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BLACK & BUDDHIST

WHAT BUDDHISM CAN TEACH
US ABOUT RACE, RESILIENCE,
TRANSFORMATION & FREEDOM

THEY SAY THE PEOPLE COULD FLY

Disrupting the Legacy of Sexual Violence
through Myth, Memory, and Connection

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There was a great outcryin. The bent backs straightened
up. Old and young who were called slaves and could fly
joined hands. . . . Say they flew away to *Free-dom*.¹

—VIRGINIA HAMILTON, *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktale*

The real story is that the people who were
treated like beasts did not become beastly.²

—TONI MORRISON, “Toni Morrison Among Us”

THE YEAR 2019 marked the four hundredth anniversary of American slavery. It was in 1619 when the first slavers’ boat arrived on the shores of Virginia, where shackled West Africans were sold to colonists. Most of us know little about the history of slavery and how it spurred the development of capitalism in the United States. The seeds of economic growth were sowed by enslaved African men and women, whose brutalized bodies were traumatized under a system of white supremacy that generated wealth and

solidified power. Slavery remains a painful period in American history, both contested and sanitized to help us digest the horrific tragedy and loss of millions of enslaved black bodies who died in servitude and remain unknown. The four hundredth anniversary arrived at a time when persistent anti-black and anti-immigrant violence had reached epidemic proportions. The legacy of black enslaved bodies is a powerful example of the enduring spirit of resistance and love that serves as a reminder that freedom is possible.

This chapter is a reflection on bearing witness to the impact of intergenerational trauma on the body. With the support of mentors, I found the courage to use my pain as a pathway to healing, which enabled me to help others. As a clinical psychologist working with traumatized black adolescents and their families, I found that moments of awakening often occurred for me as passing flashes of recognition of my connection with these families. These moments quickly evaporated from my consciousness but embedded themselves within my body; I remember feeling a tightness in my throat that rendered me speechless as I witnessed their suffering. Interacting with these families, observing the pervasive trauma in their lives, pushed me to seek psychotherapy. I didn't yet understand that the affinity I felt with these families was linked to my own history of intergenerational trauma.

For many years, I hid behind an imaginary armor of control, believing I could will myself through any experience. I believed I was keeping my trauma experience contained. Slowly, however, I was becoming unhinged; I began to fear that my clients and co-workers could sense my fragility. I was losing control and needed help. I found a therapist who saw me as I was: queer, black, Buddhist, and searching for relief from suffering; I found a therapist who was not afraid to walk this journey with me. I started going to therapy every week to attempt to understand how and why my mind and body would automatically go into overdrive when I was triggered by unresolved trauma. Despite trying to look normal, I felt a growing unease with the thoughts, feelings, and sensations I was holding inside. Deep down, generations of trauma were rumbling through me, wanting to be free. Part of me was terri-

fied to release the swell of so much pain, and another part wanted to hide from the chaos.

Educating ourselves about trauma and learning to be present to feelings, thoughts, and sensations require new skills to ground ourselves and find safety in the body. Similar to therapy, meditation can help us develop awareness, sit with uncertainty, be present to our own discomfort, and learn to befriend ourselves. My experiences learning about the impact of traumatic response in the body are threaded through this chapter. Examples of meditation practices that have been useful to me are included at the end.

MYTH: REMEMBERING ENSLAVED BLACK BODIES

Stories of resistance, transcendence, and collective liberation are deeply embedded in African American oral tradition. The survival of these stories enables closer examination of enslaved men and women's reactions to the horrific violence slaveholders unleashed upon them. These stories, and others like them, make for excruciatingly painful but necessary reading. Understanding the meaning of freedom requires grappling with the "dangerous memory of slavery,"³ where black bodies were destroyed. Recalling torture, lynching, and sexual violence is indeed both powerful and dangerous, and remembering is necessary for uncovering and claiming the loss of millions of enslaved black men and women, people who were despised and treated as inhuman, people who never became "beastly."

