

Larry Ward
Teachings for Uncertain Times
February 3, 2017



Welcome. This talk is part of Tricycle’s series, “Teachings for Uncertain Times.” My name is Larry Ward—I’m a PhD in religious studies and a senior dharma teacher of the Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh.

To begin, I have a poem for you: *I have been hurt by falling dreams, tumbling down like great stones from the mountain of hope, cracking open my heart. I have had the feeling of losing everything and the sound of being ground up by the world of endurance. Tired, sad and weary my heart overflows with tears. I have met my own fury coursing through my veins as a silent illness, because life did not go my way. I even thought the moon stole my shoes. I searched everywhere, over the green countryside, the crowded city streets, the brown deserts, the snow-capped mountains, and even the dust of stars. I found myself wrapped in clouds of doubt. In the softness of one holy night the dharma rain fell, the sky cleared, I looked down and discovered that my shoes had been on my feet all along. My pure heart and pure mind have not been crushed or destroyed by this world’s experiences of disappointment, hatred, violence, and discrimination. My deepest desire at this moment is to be a poem and to live a prayer that encourages more love in this world.*

My topic is America’s racial karma. Our racial suffering is deep and wide. It is a particular kind of samsara—repeated cycles of denial, bitterness, pain, fear and many forms of violence. It is sustained and passed on through historical, economic, political, and cultural patterning that supports it. It is also passed on through our neurological and psychological depths. We are living in a crisis of a depleted and failed paradigm of what it means to be human, individually, and what it means to be human, together.

However, hidden in this crisis is a profound opportunity to re-mount the slope of thought, to re-mount the slope of our speech, and to re-mount the slope of our behavior and actions in this world as we can, and must, reinvent what it means to be a human being. This requires the courage of deep practice, practice that touches our hearts and minds and our social fabric.

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Rousing the energy of compassion and insight within us the Yogacara tradition offers us some clues and some insights that can help us transform the seeds of racism, confusion, hatred and greed that lie at the base of our consciousness. These seeds, which all of us have, can be healed and can be transformed through our practice. Our racial samsara lives, is cultivated, and is passed on to future generations through the transmission of these seeds.

While the rivers of trauma still course through our veins and the wounds of time still echo in our bones, we have an urgent need to bring our attention home to ourselves, to touch the deepest aspects of ourselves, so they might be healed. If we embody the three jewels and apply them to our current reality individually and collectively, we have a chance for a breakthrough. This breakthrough will require dharma study, sangha participation, and continuous contemplative practice as we reinvent society itself. What an opportunity to respond to this historic moment, what an opportunity to transform ourselves, which is transforming society.

Now is the time to define ourselves not by our wounds, but by our wholeness. Now is the time to define ourselves not by our disappointment, but by our capacity and our potential to be profoundly human. We need imagination more than ever before to reimagine ourselves, to reimagine our institution, our communities, and our capacities to be present with compassion and insight for one another.

Grace Lee Boggs once said, “These are the times to grow our souls.” This is the task before us: [we must] understand ourselves as more than a biological self, understand ourselves as a vast and deep self. And from that vast and deep self we reinvent what is possible for us, what is possible for generations to come, expand our humanness and our sense of sacredness. This is how we will change our racial samsara and how we will change the world.