

**Interview with Vanissar Tarakali by Urusa Fahim, Diversity coordinator at SRMC**

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I met with Vanissar Tarakali who recently completed her dissertation in East West Psychology at CIIS. I decided to have a conversation with Vanissar about her work as it is not only timely but very relevant. In 2000, Vanissar created and co-facilitated “Compassionate Transformation: a Buddhist Way to Unlearn Racism” (CT), a 54 hour course for white people sponsored by the Buddhist Peace Fellowship. CT incorporates community building, education, compassion, and spiritual practices. Vanissar’s doctoral dissertation is a case study of CT which looks at how to address three obstacles to white anti-racist action: racial shame, denial and isolation.

**U: I am very intrigued by your research on Unlearning Racism using Buddhism. What brought you to this work?**

**V:** A few streams brought me to the work:

I experienced child sexual abuse when I was a kid. It was an experience of having my options and choices limited for a long time by someone with power over me. Ever since I have hated injustice, particularly secret injustices and power differences that are covered over while people pretend that everything is “fine.” A key piece to me is that I know in my body what it’s like to be oppressed in that specific way and I don’t want to inflict oppression on any group of people. It’s very important to me as a white person that I do whatever I can to dismantle racism because I don’t want to be a perpetrator of oppression in any way.

Another stream is that I’ve lost some significant relationships with people of color in my life because of my lack of awareness of white privilege. There was a big gulf of understanding about what reality was like between me and some of my friends and lovers. There’s a lot of loss there that I regret. I don’t want ignorance of white privilege to control whether or not I get to have close relationships with people of color.

Yet another stream of how I came to this work was trying to understand racism and to understand how and why I keep falling asleep about racism, forgetting that racism is all around me, benefiting me. Trying to understand racism, I exposed myself to concepts and political analysis and yet I found that my behavior wasn’t changing very much. So for example, I could be sitting on the BART train and maybe an African American man would sit down beside me and my body would subtly flinch and shrink away. And this, after years of knowing that I’ve been *trained* to think of black men as menacing to me as a white woman. I *knew* that, but my body was still flinching. I also noticed that I wasn’t doing much to change racism. I felt paralyzed. I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t feel worthy to do anything.

**U: So what you are saying is that just knowing theories about what perpetuates racism is not enough and one must actively do something about. Is that the understanding that led you to this topic?**

**V:** After I became a Buddhist I started using Buddhist practices and meditations to help me stay awake about racism, and also to relax any guilt or shame I might be feeling about white privilege. I noticed that the more I focused my Buddhist practices on racism and privilege, the more I could stay awake, and listen to people of color with less defensiveness. I could act more spontaneously. That was a breakthrough for me.

So those are some of the things that brought me to my research. I wanted to find out if a group of white people used Buddhist practices to unlearn racism if it would help them the same way it helped me.

In my research about what I call the “psychology of unlearning racism,” I looked at three obstacles *shame, denial and isolation*. I picked these because they were really up for me.

I looked at racial shame more than at racial guilt. Guilt and shame are often confused. Guilt is about actions, whereas shame is about who one *is*. Racial guilt may come up if I realize I said something racist. With guilt, I can apologize and change my behavior. But racial shame is more complex. Shame is feeling as if there is something inherently flawed about me that I cannot change. Racial shame can mean that I deeply believe that my people are, or that I am, inherently oppressive and exploitative to people of color.

Denial is the second obstacle. I kept noticing I was falling asleep, and not noticing how people of color were treated. Denial among white people is well-documented. Denial of racism obviously stops white people from acknowledging, taking responsibility for racism.

And then there’s isolation. I noticed in myself and in other people this sense of not wanting to have anything to do with white people who aren’t actively fighting racism. I wanted to get away from them. Underneath it all, I was really afraid of my own inertia.

**U: There are many different theories and practices out there about unlearning racism. Why did you choose Buddhism?**

**V:** Well, as I said, Buddhism works for me. And practice--versus arrival--is very Buddhist. I see practice as a place where Buddhism and unlearning racism intersect. I need to see unlearning racism as practice so that I can be ok with making mistakes. I need to practice staying kind to myself when I think a racist thought. To me it’s all about practice. Practicing listening to people of color. Practicing talking about racism and interrupting racism. It’s about practicing these things so much that they become embodied. Then I can behave in a spontaneous way. It’s also about the humility of knowing I’m not going to “arrive.” I will always carry privilege, and I need to keep

practicing.

