privilege” (para 1). On April 28th, 2021, President Joseph Biden called White supremacy the nation’s most significant terrorist threat in a speech to the joint session of congress (U.S. Government, 2021). This is a remarkable statement from a U.S. President. This truth, in part, is referencing the January 6th, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol by White supremacists to overthrow democracy. Layla Saad, the author of *Me and White Supremacy*, cautions that it is incorrect to reserve White supremacy for far-right extremists and neo-Nazis. Doing so reinforces another delusion that it is only a fringe group of Whites who are the problem (2020).

In the preface to *Radical Dharma*, Rev. angel Kyodo Williams depicts a country enveloped in White supremacy:

White supremacy is in every aspect of how we think, feel, dream, and act toward ourselves and others based on our perception of their place in the social order. Rank is still the evolutionarily Neanderthal mode by which our social and religious cultures are organized, and it systematically undermines every enlightened impulse we have. (2016, p. xiii)

According to Oluo (2018), such impulses include what White people think and feel about BIPOC due to the system led by the dominant group’s cultural values, economic and educational systems, and media outlets. Who is seen as successful? As scary? Smart? Beautiful?

This sometimes invisible yet palpable code of allegiance to Whiteness is maintained by individuals actively or passively preserving it. Oluo (2018) writes, "...the impotent hatred of the virulent racist was built and nurtured by a system that has much more insidiously woven a quieter, yet no less violent, version of those same oppressive beliefs into the fabric of our society." (p. 27) In other words, one doesn't have to be racist to perpetuate this system of oppression. This is part of the delusion that must be undone. A product of White supremacy culture is the reality of White privilege. Part of being less ignorant about race is understanding how White people are born into a degree of benefit simply because of their skin color.

Whether or not you have known it, it (white supremacy) is a system that has granted you unearned privileges, protection and power. It is also a system that has been designed to keep you asleep and unaware of what having that privilege, protection, and power has meant for people who do not look like you. What you receive for your whiteness comes at a steep cost for those who are not white. (Saad, 2020, p. 14)

White Privilege

Anti-racist activist and scholar Peggy McIntosh wrote a seminal paper in 1989 called "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," containing fifty examples of White privilege. Some examples include, "When I am told about our national heritage or about "civilization," I am shown that people of my color made it what it is" and "I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me." She explains that invisibility refers to unearned assets that Whites are endowed with, and most remain oblivious to.

The theme of White people being asleep or unaware runs deep regarding racism. With the assistance of delusion, it thrives. Saad (2020) propounds that White privilege is not part of the

natural order. Without White supremacy, privilege has no value. Additionally, she names that while it is separate, it can intersect with class, gender, sexuality, age, able-bodied, and many other types of privilege. Reviewing McIntosh's list of privileges will often elicit a sense of "what aboutism" as it relates to other inequities. However, it's important to remember that White skin is still an advantage even if one has low economic or educational status. Seeing this distinction is part of waking up from the trance of delusion.

The Third Truth: The truth of the end of racism

The third noble truth mandates that the path to liberation means removing suffering at its source by eradicating its causes and not merely its symptoms. As Bodhi notes, "one afflicted with a fatal disease cannot afford to settle for cosmetic surgery when below the surface the cause of his malady continues to thrive" (1998, p. 4). Adapting this truth to racism means a method to extinguish its causes must be provided.

The Buddha prescribed that to eliminate suffering, one must eliminate ignorance, to which wisdom is the antidote (Bodhi, 1998). Wisdom, in this sense, means to see things as they are, without delusion. Bodhi explains how,

It comes into being through a set of conditions, conditions which we have the power to develop. These conditions are actually mental factors, components of consciousness, which fit together into a systemic structure that can be called a path in the word's essential meaning: a causeway for movement leading to a goal. (1998, p.8)

McRae (2020) notes that while Buddhist ethics provide several ways to abandon delusion, she offers to concentrate on two aspects: the contemplation of causation and the cultivation of equanimity. With regards to causation, Saad agrees, "If you are willing to dare

look at White supremacy right in the eye and see yourself reflected back, you are going to become better equipped to dismantle it within yourself and within your communities” (2018, p. 14). And, it’s more than just learning and accepting facts. McRae (2020) says that to uproot delusion requires the integration of knowledge in the right ways, at the right times, and, most importantly, aligned with wholesome emotions, desires, and perceptions.