Myths and folklore are tools of healing and resistance. For example, "The Myth of the Flying Africans," which refers to events dating back to 1803, was passed down from generation to generation.⁴ It was a narrative of West African Ibo people, who were captured and transported in overcrowded and squalid conditions across the Atlantic by cargo ship to the coasts of Georgia and South Carolina to be sold as slaves. According to the legend, when the ship landed and the Ibos realized they were being sold into slavery, they rose up, broke out of their chains, and abandoned the ship. Walking along the coastline, they began singing

and chanting. By exercising their moral agency, the Ibos demonstrated resourcefulness—they were not victims to be pitied. Resisting confinement, they refused to stop dreaming of what was possible for them beyond slavery.

Refusing to be sold, some drowned themselves to avoid capture—others took flight back to Africa. Indeed, in some oral accounts, the Ibos grew wings and soared above their confinement, daring to embrace freedom and refusing to surrender. The renowned children’s book author Virginia Hamilton offers a different rendering of this narrative, calling it “The People Could Fly.”⁵ Hamilton’s version opens with the following preamble:

They say the people could fly. Say that long ago in Africa, some of the people knew magic. And they would walk up on the air like climbin up on a gate. And they flew like blackbirds over the fields. Black, shiny wings flappin against the blue up there.

Then, many of the people were captured for Slavery. The ones that could fly shed their wings. They couldn’t take their wings across the water on the slave ships. Too crowded, don’t you know.

The folks were full of misery, then. Got sick with the up and down of the sea. So they forgot about flyin when they could no longer breathe the sweet scent of Africa.

Say the people who could fly kept their power, although they shed their wings. . . .

They worked along with other folks in the field. All the workers heard the sting of the overseer’s words. They all felt the snarl of the driver’s whip around their legs. They all felt their clothes being torn to rags and their legs bleeding onto the earth.

But one of the slaves remembered “the ancient words that were a dark promise,” the words that would allow the slaves to fly again. Seeing one after another of his people falling from the heat and the brutal forced labor, he raised his arms out to them and cried out, “*Kum kunka yali, kum . . . tambe!*”

There was a great outcryin. The bent backs straightened up. Old and young who were called slaves and could fly joined hands. Say like they would ring-sing. . . . They rose on air. They flew in a flock that was black against the heavenly blue. Black crows or black shadows. It didn't matter, they went so high. Way above the plantation, way over the slavery land. Say they flew away to *Free-dom*.

In Hamilton's version of the tale, the Africans left their wings in their homeland when they were transported to America and enslaved. Brutalized by violence, the Ibos called upon their endowed power to fly away to freedom. Because of their deeply held faith, they believed the loss of freedom was more catastrophic than dying. With freedom came the awakening that the end of suffering was possible. Drawing upon the metaphor of flight as a tool for liberation, "The People Could Fly" and other folktales demonstrate the resilience of slaves in finding freedom and safety for themselves and others.

MEMORY: CONFRONTING SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND TRAUMA

... when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid

So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive.⁶
—AUDRE LORDE, "A Litany for Survival"

Remembering is necessary. This truth applies to recalling the tragedies of slavery, just as it applies to protecting the myths and

folktales created by enslaved people, thereby marking how elements of the past reverberate still today.

This is my truth: As a thirteen-year-old in the 1930s, my mother was sexually abused by a family friend and became pregnant. The perpetrator was not held accountable. As a result of this violence, my mother's mind and body were affected in ways that defined the rest of our lives.

My maternal grandmother was a poor, black, single mother with three young children; she was ill-equipped to take care of her own kids, let alone an unwanted grandchild. All I know about her is this: she was likely a former slave, descended from a group of Gullah people of South Carolina who migrated north and settled in Hartford, Connecticut, where there was a growing community of black people. My mother gave birth to her baby and was sent to a state-run vocational school while the baby was sent to an orphanage. Terrified, ashamed, and heartbroken over leaving her mother and newborn baby, my mother withdrew into the only safety she knew: herself. She never fully recovered. Years later, she married my father and was reunited with her baby, my sister. They settled in New Haven, Connecticut, close to my father's proud, large family, and hoped to start their own family.

