AMERICA'S RACIAL KARMA

AN INVITATION TO HEAL

LARRY WARD PhD
“In this taut, fearless, and well-argued manifesto, Larry Ward offers us a deeply insightful analysis of America’s racial karma—of how it operates individually and collectively—and how it can be worked with and transformed. Drawing on Buddhist psychology, trauma theory, neuroscience, and years of practice … the result is a searing, liberative, and tender work.”

—Jan Willis, author of *Dharma Matters*

“An extraordinary gift of generosity…. *America’s Racial Karma* doesn’t just add to the essential conversation around race, racialization, and discrimination, but rather redefines the very conversation itself from the inside out.”

—Brother Phap Hai, author of *Nothing to It*

“I know Larry Ward’s teachings, firsthand, to have come from his humble, dedicated, devoted, long and steady practice. Wise, clear, heartfelt, and based on his own authentic transformative experience … sure to be a classic among those who are serious about awakening.”

—Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, author of *The Deepest Peace*
“Dr. Larry Ward is an elder in American Buddhism, using his decades of heart-centered practice to guide our community into a deeper and more relevant exploration of America’s struggle with racism in order to support us in our healing ... an invitation to us to tend to our own hearts as we disrupt deeply ingrained thoughts and actions that have perpetuated the violence of America’s racial karma. We will all be much freer because of Dr. Ward’s teaching.”
—Lama Rod Owens, author of Love and Rage

“Welcome medicine for today’s generation of decolonial, spirit-led seekers and activists.”
—Katie Loncke, codirector of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship

“Buddhism is syncretic and malleable and has always mingled with whatever culture it has landed within, whether in Tibet, Japan, or China. So why not in America? More importantly for us, Larry Ward is able to relate Buddhism to the experience of people of color in America. We need this.”
—Rajeev Balasubramanyam, author of Professor Chandra Follows His Bliss
“Rich in practice in the Plum Village Buddhist tradition, America’s Racial Karma is a must-read book to understand our individual and collective legacy and to walk the long path toward reconciliation and awakening.” —Valerie Brown, coauthor of The Mindful School Leader

“Accessible to those experienced in meditation practices and beginners alike, Larry Ward’s book offers us a way to bring clear intention and compassionate action to our path of racial healing with concrete practices to help us come back again and again to healing ever-deeper layers of our embodied, psychological racial traumas. A refuge for today and future generations.” —Marisela B. Gomez, MD/PhD, author of Race, Class, Power, and Organizing in East Baltimore

“The living tradition of Buddhism will only progress if it reflects and includes the diversity of insight and experiences from a spectrum of teachers. Dr. Larry Ward is an important voice for our collective awakening.” —Denise Nguyen, executive director of the Thich Nhat Hanh Foundation
“Toward the project of national healing, Larry Ward brings to bear his decades of experience to instruct us on locating the seeds of racialization within us all. Brimming with aphorisms of wisdom, Ward shows us how to build a society of belonging.”
—John A. Powell, author of Racing to Justice

“Preacher, poet, griot, and Zen Master, Larry Ward shows us how we can each manifest our inherent wholeness in the midst of the brokenness of white supremacy.” —Kaira Jewel Lingo

“Timely and timeless … healing and transformation from a wise elder committed to our collective liberation.” —Julio Rivera, founder of the meditation app Liberate

“In clear, courageous words, the author reveals America’s racial karma and its linkages to unbridled greed for wealth and power. Dr. Ward shows how Buddhist psychology can help us confront racism and heal its trauma within our own body-mind.”
—Robertson Work, author of A Compassionate Civilization
AMERICA'S RACIAL KARMA
Also by
Larry Ward and Peggy Rowe Ward

Love’s Garden:
A Guide to Mindful Relationships
America’s Racial Karma

An Invitation to Heal

Larry Ward, PhD
Our racial suffering is deep and wide. It is a particular kind of *samsara*. Repeated cycles of bitterness, pain, and fear.

It is sustained by our conditioning, both individual and collective.

It is the undercurrent of a failed paradigm of aggression, ownership of peoples, and enduring institutionalized racism.

This failed paradigm of views presents us with a profound opportunity to rebuild the shape of our thinking, speech, and action as we can and must redefine what it means to be a human being.
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Introduction

An Invitation to Heal
Race has been a source of trouble in human affairs since the contours of the modern ways of thinking about it became dimly visible in the rise of new scientific ideas about human beings as parts of the natural world.