White people can regress into everyday unwholesome emotional habits when examining their relationship to Whiteness and racism, such as hostility, fear, and White fragility. It can explain why White people fail to be rational about issues regarding race. As a result, McRae posits that “critical reasoning about the specific causal relationships between white privilege and racial injustice could help address white delusion” (p. 53) and that equanimity will encourage White people to pause before taking as fact what their initial cravings and aversions are telling them. As previously noted, Olendzki (2016) states that the third part of the inquiry process – or third truth, in this case – involves looking for theoretical ways suffering can be resolved. While there are necessary and innumerable ways racism needs to be addressed, including systemically, this project suggests that one way to relieve the cause of racism is to ask White people to share their stories for the benefit of uprooting delusion, increasing knowledge, and with mindfulness modulating the container and the conversations as they occur and are witnessed.

The fourth noble truth and final stage of the inquiry will extrapolate how a group of White people can do this work together, taking it from a theoretical to practical means of engagement.

The Fourth Truth: The truth of the path that leads to the end of racism

The Buddha prescribed the Noble Eightfold Path as the way to end suffering. It's comprised of three categories and each element within is meant to be practiced in tandem with each other. The first arm of the path is ethical conduct (*sila*), made up of wise speech, wise action, and wise livelihood. Mental discipline (*samadhi*), the second arm, encourages wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration. The last arm, wisdom (*panna*), includes wise understanding and wise intention. Respected Buddhist teacher and author Larry Yang (2017), says the following regarding the Eightfold Path, "Within this framework are literally hundreds of practices to support the development of our happiness and freedom. They are all worthy ingredients in our lives, but the recipe is something that only we can create for ourselves" (p. 34). He states that much of the work is in mindful awareness. And while this alone does not release suffering, it supports the creation of a new relationship with it.

Similarly, these same categories of ethics, mental discipline, and wisdom can be applied to achieve an anti-racist mindset. Therefore, the inclination to think and act from that perspective and with mindfulness as vital support. Though not always explicit in how they are presented, the audio series offered in this project seeks to develop these three arms of the Path in White people who engage with it.

The following sections on de-centering whiteness, affinity groups, and storytelling are imbued with right speech, right action, and right livelihood, the ethics arm of the Path. It's imperative to recognize the possible ways that giving White people a platform to discuss race could cause further suffering and offer a grounded perspective that supports and transforms it into a space where the other wings of the Path (wisdom and mental discipline) can flourish.

(De)-Centering Whiteness

As a preface to discussing the podcast, it's essential to bring attention to the paradox within which it is contained. In American society, Whites are the default standard against which everyone else is compared (Hitchcock & Flint, 2015). A central part of working towards racial justice is centering the voices of BIPOC, learning directly from their lived experience and challenges. However, this project is centering White voices and stories, which may feel out of alignment with the goal. To delineate the grounds for this work, it's paramount to hold the delicate balance of centering Whiteness for the benefit or de-centering it. This can be achieved within a White anti-racist affinity group, sharing stories in a supportive learning space.

To illustrate the problematic kind of White centering, here is a scene referencing the record number of Whites who protested during the summer of 2020 following the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery.

A white person saying 'I can't breathe' at a protest when they are at essentially zero risk of ever enduring a police chokehold is not a particularly meaningful act," says Balto. "It is a centering of the white self that at least partly dislodges focus from the matter at hand — black safety from the police. (Patton, 2020)

Confusingly, many well-intentioned White people may not realize that such an act is a problem. As a society, we tend to highlight the ill-intentioned, such as self-declared White supremacists, as the only ones perpetuating harm. However, it goes much deeper than that.