Another connection with Buddhism is *interconnectedness*. If I practice Buddhism, and come to an experiential understanding of interconnectedness, I realize I'm getting harmed when I benefit from harming people of color being harmed. Out of that sense of interconnectedness if I see injustice happening in the world that I contribute to, then I realize that that person who is suffering...they're me. I may not always feel that or remember or understand that, but they're me.

With white people the focus on the individual makes it difficult for individual us to see institutionalized racism because we keep looking at "me" - what am I doing? What am I not doing? There's such a focus on "me" the individual that the ability to see the larger picture of institution and the collective is impaired. So it's difficult for white people to see the institutional racism. Buddhism is a powerful antidote to that tunnel vision.

**U: Are there specific Buddhist practices that relate more directly with your work?**

**V:** Yes.. Awareness practices are useful, being present with yourself. The more white people can be alive and present with their thoughts and their emotions and body sensations, the more we can notice when racist assumptions inform our behavior and the more I can choose how I want to act. So awareness practices are really key. At the same time I think it's really important to infuse those awareness practices with compassion and kindness towards yourself so that that censor doesn't come up.

The idea is to be conscious of what kind of racist stereotypes and assumptions am I operating from. If I become aware of those stereotypes and immediately chastise myself, I will probably stuff down that awareness because I want to see myself as a good person. So the awareness must be a kind and compassionate awareness so that I can say, "Oh this is what's here, and I'm going to treat myself with kindness and with gentleness." The more I can incorporate that kind of compassionate attitude towards myself and towards other white people the more I can notice racism in me, and I can keep questioning those assumptions and breaking down those automatic racist behaviors.

**U: Directing the compassion outward is not enough, some of it has to be directed inward?**

**V:** I would say that's where it has to start. I also I think it is essential for white people to practice speaking up about racism. There's not a lot of environments where it's ok for white people to talk about racism. So we don't get a lot of practice talking about it. So you don't have the vocabulary and it's not a comfortable thing to do. How can white people educate each other about racism if we can't talk about it? So practicing talking about racism, naming it, making it visible, those are really important, and that's a practice. It also prepares white people to not freak out every time a person of color talks about racism.

At first, this is about practicing being in community with other white people in the service of talking about racism. A community practice of dialoging and talking about it. The sangha is really important. So it's not only that each individual is practicing kind awareness of what's going on with them, but also extending that kindness to each other. So that you are not sitting in judgment of each other because that's going to shut each other down. Instead, you're actually cultivating this sense of kind awareness for whatever's coming up so it can come up, it can air out. I think it's responsible to create a space where there is this mutual respect to talk about this. And space for people to have their mistakes. It doesn't mean not challenging people, it means doing it from a space of compassion.

When individual white people start becoming more aware of racism and wanting to do something about it, it's really a common dualistic thing of "I'm the good white person, I'm trying to do something about racism, and you over there, you're the bad white person, you just said something racist, and I want to get really far away from you." So its important to realize that all white people have been conditioned together, and we're going to get out of this together. Because racism is a *collective* oppressive system and it's going to take a lot of white people together to own up to it and dismantle it.

If I recognize that all white people have this conditioning inside us, then who am I to judge other white people? As I said, isolation is an anti-racist obstacle. I've been researching a specific kind of isolation that happens when a white person who cares about racism feels rejected by or avoids other white people. A divide is created between the informed and uninformed white people, and people get competitive about who is the most enlightened white person.

And it's a profound obstacle to coming together as a collective and teaching and healing each other, and working through all this inaccurate conditioning. How can we get together and do that with each other when we're busy saying "Get away from, me I'm not like you?" So I just think isolation is a profound obstacle to white people taking collective anti-racist action.

As I said, the three obstacles I studied are *isolation*, *denial*, and *shame*. What I found in my research is that the thing that unites these three obstacles to white anti-racist action is shame. Shame fuels denial and shame fuels isolation.