My mother's happiness was short-lived. Her tragic experience left her a fearful and anxious woman; she struggled with depression for the rest of her life. She did have periods of thriving. She was an accomplished cook, outgoing and funny, and she loved to dance. But she gradually lost her sparkle, a sparkle extinguished by the trauma that lived within her. Gone were the moments of lightheartedness and joy. Her energy seemed to leak out of her body until there was no joy left. Without having the resources necessary for healing, my mother suffered greatly trying to live in her own skin. There was nowhere to hide. Living with the triple whammy of being black, abused, and depressed, she was achingly alone. Family members witnessed the crumbling of her spirit, but wouldn't or couldn't help. Perhaps it was fear or ignorance or shame that blinded them to her pain. Mental illness was and remains a taboo in our culture. Post-traumatic

stress disorder had not yet been identified and described, and treatment for survivors of sexual violence was not available. As business owners (a rarity in the black community of New Haven), my uncles and their families kept their distance from my mother. They were well-known in their social and business circles and feared becoming outcasts and the subjects of gossiping tongues.

We all yearn for love, connection, and belonging. This is our birthright: we are all endowed with original goodness and the capacity to love ourselves and one another. But many of us feel unworthy of this birthright. Trauma has the power to disrupt our ability to love wholeheartedly by triggering painful memories of harm in our minds, bodies, and spirits, and this creates a barrier to connection. My mother's trauma affected her ability to raise her young daughter (my sister) and she often unleashed unwarranted anger and harshness upon her own child. Sadly, my mother's trauma-related behavior resulted in my sister's suffering and her own unmet need for love and belonging.

Unlike my mother, who had no support, my sister found refuge in our paternal grandmother, who sheltered her from my mother's anger and provided love and nurturing. With our grandmother's help and by being surrounded by playful cousins and family activities, my sister learned to navigate my mother's erratic moods and anger. My sister was a motivated student and after graduating from high school, she attended nursing school with the goal of working at a local hospital in New Haven. Years after my mother died, I found boxes of old family photos with pictures of my sister at fifteen, smiling while she rode her bike with her dog, Trixie, who sat in the straw basket attached to the handlebars. These pictures offer glimpses of her occasional happiness.

My father worked as a construction laborer doing seasonal work while my mother cleaned houses for wealthy Jewish families in a suburb of New Haven. During the winter months, he collected unemployment. With the money they earned, they managed to cobble together enough to buy a house in a neighborhood within walking distance of downtown New Haven, where white flight was creeping across the city.

While trying to have another child, my mother experienced several miscarriages. After giving up on having more children, she became pregnant and gave birth to me in 1954, almost nineteen years after my sister was born. It was quite a surprise to both of my parents, and not necessarily a happy one. My father nearly forty years old and my mother, though just in her mid-thirties, having already been a parent for twenty years, they bore the scars of a hard life.

Right before my arrival, my mother had been ambivalent about parenting again. After I was born, however, she began to show signs of deep distress. Perhaps it was postpartum depression. More likely, she was triggered by memories of sexual abuse. Her sadness was exacerbated by loneliness; my father worked long hours at grimy construction sites.

My father was a talented carpenter who built wood furniture in his spare time. After applying to join the carpenters' union and being rejected several times, he learned that the union was all-white and did not accept black people. Knowing that he was excluded based purely on the color of his skin and not his skills became a tipping point for my father. Wounded by the not-so-subtle daily microaggressions at work, his anger simmered. The more he struggled to make a decent wage, the deeper his resentment grew. His shame was overwhelming. As the oldest of six children, with three brothers who were successfully self-employed, he felt the weight of failure. He was the man of the family, and he was consumed by the lack of opportunities to succeed in this role. Often, when he arrived at home, tired and angry, he repeated the same mantra to me: "Stay in school and get an education and don't get pregnant." In my nine-year-old mind, my father's words only emphasized the importance of education. What I couldn't comprehend was his warning that sex, consensual or otherwise, could upend my education. If I got pregnant, no matter the circumstances, it would be my fault. I had no idea what he meant when he talked about sex or getting pregnant, but I took his warning to mean I would be punished, and that was enough to let me know there was no room for mistakes.