According to Hitchcock and Flint (2015), "Whiteness needs to be taken out of the center to join other racial/cultural groups on the margins" (p. 5). They further elucidate that "attacking whiteness is not enough to accomplish this goal. Assaults on whiteness, depending on their nature, may have the effect of confirming and solidifying the central position of whiteness in

American society” (p. 5). Such situations reinforce Whiteness, while those who attack it (including other White people) are pushed further to the margins. With polarization resulting from such heated discourse in America, it’s paramount to bring some neutrality to conversations and the containers within which they occur. In this sense, the goal is to center Whiteness mindfully while simultaneously acknowledging that the purpose is to decentralize it. White people need to see it, to free it, essentially.

White Racial Affinity Groups

Suppose there were a place or forum where White people could share and process their racial identity to benefit People of Color (and themselves). In that case, it might function as this neutral space that can eventually lead towards less polarization and decentralization of Whiteness. For example, take the earlier example of the White protester saying, “I can’t breathe.” If that person took part in a White racial affinity group, they might learn how their action was potentially harmful and help others see it. In this way, it is different from centering the self only and ignorantly, but rather centering a perspective, story, or experience for the sake of learning and healing. Ruth King, a renowned African American author, educator, and meditation teacher, discusses the importance of racial affinity groups (RAGs) in her book, *Mindful of Race*. She states, “Given the unintended harm caused from unawareness and cumulative impact when we gather across races, we need a different way to explore the ignorance and innocence of our racial conditioning and racial character with those of our same race” (2018, p.165). Even those who consider themselves anti-racist and fighting for racial justice can benefit from such a space.

Regarding White RAGS specifically, King notes how Whites can encourage solidarity with compassion and support while being with the discomfort of racial awakening. And, very

importantly, Whites can do so without the dependence on POC to assist them. She further illuminates how RAGs are essential to developing racial intimacy, literacy, and skillfulness. “To separate into same-race groups, in this sense, is not intended to divide us but rather to leverage the fact that, in relative reality, we are racially divided. In a RAG, we use separation to more deeply understand this conditioning.” (2018, p.166). Magee, author of *The Inner Work of Racial Justice*, concurs, noting the importance of homogeneous spaces with a commitment to self-compassion. It is here that familiars can “unpack what’s going on without having to worry about the fragile feelings of others who might not understand” (2019, p.165).

Despite the surge in interest in racial justice from the White community during the summer of 2020, there are signs that it has waned. In particular, in September 2020, the Pew Research Center found that support for the Black Lives Matter movement slightly rose for Black adults and decreased in every other racial category with the most decrease in Whites (from 60% to 40%) (Thomas & Horowitz, 2021). Michael and Congur (2009), who founded White Students Confronting Racism (WSCR) at the University of Pennsylvania’s Graduate School of Education, helped White students explore their racial identities to become anti-racist allies. They note, “It is extremely difficult to stay engaged in anti-racism work as a white person. There are many institutional forces telling us to butt out, or questioning the legitimacy of our stake in anti-racist work” (p. 60).

Interestingly, they state that most White people have questioned their motives for having a White affinity group, assuming it to be racist or supremacist in itself. Despite the criticism, WSCR has remained essential for “identifying the other white allies in our environment who will challenge us and support our growth as anti-racist white people” (p. 60). An integral part of learning from each other is sharing perspectives through storytelling.

Storytelling

It's estimated that the first stories were told about 27,000 years ago as cave paintings (Widrich, 2012). Human brains have and still do rely on storytelling to survive. A typical story recalls events where a protagonist is in a relationship with someone or something, confronting and attempting to resolve problems. As a result, the audience of a story can build shared meaning and learn from another's experience (Landrum, et al., 2019). Lisa Cron, the author of *Wired for Story*, says. "Stories allow us to simulate intense experiences without having to actually live through them" (p. 9). She explains that back in the Stone Age, we'd "be toast" if we didn't learn from stories. For example, waiting for the experience of seeing that the rustling in the bushes is a lion, rather than remembering a similar story, would decrease survival. Today, she posits, instead of navigating the physical world, the brain has evolved to navigate the social realm. Cron asserts that stories now offer a way to explore one's mind and that of another as a dress rehearsal for the future.