**U: How would you define racial shame?**

**V:** Racial shame, for those of us who deal with it, is this sense that I'm bad because I'm white, or my people are bad because we've done these horrible things like genocide, slavery, internment camps, etc. I can say that my people did that, I come from these people, so I'm bad, I'm evil, we're the oppressors, and a lot of shame can come up with that. And that racial shame can resonate with and amplify any other shame I might have.

For example, I might have shame from a past trauma. Shame is a natural reaction to trauma, so any trauma I might have in my history, such as family violence, leaves a residue of shame in the body. So any white person who has experienced trauma probably has some unprocessed shame. And social trauma, like sexism or anti-semitism or homophobia (or racism!), also causes shame.

There can be many streams of shame percolating inside us. Racial shame is yet another layer. All these sources of shame bleed into each other. Amplify each other. I may already have internalized shame from sexism so if I add a layer of racial shame on top of that—maybe I notice that some of my unconscious behaviors are oppressive to people of color, or I notice that I am benefiting from white privilege because my ancestors had a chance to gather wealth by financially exploiting people of color. And I feel not just guilt, but shame. And there is plenty to fuel that shame: as a white person I benefit from racism everyday. If I face that and I already have shame from other sources, it can be overwhelming and paralyzing.

**U: How do people cope with shame?**

**V:** The interesting thing about racial shame or any kind of shame is the things we do to avoid feeling it. Something I've learned in my research is that shame is unbearable; it is difficult to hold in conscious awareness. Because of this, people have a lot of strategies to cope with or avoid shame, such as going into denial, getting angry or defensive, blaming others, self-isolating, becoming self-absorbed, or looking for absolution. And all of these coping strategies get activated by racial shame. As I said, shame fuels denial and isolation.

All three as I said, are profound obstacles to white people taking anti-racist action.

Another response to avoid shame is defensiveness. So when a person of color tells me “what you just said excludes me” or “erases my experience” I might become defensive and rebuke them, or tell them they need to transcend their reaction.

**U: I find myself being embarrassed by that shame and often try to make it ok for the white person. I pick up on it and even though I know it's not my place to make things ok, I find myself trying to do so.**

**V:** How do you pick up on that, what do you pick up on?

**U: I think it comes from living in the margins and not in the center. I pay a lot of attention to dominant groups so I can adjust myself accordingly. I pick up on the shame and the blame that way and feel as if I need to do something about it, as if it is my responsibility.**

**V:** That fits right into another coping strategy for white racial shame: seeking absolution from people of color. I might go up to a person of color and confess something, and hope

they will absolve me. You can get absolved all you want but it doesn't mean you aren't white and aren't participating in racism. That "absolved" white person is living in a delusion. And since racial oppression is something people of color have to survive every day, when you go and say, "I want you to absolve me," that's like someone battering their partner and feeling remorse later and saying "Honey, remember all the things you love about me?" instead of making amends or taking responsibility. But to batter someone and make them forgive you is very oppressive.

Another coping mechanism of shame, or a way of avoiding shame is self-absorption. Everything leads back to "me." The conversation about racism gets turned back to white people: what about *my* pain?

**U: Recently, I heard someone saying "People of color keep talking about their pain but what about my pain? What about the abuse I've suffered? No one cares about that."**

**V:** Yeah, that kind of self-absorption will continue until shame is dealt with. And the appropriate context to do that is with other white people.

**U: I've heard you and a few other people say that the way for white people to erase racism is to work with their own kind. Why is that?**

**V:** Well where I see this going, my own vision of it, is that in order to build alliances among white people and people of color... it's white people's responsibility that racism exists, but it will take a collaboration between white people and people of color to dismantle it. For white people to get to the place to work with people of color authentically, we need to work through that shame, to a deep extent. Work through the shame, the denial. Part of working through that and talking about it honestly involves white people saying a lot of stuff that people of color don't want to hear. It can be very wearying for people of color to sit in a room listening to white people share their misconceptions about people of color. But those things need to be brought to light if they are going to be addressed. There's stuff that white people need to say, but it could be re-traumatizing for people of color to have to listen to and hold space for that. I do think that has to happen in an atmosphere that is compassionate and challenging. And I don't think it's fair for people of color to have to sustain a feeling of compassion while listening to white people talk about stereotypes and harmful things they've said or done. That's asking the victim to take care of the perpetrator. I think it's often inappropriate for People of Color to be in the same room while white people are doing that.