Years later, I remember watching the evening news with my parents as Martin Luther King Jr. marched in Memphis, boycotting the poor conditions of sanitation workers and the union's refusal to recognize black workers. Not only was my father struggling to find happiness in his marriage to my mother but he was also facing unfair impediments to finding work that would enable him to support his family. Owning a home was a source of pride, but there were other dreams he held in his heart that went unfulfilled. His preoccupation with fulfilling his role as head of the house and getting ahead blinded him to the emotional avalanche that was building inside my mother. He was unable to see the storm that engulfed her and attend to her desperate need for love, attention, and connection. Looking back, it's difficult to imagine that she had the emotional resources to nurture a baby. Despite that, I know she loved me fiercely and protected me. I was still a young child when my sister was working her way through nursing school and was engaged to be married.

When I was nearly five years old and about to start kindergarten, my mother was hospitalized for the first time. She was totally worn out. No one saw this coming, which is still hard for me to imagine. In her misery, my mother was overwhelmed with worry that someone was going to hurt her. Her mind was racing, stalked by her internal demons. She became wildly tearful and uncontrollable, perhaps driven by a flashback to the sexual violence she longed to forget.

I remember seeing her, one day, panicking with an irrational urgency to run from the house while my father was at work. What followed was the first of three hospitalizations my mother endured from that early trauma. The American Psychological Association defines trauma as “an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape, or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships, and even physical symptoms like headaches and nausea.”⁷ Trauma is not a single story—each person experiences and manages it in their own unique way.

During the time my mother was hospitalized, my father cared for me with the help of my sister and other relatives. The invisible but enduring stress embedded in my mother's body was the consequential damage caused by trauma. She had no language to communicate this unbearable violation. How does a person recover from sexual violence? The shame is overwhelming. There is no one to say, "It's not your fault," "I'm sorry he hurt you," or "This should never have happened to you." Without the support of family, community, and good mental health care, my mother was never able to face her trauma and find healing. Now, I can say this: I was never afraid my mother would harm me when she was unraveling. My greatest sadness is that, when she desperately needed help, no one was there to support her. She was caught in a powerful, destructive web of violence, part of the historical legacy of seeing black bodies, especially black women's bodies, as expendable.

Despite having these traumatic experiences and the uncertainty of her mental health, my mother was able to show her love for me. She rebounded after the third hospitalization and focused her attention on caring for me. Although she left the hospital with medication, she refused to take it, complaining it made her feel dull and sleepy. Buoyed by her release from the hospital and renewed vigor from focusing on my welfare, she guided me all the way through high school, accepting help from the nuns who taught me. When I faced challenges understanding math, she became my tutor and worked tirelessly until I understood the material. Our home came alive. My mother planted flower and vegetable gardens and shared them with neighbors. She spent time cooking creative meals and repainting the rooms inside our home. It was as if my progress gave her a sense of hope, and she focused that hope on cultivating beauty all around us.

My mother's ability to connect with friends and family was renewed—with the exception of my father, whom she showed no warmth. It was as if my mother recognized that the bright flame of love and passion she once felt for my father was now a dim flicker of light. Whatever reconciliation that needed to

take place was beyond my scope of understanding. Something had radically shifted for her. Although they appeared as a couple for family gatherings and on holidays, and though at home my mother played the role of dutiful wife—cleaning the house, paying bills, and washing clothes—an imaginary line was drawn between my parents, and my father accepted this boundary. He helped where he could with grocery shopping and making repairs in the house. There was no meanness, but their lack of intimacy was not lost on me.