Within the context of Whiteness, Matias and Grosland (2016) showed how modern, digital storytelling promotes a racially just way of having White teacher candidates self-reflect on their Whiteness in four key ways; by ending emotional distancing; debunking colorblindness; engaging emotions; and sharing the burden of race. A large part of the success of storytelling as a learning tool is what happens in the brain. Yan et al. (2018) found that the "theory-of-the-mind" brain network gets activated by paying attention to the character's intentions, motivations, beliefs, emotions, and actions.

How might hearing narratives by other White people help listeners become better prepared when they encounter opportunities to interrupt racism in everyday life? One possibility

is that White people get a little closer to knowing what's true, decreasing delusion and increasing liberation for all.

Mindfully White, An Anti-Racist Affinity Group Podcast

This section will chronicle the creation of a podcast series that weaves together the aforementioned foundational Dharma teaching of the Four Noble Truths and Racial Affinity Groups. The heuristic application of these concepts within the structure of a white, anti-racist affinity group audio series recognizes it as central to its success. The podcast's goal is to highlight the work of aspiring towards anti-racism, and the cessation of racism, as a White person. Interview questions are based on the author's conception of the Four Noble Truths. The interview and guidelines offer a supportive, mindfulness-based structure that prioritizes non-judgment, curiosity, and compassion for self and others. Each episode also contains a guided meditation as a complement to the interview.

The Cast

This part will review guest recruitment, the positionality of the host, and a brief introduction to who the guests are.

Recruitment

The project aimed to recruit four to eight guests who met specific criteria:

- I identify as white and am actively interested in anti-racism, even if I have trouble doing it as well as I'd like.
- I can share from my point of view only, without making assumptions about how others felt.
- I am comfortable giving a bit of personal background to the extent it adds value to recording (age, occupation, hometown, etc).
- I can find a place/time to record when it will be quiet and free from distraction.
- I want to share my story to help others grow and learn, and not to promote myself.
- I can meet (online) to record my story.

- I'm open to sharing potentially challenging stories and examples that may bring up uncomfortable emotions.

I asked several people who were aware of the project's purpose to send out a summary and the recruitment website to those in their network who may be interested. Of about 40 people notified, four enthusiastically came forward as interested participants. Following a brief interview via Zoom, they were invited to attend a live, 75-minute recording session with the technical specialist and me. After all interviews were completed, the guests and I met for a group recording session to process and reflect on the experience.

Positionality of the Host

Given the importance of being consciously aware of how White voices are being centered, I'd like to give a brief synopsis of how I came to be in the role of producer/host of this podcast series. This project is in itself a piece of my own White affinity work.

Beginning in 2017, I started waking up to the fact that racism was a serious issue and that I, as a White person, had a responsibility to do better. I grew up in the suburbs of Massachusetts, buying into many of the narratives heard on platforms like Fox News, which I watched regularly. Conservative shock jocks like Don Imus and Jay Severin were also part of my daily life in my 20s. I believed in "welfare queens" and that immigrants take jobs away from Americans. I was irritated by people who didn't know or speak English well. I thought terrorists were Muslim. I believed that if someone wasn't successful, it was the individual's fault and had nothing to do with a system that worked against them. While I would never have considered myself racist, I undoubtedly abided by racist ideology.

When asked to consider how my family, friends, or community contributed to upholding these viewpoints, I feel confused. No one ever challenged me, so it always felt natural. As a

child, teen, and young adult, I did not have the tools or perspective to question anything related to race. I'm sure I absorbed many imprints of racism from school, church, family, and friends without realizing it.

It has been difficult to wake up to the truth of racism and my role in it. And there's considerably much more to do. Nevertheless, there's hope and momentum for this project because I know that there are countless White people like me who, if they could start to see racism more clearly, and the ways they contribute to it, what a difference it could make.