Kwame Anthony Appiah

My growing years took place in Cleveland, Ohio, on the East Side of the city near Lake Erie. It was a predominantly African American neighborhood in the 1950s, with a few European immigrants from Polish and Italian roots. Interactions between children and adults of different races, other than on the job or through commercial transactions, were controlled and rare. To my young eyes, members of the community moved about their days going to work, to church, and to school in a kind of stunned silence about race, as if hoping that by never acknowledging it, the bitterness just under the surface would not
leak out. Even then, I sensed we were all wrapped in a blanket of fear and yearning.

The nightly news of my teenage years expanded its coverage to voices echoing the pain of centuries, determined to be silent no more. Many of these voices and their stories became focal points in the story of race in the United States, including those of Rosa Parks; Angela Davis; Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.; Malcolm X; and Dennis Banks.

As a Black man writing about race in America, I do not forget the first peoples of this land, their genocide, and their continued presence. Many of us tend to think of African American bodies when we think about America and race, yet the story of racial hierarchy in this country began long before the arrival of African people on these shores. Now, we find ourselves living in a racialized world that existed before we were born, and our minds have been conditioned to see race as real. This racialized awareness permeates us like a disease of the psyche, cementing our minds to a system of social worth and value by skin pigmentation. It animates our thinking, speech, and behavior individually and collectively. It influences our attitudes, emotional states, habitual dispositions, and
social organization. How has this mindset become so powerful?

From my childhood in the fifties to the era of the war in Vietnam in the sixties, when Dr. King and Thich Nhat Hanh found in each other a source of spiritual friendship and political solidarity, and the many domestic and international conflicts in which race has played a part, in my own lifetime the cycle of America’s racial karma has become very visible. As I grew into adulthood, I was fortunate to have the chance to observe many peoples and places around the world, with jobs that took me around the globe to factories, educational institutions, consulting firms, churches, and community development efforts, in rural villages as well as urban centers. On most occasions, I’ve noticed the presence of racialized consciousness in the thinking, speech, and behaviors not only in myself but also in the people around me.

The first time I went to work in Asia many years ago, I was part of a faculty running trainings in new methodologies for schoolteachers in Hong Kong. My first day on the job, I had someone come up to me wanting to know if I was the luggage carrier for the team. I said, “No, I’m the dean.” You could see their
face working hard to try to fit me into their picture of the world. That’s when I knew this racial hierarchy system is global. I’ve been all over this planet a hundred times, and everywhere I’ve been, this is an issue. It’s such an issue that as an African American going to Africa, people in Africa consider me “white” because I come from the United States. In the sixties and seventies, being regarded as “white” under the yoke of white supremacy gave Black Americans in the Back to Africa movement the shock of their lives. Everybody was clear that white people rule.

Millions of years of adaptation have formed our discriminative intelligence into a complex classification machine that constantly evaluates threats to our safety and integrity. But the kind of thinking that elevates some humans and devalues others based on skin color is not baked into our neurobiology. Some call it racism and colorism; some call it the colonial mind; others call it capitalism; whatever we may call it, those of us who feel the oppressive edge of bias tend to recognize its presence.

I appreciate your opening this book because I know it takes a certain conscious courage to read anything related to the word “race” in the title, because there
are few other words in the English language that can activate our autonomic nervous systems so quickly. I am also aware that it is no small task to attempt to describe America’s racial karma—what it is, and how to transform it—especially if, many days, it may feel as if there is little or no movement forward. Yet, I know once we recognize America’s racial karma as actions that continue to give birth to the notion of white racial superiority and its psychosocial consequences, we gain the necessary insight to change course. We will rage and grieve, but we will also begin to heal.

Of course, race isn’t the only knife we use to separate ourselves from each other. All kinds of social inequities around gender, class, ability, and sexuality combine to form unique forms of discrimination and prejudice. The following example from my family is close to my heart. Twenty-five years ago, I was in a remote area of Costa Rica when my mother passed away. I hurriedly made arrangements to go home to Cleveland for her funeral rites. When I arrived at my old house, a young man I didn’t recognize was exiting our door, his face wet with tears. I asked who he was and discovered Tim, a long-lost cousin.
Why the tears? “Why are you leaving?” I asked. He said, “Your father won’t let me stay here because I’m gay.” I was appalled. I went upstairs to confront my father. He said it was a religious matter. “If Tim cannot stay here, neither will I,” I said, and Tim and I immediately went to stay at my sister’s house.

