

White Fragility Book Discussion
Des Moines Zen Center
First discussion reading excerpts

Reading for the first discussion includes:

- I. Key class takeaways
- II. Ground rules
- III. Silence breakers
- IV. Brief excerpts from *White Fragility*, by Robin DiAngelo:
 - o Definition of 'white fragility' (page 2 of Introduction)
 - o The 'pillars of whiteness' (page 3 of Introduction)
 - o What race influences for us (page 5 of Introduction)

I. Class key takeaways:

1. **Continuous learning about racism is an integral part of Buddhist practice, as well as other spiritual/religious practice.** (*Buddhist concept: Always keep 'beginner's mind'.*)
2. **Race is not biological. It is political, so it is important to recognize if we are white because it has determined the course of our lives in many ways.** (*Buddhist concepts: Interconnectedness and no separate self (the racist is in myself, not outside); owning our mistakes and changing our behavior as the moment requires, without attachment to habit patterns. Vow and repentance.*)
3. **White experience is neither neutral nor universal. White people are not the center of the world, nor the desired standard of measurement.** (*Buddhist concepts: Ego, arrogance*)
4. **Racism is a system in which we all live; we can't opt out.** (*Buddhist concepts: Collective karma; collective greed, anger, delusion, Indra's Net – reflection of the many in the one. Recognition of unconscious behaviors, thoughts and words that are based in racism. Recognizing the collective story we tell ourselves regarding color-blindness as deeply flawed.*)
5. **We as white people don't 'get it'. But we can choose to not-know in a damaging way or an awakened, way-seeking way.** (*Buddhist concepts: Don't-know mind. The mind that seeks the Way.*)
6. **We can all learn more about this and practice anti-racism; anti-racism is every-moment practice, not an identity.** (*Buddhist concepts: We have no fixed self. Continuous enacting of precepts.*)
7. **Part of anti-racist action is learning about what policies can shift in order to subvert racism in our institutions (e.g., learning about reparations, affirmative action, recommendations for removal of racism in criminal justice system, etc.)** (*Buddhist concepts: Walking the talk – lifelong practice*)

II. White Fragility and Our Egos – Ground rules

Suggested ground rules, for group consideration and revision . . .

- Respectful communication (led by Buddhist precept of right speech/ perfection of speech)
- Confidentiality (except ongoing child abuse/ danger to self/ others – what is said in group stays in group)
- Mistakes are expected and ok; admit them

- Draw on ‘don’t know mind’/ ‘beginner’s mind’ – remain curious
- Speak about / reflect on our own part in this – avoid putting it off on our racist uncle, coworker, etc. who should be here. Keep it about us.
- Remain present– avoid checking out by changing the subject, side conversations, no phones, etc.
- Be aware of others in the group as we participate – avoid dominating and help be sure everyone is comfortable to participate
- Be mindful of our emotions, reactions (defensiveness, fatalism, guilt, etc.); find constructive ways to use our emotions when our views on racism are challenged
- Take the responsibility to learn more. Accept this is a beginning, not the end; avoid expecting People of Color to teach us about racism (including putting our advisors in weird positions unless they offer themselves, etc.)
- Accept that this is about us; we are not the exception (watch our egos in thinking we’re so different that we’ve awakened out of all racist conditioning)
- Others?

III. **Silence Breakers** – *(part of abandoning ego is learning to put ourselves out there)*

1. I’m really nervous/scared/uncomfortable saying this and/but ...
2. From my experience/perspective as [identity] ...
3. I’m afraid I may offend someone, and please let know if I do, but ...
4. I’m not sure if this will make any sense, and/but ...
5. I just felt something shift in the room. I’m wondering if anyone else did.
6. It seems as though some people may have had a reaction to that. Can you help me understand why?
7. Can you help me understand whether what I’m thinking right now might be problematic?
8. This is what I understand you to be saying: ____ Is that accurate?
9. I’m having a “yeah but.” Can you help me work through it?
10. I’m engaged but just needing time to process this. What I am working on processing is ____.

<https://robindiangelo.com/2018site/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/WhiteFragilityReadingGroupGuide.pdf>

IV. **Brief excerpts from White Fragility**

Definition of ‘white fragility’

“White people in North America live in a society that is deeply separate and unequal by race, and white people are the beneficiaries of that separation and inequality. As a result, we are insulated from racial stress, at the same time that we come to feel entitled to and deserving of our advantage. Given how seldom we experience racial discomfort in a society we dominate, we haven’t had to build our racial stamina. Socialized into a deeply internalized sense of superiority that we either are unaware of or can

never admit to ourselves, we become highly fragile in conversations about race. We consider a challenge to our racial worldviews as a challenge to our very identities as good, moral people. Thus, we perceive any attempt to connect us to the system of racism as an unsettling and unfair moral offense. The smallest amount of racial stress is intolerable—the mere suggestion that being white has meaning often triggers a range of defensive responses. These include emotions such as anger, fear and guilt and behaviors such as argumentation, silence and withdrawal from the stress-inducing situation. These responses work to reinstate white equilibrium as they repel the challenge, return our racial comfort, and maintain our dominance within the racial hierarchy. I conceptualize this process as *white fragility*. Though white fragility is triggered by discomfort and anxiety, it is born of superiority and entitlement. White fragility is not weakness per se. In fact, it is a powerful means of white racial control and the protection of white advantage.” – Robin DiAngelo

Pillars of whiteness

Robin DiAngelo fully defines the ‘Pillars of whiteness’ on page 3 of *White Fragility*, paraphrased below.

- [Belief that] only bad people are racist;
- Individualism [that] allows us to exempt us from the forces of socialization;
- [Belief that] racism only as discrete acts committed by individual people, rather than as a complex, interconnected system;
- [Belief that we/ white people are] entitled to, and deserving of, more than people of color deserve;
- Investment in a system that serves us;
- Deny all this . . . become defensive when these dynamics are named;
- Defensiveness maintain[s] the status quo

What race influences for us

Robin DiAngelo writes “Race will influence whether we will survive our birth, where we are most likely to live, which schools we will attend, who our friends and partners will be, what careers we will have, how much money we will earn, how healthy we will be, and even how long we can expect to live.” (page 5)