In 2013 I began a committed practice to mindfulness, and in 2017 began working for the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center. Opportunities to do White awake work with the leadership and sangha were pivotal in my ability not to shut down or close myself off to learning about race, white supremacy culture, and privilege. The most supportive and eye-opening experience was attending a book talk with Ruth King when *Mindful of Race* was released, learning about affinity groups, and forming one with a group of anti-racist White people. This is why my project is an iteration of such a format. My hope, and the hope of those who have contributed to the podcast, is that it will make these conversations more accessible, transparent, and normal.

The Guests

The four interviewees, who self-identify as White and anti-racist, are James, Tracy, Esther, and Yusef, all currently residing in the Northeast US region and mid-30s to late 40s in age. All have at least one graduate degree. While geographically, they are relatively similar, their sexual orientation, religious affiliation, and racial identities differ. Two of them identify as mixed race, and collectively, they represent Jewish, Protestant, Orthodox Christian, and Islamic religions.

The Setting

From how the interview container was composed to the choice of questions asked, this section will describe the construction of the guest experience.

A Mindful Container

From beginning to end, all guests were supported with mindfulness-based guiding principles. They and I committed to maintaining open-mindedness, curiosity, non-judgment, and compassion for self and others. They were first made aware of this foundational aspect of the project during the recruitment process and pre-interviews. During the recorded interviews, additional guidelines were shared to support further their sharing of personal history with racism and anti-racism. Listeners of the podcast will also be invited to listen mindfully, increasing the likelihood that it will constructively engage the listener.

Interview Guidelines

Interview guidelines were inspired by insight dialogue (Kramer, 2007), the East Bay Meditation Center's (2020) guidelines for multicultural interaction, and Ruth King's instructions for racial affinity groups (2018). They reiterated the purpose of the interview and project, emphasized the importance of trusting the emergence of a response that isn't forced or performed, allowing vulnerability to be present and awareness of the body. See Appendix A for a complete description.

Following the interview, we sat together silently for a few minutes. Each guest was then asked to notice their body and if a word, phrase, story, or image resonated within them. They were invited to share this before ending the session, which they all did. Again, this was an

opportunity to practice mindfulness, acknowledging the presence of anything pertinent that was arising.

The Questions

In preparation for the individual and group interviews, the questions were derived from the teachings of the Four Noble Truths. Accordingly, inquiries were made with an emphasis on one's personal experience in seeing and understanding how racism affects BIPOC, along with their unpacking of what it means to be White. (See Appendix B for the complete list.)

Before each interview, guests were pre-screened and given a list of queries. The purpose of this was to ensure that the guests would be prepared to respond and not feel caught off guard by potentially very personal and vulnerable questions. There was also an understanding that new areas of interest could emerge as the conversation flowed. Therefore, staying open to the interview as an emergent process was carefully balanced with pre-planning.

Each interview ran approximately 75 minutes and was edited to about 20-25 minutes each. Guests could opt not to include specific comments or answers in the final recording. None of them did, however. Instead, edits were determined by what felt salient, emphasizing personal anecdotes. It was common for the guests to avoid talking about themselves and rather speak of race and Whiteness in more academic or intellectual terms. There was also a tendency to speak on behalf of other White people. These aspects were anticipated and understood to be part of the learning journey. Because the podcast is not about highlighting expertise on racism and Whiteness, but rather a look at what doing that work looks like, as a White person, it was essential not to position the interviewees as experts.

Other Episode Elements

As complements to the interview portion of each episode, listening guidelines, a guided meditation, and a personal reflection are offered. These supportive elements encourage the listener to engage in an open-hearted and equanimous way.