Such is the deep-seated power of prejudice that it can overcome the sense of familial belonging, even in times of grief. I’m glad to say that my precious father’s biases did become less rigid—he became less of a bigot—and he did become more open and respectful toward Tim. My father’s behavior painfully exemplifies the kind of cognitive bias that distorts our thinking, decisions, and actions toward others, often causing them physical or emotional harm.

After living many years outside of the United States, in the year 2011, my wife, Peggy, who is white, and I relocated to progressive Asheville, North Carolina, to start a small business and develop a community of spiritual practice. After settling into our new home, we were invited by Gail Williams O’Brien to lead a meditation retreat in the college town of Chapel Hill on the other side of the state. This connection was made through our association with Zen Master
Thich Nhat Hanh and the Plum Village Community of Engaged Buddhism; Gail is a history professor emerita at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the author of *The Color of the Law: Race, Violence, and Justice in the Post–World War II South*.

On the six-hour drive from Asheville to Chapel Hill to meet Gail, I was at first startled by the presence of Confederate flags flying from many homes and businesses along the way. My sense of shock gave way to an increasing uneasiness within my body and mind, compounded each time I encountered a Confederate flag on the decals of a vehicle in front of me. Visible through my car windows were subtle and not-so-subtle reminders of Jim Crow attitudes and America’s habits of racial dissociation and aversion. There seemed to be a rhythm of daytime integration and nighttime segregation. While some of the overt patterns of segregation had changed, it was clear to me that the psychological wounds of the past remained unhealed.

Stopping at gas stations, the politeness Peggy and I did experience seemed constrained, with furtive eye contact. The air was filled with discomfort, and I felt like an alien in my home country. My sympathetic
nervous system went on high alert. My heart raced; I had knots in my stomach; and memories rose up within me of past trips to the South in the 1970s, in which my life had been threatened. My mind was filled with concerns for our safety. I had left the United States to work abroad for decades, but on returning, I was filled with the same fear from my childhood and teen years. Why did I, a grown man, not feel safe in 2011—three years into the Obama presidency—in my home country? On election night in 2008, the moment we saw the televised results, I’d turned to Peggy and said, “Shit’s going to hit the fan,” because I knew that the election results would activate the hatred that had sent me outside of America for so many years.

The anger, sadness, and disgust I was carrying revealed themselves to me later during our community meditation. My body and mind began to calm down. I looked deeper into my experience and realized that I was witnessing the impact in myself of a society built on the sinking sands of the white supremacy complex. I began to see how all of us—regardless of how we or our ancestors came to be here—have been conditioned to live on this land as forever strangers. Later,
after a meal, we discussed the importance of Gail’s book as well as our new life in Asheville, and we managed to return to some equanimity and enjoy our visit.

Nevertheless, I woke up the next morning with a question on my heart and mind. Why is the notion of racialized consciousness, with white skin on the throne of the human species, so intractable in the hearts and minds of many? Despite its trail of suffering around the world—for colorism is not unique to America—why does it persist? Movements, martyrs, and magistrates had not set us free from this great social-psychological construction.

The idea of America’s collective karma arose within me and inspired me to talk with people wherever I went about the subject of race and its effect on our consciousness. The themes of this book were born from a decade of such talks.

Ten years prior to my and Peggy’s trip to see Professor Gail, I had been introduced to Buddhist psychology while taking a retreat with my teacher Thich Nhat Hanh in Plum Village, France. His book on the subject, now known as *Understanding Our Mind*, had a different name back then: *Transformation at the Base*. This title gives us a good clue as to
what is required for radical shifts in consciousness. Transformation at the base affects the roots of our body and mind. This is why we practice.

With this lens of Buddhist psychology, I began to see a fresh way to understand the lived experience of consciousness as a dynamic and multilayered reality. I began to see how deeply embedded the idea of race is as the psychological base of modern self and society. It’s entwined with our notion of ourselves surviving within a world of fear, conflict, and competition, and painful though it may be to hold on to it, without awareness, we cannot let it go.

Not everything has an answer. Some things are not fixable. So, I’m not talking about fixing our racial karma. I’m talking about bending the trajectory and transforming the energy that sustains it. What we’ve seen in the last few years is the great feeding of animosity and the joy of bigotry. Nothing can live without food. If it’s not fed, it will not live.