**U: What's your take on white allies in this work?**

**V:** The ultimate goal is collaboration between people of color and white people. But it has to be genuine and *authentic* collaboration, not a quick "we're all interconnected everything's fine let's collaborate." We *are* all connected, but most white people aren't

ready to dialogue with people of color.

The ultimate goal is multi-racial collaboration and alliance-building to dismantle racism. But the *initial* paths to that goal of collaboration are different for white people and people of color. For people of color, healing from internalized oppression is critical. This is not my area of expertise, but I have heard that it is rare;u safe for people of color to do deep racial healing in the presence of white people. But I see the process of people of color healing from internalized oppression as a parallel and complementary to the process that needs to happen with white people.

One of the things I understand about healing from internalized oppression is the need to express anger and rage and tell it like it is without censoring. People of color need that to heal from internalized racism. But if that expression happens in the presence of white people who are just *starting* to deal with their racial shame, they take it personally. They get upset, and want to be soothed. That doesn't work for anybody.

I believe it is important to create compassionate, all-white spaces to get white people to a point where they are healed enough that they are resilient, and robust and they can *hear* people of color's anger. So instead of going into denial or getting defensive, they are really open, they are expansive, they can listen and dialog and take *action*. And it is possible; I have found myself increasingly able to stay present with whatever people of color need to say to me about racism. I am less and less defensive, and it is directly related to working through my own shame, racial and otherwise.

**V:** My goal is that eventually many white people will be in a place to take responsibility for racism. When we are healthy enough that is not necessary for people of color to have to try to teach us about racism. People of color shouldn't have to work so hard. White people should be doing their work together to heal shame and unlearn racism so that, we can listen to people of color. We can be spacious. What if a lot of white people, white Buddhists, were so spacious about issues of race and racism and privilege that we could simply say, ok, I hear you?

I feel passionate about making space for white people to do that work, but I want to be very clear about what the end goal is. It's not about making white people feel better or letting them off the hook about racism. It's about building this robustness to be able to stay conscious and responsive when people of color point out things that are racist. And to be proactive without having to be told.

**U: And challenging each other?**

**V:** Yes. And to welcome challenges from people of color. Yes. The last thing I want to say is that there are interventions for racial shame. Shame is a key obstacle to white anti-racist action, and if you deal with that you are dealing with a lot of the other obstacles.

## **U. How do you intervene with shame?**

**V:** First, you need to respect that it is profound. And well hidden. Accessing shame is difficult because if you access it, it calls up other deeply buried emotions, such as powerlessness or abandonment or despair. Not fun. So to address racial shame, you have to use sophisticated tools.

You can tell people that racism is not their fault. But that's just talking. And shame isn't on the verbal level. It is deeply embodied. If someone has a personal trauma going on in their current life or in their history, it's important to get help with that. Therapy, especially somatic therapy is good for that. And doing that healing work will help you become resilient and elastic enough to face racial shame. But you don't want to *only* do your own personal healing work. You want to look at racism simultaneously as a system. You need to work with that, too.

**U: It's important for white people to do their own work because racism happens on a systemic level; people in privileged positions sustain racism so when they become aware they can dismantle the system.**

**V:** Absolutely. Other things that really help with racial shame are developing a strong white anti-racist community that holds you in compassion, and holds you accountable, practicing mindful compassion for yourself, educating yourself about how racism is not chosen, but conditioned. That makes some room for forgiveness. And working on racial shame through the body, through expressive arts, embodied practices helps heal racial shame. Learning and identifying with some positive aspects of being white also helps, such as learning positive things about your ethnic identity or about your family, or if that doesn't work for you, learning about anti-racist white people in history who you admire, and re-claiming them as your spiritual ancestors. Finally, engaging in anti-racist action helps undo racial shame.

**U: What does it mean to be an ally?**

**V:** To me, being an anti-racist ally means listening to people of color, believing them, respecting their experience. It means educating myself about institutional, individual, cultural racism and white privilege. It means being able to notice white privilege and racism in my daily life, in the world around me, and to speak up about racism when I see it. Being an ally also means supporting the leadership of people of color. In the long run, being a white anti-racist ally means engaging in white collective anti-racist action, and participating in authentic, multiracial alliance building and collaboration.