Listening Guidelines

As mentioned, given that the series is focused on hearing perspectives on how White people think about and do anti-racist work, this can be a bit of a metaphorical minefield, and that is, in part, the point. A White Affinity group is assembled so that people can speak freely without fear of ridicule. However, this does not mean that those listening do not have negative emotions, feel uncomfortable, or become highly judgmental. The listening guidelines shared at the top of each episode prime the listener for discomfort so that when they notice they've been triggered, a mindfulness-based approach to working with it can be utilized. They are:

Before we begin, I'd like to offer some suggestions on how to listen to this conversation. It's important to remember that our guests are not experts on racism, white supremacy, or privilege, nor am I. We are offering our dialog primarily as an opportunity for you, the listener, to engage with curiosity. Those being interviewed are inviting you into their perspective and direct experience. There will no doubt be times that you disagree with what is being said, feel it could be expressed differently, or find yourself becoming agitated. However, you're also likely to find ways you relate, learn, and want to know more. As you listen, I encourage you to be aware of what you're feeling and thinking with a sense of openness and compassion for yourself and others. Notice where in your body you feel it. This is an exercise in mindfulness. If we can take this same approach

with us into conversations we have in-person, on social media, or anywhere else, we may be able to move along this path further, together.

Guided Meditations

Following each interview, listeners are invited to process what they just heard through a guided meditation. Awareness of highly charged emotions and feelings in the body is often key to discharging and learning from them. The focus of each meditation was inspired by the interviews and was not pre-determined. In order of the episodes, they were a reflection on awareness, the impact of harm, belonging, and land.

Personal Reflection

At the end of each episode, I offer a personal reflection as a way to model the process I'm suggesting the listeners undertake and in response to the guided meditation. When this idea was first proposed, I was very hesitant. I knew my potential ignorance would be on full display. After processing those apprehensions, I prioritized the normalization of being vulnerable and uncomfortable over being perfect. Over time, becoming more skillful at this is part of my practice and white affinity work. In order of the episodes, they were a reflection on my relationship with perfection, the recollection of a racial microaggression, my sense of not belonging, and being naive about indigenous history.

Podcasting Limitations and Future Considerations

This audio series, while heavily influenced by the Racial Affinity Groups as described by Ruth King, there are several ways it offers a challenge to that model due to the nature of it being a live recorded session that is publicly shared for *anyone* to listen to.

Lack of a Group

What makes someone willing to do this? Each of the guests expressed the desire to be helpful, and in turn, found the process to be enlightening for them, to varying degrees. While a supportive container was put in place for guests, they did not have time to develop a certain level of comfort with me or the technical assistant who was present for each session. Affinity groups typically rely on a commitment of the members to meet over long durations of time to develop the ability to feel safe and be vulnerable. To the extent the guests were able to open up about deeply held beliefs of challenging emotions could have been limited because of this.

Being Recorded

Another possible limitation to sharing is that their words would be on public display. After the first recording session with James, I wondered about this. I asked subsequent participants to be aware if they were reluctant to share because it was being recorded and made public. One guest mentioned that he had considered this before the interview, wondering if it would “come back to bite him.” While the degree to which the recording influenced sharing is unknown, it likely did. For example, most guests did not mention any trouble or tension with family members or negatively speak of their workplace. In my experience with affinity groups, these are two areas that typically come up in private. One can understand why a guest may choose not to share potentially disparaging things about such relationships publicly. Nevertheless, meaningful stories and perspectives were shared.

Future considerations for the next iteration of this series involve ways of alleviating, to some extent, the limitations mentioned above. First, it may help to develop groups over a more extended period, with opportunities for showing learning and growth over time. This could also allow for more depth of sharing that may otherwise be restrained. Second, adding additional hosts would decentralize a particular identity and emphasize the group dynamic.

Conclusion

This project is a bold remodeling of a White anti-racist affinity group predicated on the Buddha's Four Noble Truths. In every way, the production of this pilot series is a path unto itself. It's an opportunity to reflect at each stage, and with others, on how to give space, take breaths, and bring awareness to how White people can do better together than alone. In the words of Maya Angelou, "Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better."

Broadcasting this affinity group attempts to make what is private or unknown more transparent. The Buddha taught that to see clearly was paramount. Seeing suffering, investigating its causes, and doing something about it is the path to becoming less deluded and more awake. These episodes aim to do this and are catalysts to conversations with guests and their friends, families, and colleagues.