Echoing the Buddha’s model of the mind, Sigmund Freud and others have revealed that we are beings subject to subconscious processes influencing our thinking, speech, and behaviors. Repression and denial of our unconscious mind leads to pathology,
or as the Buddha would call it, suffering. Unless we choose to live more deeply than shallow awareness allows, it can be difficult to see what I mean by America’s racial karma and observe its turning. We will need to look beyond our contented shallowness and into the roots of our racialized consciousness if we truly desire to heal and transform our past, present, and future.

As students of the Dharma, we know our collective awareness is ultimately impermanent. Ideas that seem set in stone and immovable may in fact change; in fact, they are bound to change. If we look deeply into the mind and body’s role in creating, nurturing, and protecting our racialized awareness and its actions, we see an opportunity for transformation. America’s racial karma invites us to be attentive to our hearts’ conditioning. It invites us to embrace our shared racial trauma at its roots and heal our compromised social imagination, so we may be the ones who come through the mists of racial ignorance into what we may call a good society.

For months after my visit to Gail, I continued to reflect on my question: What lies at the roots of this social construction of racial hierarchy? I began to
recognize a kind of catharsis, a sense of energy more like worship, a quality of transcendence that a religion would provide surrounding the notion of white supremacy. I then began to understand its seductive conditioning power and subsequent seeming intrac
tability in history and in the present.

This book and the practices I share invite us to go deeper into our collective psyche and see how it creates a social psychology that nurtures it, which in turn keeps feeding the institutions that damage us so intimately.

*America’s Racial Karma* explores the psychological factors that continue to create our racialized consciousness and the waves of suffering in its wake. Our racialized consciousness is the greatest achievement of white supremacy. It’s an example of how human consciousness can be nurtured to perfection in unwholesome ways. It is a fundamental obstacle to the achievement of collective wellness and justice in US society.

For nonwhite people, racialized consciousness is kept alive daily through everyday acts of violence and macrosystemic and micropersonal aggressions. This kind of violence is remote to many white people
as members of the group that benefits from racial inequity. I have a friend, Henry, a white man who is sincerely seeking to deepen his understanding of the racial divide in America. In conversation with him, I came to see how his life experience had left him profoundly unprepared for the work of awakening and transformation. Henry is an aware and progressively engaged person, yet for him it is a genuine struggle to understand the distinction between personal racial intention and the social-psychological impact of five hundred years of the system of white supremacy. I write *America’s Racial Karma* not only for myself but also for him.

I initiated a special daily routine in the past year while writing this manuscript. Like many of us, I scan the world news every day. Similar to doing a body scan in mindfulness meditation, I go continent by continent, to remember I am a part of something larger than my ego; this is part of my everyday spiritual practice. Every day, my heart gets both broken and restored. I’ve yet to meet a day when something from the ridiculous to the horrifying does not occur in relationship to race in America.
An NAACP lawsuit over the use of Confederate symbols in public schools, an increase in assaults of Asians nationwide after Donald Trump calls COVID-19 “the Chinese virus,” the pandemic causing disproportionately high rates of illness and death in Native, Latinx, and Black communities—and on it goes.

The stories we tell ourselves and one another about race are full of political emotional manipulation, the social theater of status and, most of all, unprocessed trauma. While such stories must be reported for as long as they continue to occur, the unwitting ingestion of them as forms of cultural reenactment actually prevents many of us from the personal and collective work of grieving our racial karma, restoring our racial sanity, and reimagining our lives together. By telling and retelling such stories of suffering, without mindfulness or insight, we reinforce our fears and biases through the triggering and retriggering of our autonomic stress responses.

Storytelling is an ancient means of creating individual and collective identity, but stories are not innocent; they provide language and leave footprints in the cave of the heart that reveal how to be human.
Our racialized stories tend to be in-group affirming and out-group shaming—self-affirming and other-demeaning. Stories of our racialized consciousness are passed from generation to generation and from land to land. We can track the progress of these stories over five hundred years of colonial history as they provided legal, religious, social, and psychological support and justification for ignorance, injustice, and indifference in America.

To assume that our current racial dysfunction is disconnected from America’s continental and Eurocentric past is a delusion of the highest order. Our racial past echoes through the air we breathe and permeates the ground on which we walk. This fragmented consciousness predates our birth but still flows through our neural networks, the veins of our being. When it comes to matters of race in America, we are caught in a cycle of reactivity. Our autonomic nervous systems are on high alert, flooding our bodies with the energies of fight, flight, or freeze. If we can learn to stop and look deeply into these energies, we can discover the courage, connection, and imagination to embody a new world.
This book is also a resource to better understand the mind’s grasping, clinging, and attachment to the fiction of race. Our minds seem to enjoy projecting qualities onto others with the aim of elevating ourselves. The result is nothing short of tragic: in a fictional universe, we may make ourselves feel safer, but we lose touch with reality. Some of the reflections in this book can help us learn to recognize, name, and rest these mental gymnastics. We will also look at how we can begin to heal our shared racial trauma with awareness, whether we are victims, perpetrators, or witnesses.

Fifty years ago, I had surgery for a knee injury that left me with painful scar tissue. For a long time after my surgery, I lay in bed, immobile. I was like the man in the Bible story who was stuck on his bed just a few feet from a healing pool of waters. Jesus approached him and asked, “How long have you been here?” “Thirty-eight years,” the man said, “but no one would help me get in the pool.” Jesus asked, “Do you want to get well?” The man said, “Yes,” and Jesus’s reply was, “Well, get up, pick up your bed, and walk.” I had a similar exchange with my knee surgeon post-op. I was well enough to walk, but my mind’s
resentment at my injured state kept me in bed. My surgeon offered the same words as Jesus to me: “Well, get up and walk.” And I did. I thank him each day since then for his encouragement, his belief in me, and also his diagnostic eye.

I see us in America today walking uneasy and contorted from the continuous cycle of actions that create, sustain, and perpetuate our racialized consciousness. This cycle is America’s racial karma. For those of us in a deep state of paralysis due to our past pain, shame, grief, and trauma, it’s all we can do to exist, get up, and walk.

For many of us, the question becomes: *Am I worthy of being healed?* Feelings of guilt, shame, and grief may seem as solid as blocks of ice within us. Or, the anxiety of our imperfections becoming more exposed paralyzes us from acting and taking the risk to heal. These anxieties are part of the healing process, not obstacles to be feared. To move into healing requires us to be vulnerable. One way I understand this sense of vulnerability is the presence of openness and grace in my body and mind’s readiness for change. Anything could happen, and it could even be good.
I have been asking myself as I crafted this book: What do I mean by healing? You may be asking yourself the same question. Many are aware of this sense of racial alienation and denial and the stress it brings daily, while others may walk through their daily life seemingly unaware. Now, I may think I’m okay, and you likely think you’re okay too, at least at times. Other times, we may feel broken by what we may witness, experience, or perpetrate on an almost daily basis. It is more than evident that as a society we are not okay. We are burning up and burning out. What rises from the ashes? Our karmic actions. As we walk forward into changing our social institutions and practices, we can also increase our awareness and turn it toward the work of healing.

This book is a journey through our inner and outer lives. In part one, “Deep,” the chapter “The Turning Karmic Wheel and the Role of Intention” offers a description of America’s repetitive cycle of racial dysfunction and how it came to be. Part two, “Deeper,” explores a dynamic understanding of white supremacy and discusses its traumatic effects that still live in our American bones. Part three, “Deeper Still,” presents an understanding of healing from Buddhist
psychology that will give you the necessary tools for transformation. After “Crossing Mercy’s Bridge: Healing the Wounds of Time,” the book concludes with a call to the duties of ancestorship not solely as Americans but as full human beings living on this planet Earth.
About Larry Ward

The assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. was the catalyst that sparked the young Larry Ward’s journey into a life of planetary peacemaking. Ward’s introduction to Buddhist practice began in Calcutta in 1977, but it was when he met Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh in 1991 that the practice became truly central to his life. He is ordained as a Dharma teacher in Thich Nhat Hanh’s Plum Village tradition and has accompanied Thich Nhat Hanh on peace-building missions around the world. Ward brings twenty-five years of experience in organizational change and local community renewal in twenty countries to his work as advisor to the Executive Mind Leadership Institute at the Drucker School of Management in Claremont, California, and as director of the Lotus Institute, which offers Buddhist practice for changemakers on the journey of individual and collective liberation.

thelotusinstitute.org
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“Larry Ward’s teachings are based on his own authentic transformative experience of being a Black man who also holds a high and honored Dharma seat in the lineage of Thich Nhat Hanh. A jewel of a book.” —Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, author of The Deepest Peace

“Welcome medicine for today’s generation of decolonial, spirit-led seekers and activists.” —Katie Loncke, codirector of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship

LARRY WARD, PhD, was ordained to teach by Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh in 2000. He is a cofounder of the Lotus Institute, which offers Buddhist practice for changemakers on the journey of individual and collective liberation.