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Appendix A

Interview Guidelines

- While we acknowledge that there are multiple forms of oppression, our focus is on racism, racial justice, and white supremacy culture in this space. We're interested in how you have personally navigated these issues as a white person and, in doing so, hope to craft a narrative that will be helpful to other white people who are on the same path but might be struggling to start or continue.
- There is no sense of urgency to respond to the questions. Instead, we can allow as much time to pause as needed between the prompts and responding. This spaciousness is essential.
- Please let me know if you want to take a break at any time.
- I commit to listening deeply to what you share and guiding the questions from a place of curiosity, compassion, and non-judgment.
- I encourage us both to be aware of our bodies and any sensations or emotions that may arise, inviting a sense of ease and openness.
- Notice if there's hesitancy to share. Again, while I respect your decision to choose what you speak about, I invite you to name if there is reluctance present.
- And lastly, if either of us feels like we've made a mistake, it's ok.

The following guidelines were added for the group interview:

- When sharing, you determine the level of disclosure and vulnerability you will express.
- When someone else is sharing, pay attention to what is being said and recognize the courage it takes to say it. Then, as we listen, maintain compassionate patience and curiosity.
- While it may feel tempting to discuss with each other, comment, or ask another person, we want to be mindful of the time and not get too caught up in one thing for a long time. So please bear with me and apologies in advance if I should jump in at any time and say we have to move on.
- Please raise your hand, so we avoid cross-talk.

Appendix B

Example of an Individual Recording Session Flow

- **Welcome/Thank you [2 min]**
- **Tech check [2 min] - MG**
- **Plan for the hour & questions [1 min]**
 - Guidelines
 - Meditation
 - Interview
 - Meditation
 - Debrief
- **Guidelines [3 min]**
 - While we acknowledge that there are multiple forms of oppression, our focus is on racism, racial justice, and white supremacy culture in this space. We're interested in how you have personally navigated these issues as a white person and, in doing so, hope to craft a narrative that will be helpful to other white people who are on the same path but might be struggling to start or continue.
 - There is no sense of urgency to respond to the questions. We can allow as much time to pause as needed between the prompts and responding. This spaciousness is important.
 - Please let me know if you want to take a break at any time. I may suggest we pause from time to time.
 - I commit to listening deeply to what you share and guiding the questions from a place of curiosity, compassion, and non-judgment.
 - I encourage us both to be aware of our bodies and any sensations or emotions that may arise, inviting a sense of ease and openness.
 - Notice if there's hesitancy to share. Again, while I respect your decision to choose what you speak about, I invite you to name if there is reluctance present.
 - And lastly, if either of us feels like we've made a mistake, it's ok. This recording will be edited.
 - Is there anything you'd like to add or any questions?
- **Meditation [2 min]**
- **Interview [35]**
 - 12:10 How are you feeling?
 - 12:11 Tell us a little about yourself
 - There are four main areas we'd like to cover with you
 - 12:15 How you came to know about whiteness and racism (knowing)
 - 12:20 How you have seen these things occur within you and your environment (causing)

- 12:30 What you've done or tried to do, to work towards anti-racist practices (undoing)
 - 12:40 What you'd like others to take away from your experience. (the ways to undo)
- **Meditation [2min + 3min sharing]**
 - As we near the end of our time together, is there anything you feel inspired to share?
- **Debrief [10 min]**
 - Are there any parts of the interview that felt the most important to you?
 - Is there a word or phrase that comes to mind if you were to title the theme of this interview?
 - Thank you

Example of a Group Recording Session Flow

- **Welcome/Thank you [1 min]**
- **Tech check [2 min] - MG**
- **Plan for the hour & questions [1 min]**
 - Guidelines
 - Meditation
 - Discussion
 - Meditation
- **Guidelines [2 min]**
 - When sharing, you determine the level of disclosure and vulnerability you will express.
 - When someone else is sharing, pay attention to what is being said and recognize the courage it takes to say it. As we listen, maintain compassionate patience and curiosity.
 - Tune into your own experience—how you are being touched and shaped by what's offered? Be curious about your inner experience, not just your thoughts.
 - If you'd like to pass on a question, please feel free to say so.
 - Please raise your hand, so we avoid cross-talk.
- **Meditation [2 min]**
- **Interview [60min]**
 - Quick go-around - [1 min] Introduce yourself to the group; name, pronouns, what do you remember most from our 1-on-1 interview?
 - Since our 1-1 interview, have you had any particular thoughts or feelings come up as a result that you'd like to share?
 - Since our 1-1 interview, have any memories surfaced - a time of learning?

TARGETED QUESTIONS - BASED ON EIGHTFOLD PATH (choose 2)

- What inspired you to become more knowledgeable about racism and whiteness?
 - What is something you feel you still need to learn more about?
 - Where, in your own life, do you see greed or ignorance playing a role in keeping white privilege and white supremacy culture alive?
 - How have you engaged other white people to talk about race?
 - What is a way you've learned to communicate with more sensitivity and awareness when speaking with a POC?
 - What is something you have done that works to protect and/or improve the lives of POC?
 - What's one thing about your job/workplace that causes harm to POC?
 - What's one thing about your job/workplace that is beneficial to POC?
 - When difficult emotions surface (shame, guilt, fear, etc.), what do you lean on as a support to move through and learn from them?
 - How do you experience joy, gratitude, compassion, or other positive mental attitudes when engaging in anti-racist practices?
 - What is something you know that if you gave it up or did it differently, it would benefit POC?
 - If you have a mindfulness practice or another tool for building self-awareness, how does it support you in doing this work?
 - If you have a spiritual practice, how does that serve you in doing this work?
- **Meditation [2min]**
 - **Goodbyes [5min]**

Appendix C

Example of Individual Interview Questions - Based on the Four Noble Truths

GENERAL QUESTIONS

- Tell us a little about yourself - what are the first things that come to mind when you think, “who am I?”, what are the identities you hold?
- What does it mean to be white?

4 CORE QUESTIONS

- TOPIC #1: The truth of racism
- QUESTIONS:
 - When did you first realize that racism existed in the U.S.?
 - What is a distinct memory you have of this realization?
 - Why do you think you began to recognize racism at this point in your life?
 - How did you feel when this became clear to you?
 - Did you discuss this incident/recognition with anyone in your life? What did they say?
 - Did anyone in your life talk about race or racism with you?
- TOPIC #2: The truth of the causes of racism
- QUESTIONS:
 - In thinking about yourself, how have racist attitudes and actions shown up?
 - Can you tell me about a time when you said, thought, or did something that you now consider to be racist?
 - How did you think of that action (thought, etc.) at the time?
 - What contributed to you feeling or acting that way?
 - Think about what emotions you might have been feeling.
 - What has become more evident to you, over time, about how racism operates within you?
 - Can you give me an example of this? When was a time when you surprised yourself? Or tell me about a time when you challenged your notions and biases?
 - What is an example of a system that you are a part of that exploits and oppresses people of color?
 - How often do you think about that exploitation?
 - Is there anything you could do about it?
 - Have you seen a structural or system-wide change in any area of your life before?

- How has being white given you advantages in your life?
 - Has anyone ever told you that your whiteness made things easier for you?
 - How did that make you feel?
- TOPIC #3: The truth of the end of racism
- QUESTIONS:
 - What are some things you've done to learn about racism?
 - What are some ways you've been able or attempted to interrupt racism in your everyday life?
 - Tell me about a time you addressed something racist you encountered in the world. Was it a successful or helpful approach?
 - Have you ever apologized or otherwise tried to 'make right' a racist situation you witnessed or previously participated in?
 - What has been the most challenging aspect of this work for you?
 - What has been the most rewarding?
- TOPIC #4: The truth of the path that leads to the end of racism
- QUESTIONS:
 - Based on your personal experience of leaning away from white supremacy/privilege and towards racial equity/justice, what is one thing you want people to take away from your story?
 - Think about your daily life and your communities. What would an anti-racist society look like for you?
 - If you have children/were to have kids/have young people in your life that you mentor - how do/would you try to instill anti-racism in them?
 - In a word, how would you describe what it feels like to work towards being anti-racist?