When it came to me, however, my parents worked together and were joined in their decisions about my education. Growing up, I learned to accept their relationship and felt confident that I would be cared for, regardless of how they were with each other. Above all, my parents worked hard to help me to rise above the pain and suffering they experienced. Their aspiration was assuring I had access to a good education, and they were prepared to block any interference. Their instructions were clear: if you abide by what we are asking of you, and if you do the necessary work, success will follow. When I achieved each goal, from high school graduation to getting a doctoral degree, they breathed a sigh of relief. Though they had little, allowing me to stand on their shoulders to climb higher brought them deep gratitude and personal freedom.

CONNECTION: #METOO

In the history of the United States, the trauma to black women's enslaved bodies—bodies viewed as property, treated as objects of toil, reproduction, and pleasure—is widespread and institutionalized. These bodies have survived centuries of domination under white supremacy. With no legal protection, black women's bodies are easy prey, easy to both dehumanize and hypersexualize. For all women, but for black women especially, the recent emergence of the #MeToo movement is a wake-up call signaling that body terrorism upholds the false belief that some bodies are more valuable than others.⁸

Long before #MeToo, my mother was one of those girls who was devalued, physically and spiritually. I can only imagine how the presence of the #MeToo movement could have affected my mother. What if she had been able to come forward and find support and resources for healing? Connecting with others and knowing she was not alone might have provided a lifeline and given her hope. These resources did not exist for my mother at a time when a victim of sexual violence generally had no voice. Often, if a girl gave birth to a baby born out of wedlock, her family helped to care for the baby. Shrouded in silence and secrecy, that girl and her family bore the burden of stigmatization, loss of respect, and invisibility. And so it was for my mother.

Tarana Burke, the founder of the #MeToo movement, offers another perspective on the kind of trauma suffered by my mother and countless other black women. Growing up in the Bronx, Burke was sexually abused as a child and assaulted as a teenager. Fortunately, her mother helped her through her horrific experiences and supported her recovery, encouraging her to read inspirational books by Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, and Alex Haley. Her mother's skillful counsel protected Burke from feeling alone, isolated, and unworthy. Burke acknowledges that, with her mother's encouragement, instead of withdrawing from social engagement, she connected with other young girls of color in her community. Maintaining a link with others and avoiding isolation helped Burke begin the long process of healing and becoming an advocate for young girls in communities of color. In 2003, unwilling to accept the ritual of abuse as inevitable, Tarana Burke founded an organization to support these young girls.

For more than two decades, Burke has advocated tirelessly for racial justice and against sexual violence, disrupting the culture of silence and invisibility that exists for traumatized girls of color. After finishing college, Burke began a career as a Civil Rights activist and youth worker in Selma, Alabama, facilitating culturally informed workshops in a junior high school. Burke founded Just Be, a nonprofit that provides access to resources, safe spaces, and empowerment for young girls in low-income

communities of color. As a youth worker, she listened to girls who often came from troubled homes and had suffered in silence, afraid to share their stories of abuse and neglect.

In one heartbreaking story, Burke recalls a young girl who confided that she was being sexually abused by her mother's boyfriend. As she considered how to care for this young girl and so many others struggling with depression, behavioral problems, and difficulty learning in school, however, Burke's own experience of sexual violence began to haunt her once again. Overwhelmed and faced with her own truth, Burke shut down and could not listen to this girl's story. She says,

I was horrified by her words. The emotions welling inside of me ran the gamut and I listened until I literally could not take it anymore . . . which turned out to be less than five minutes. Then, right in the middle of her sharing her pain with me, I cut her off and immediately directed her to another female counselor who could help her better.

I will never forget the look on her face. I will never forget the look because I think about her all of the time. The shock of being rejected, the pain of opening a wound only to have it abruptly forced closed again—it was all in her face. I watched her walk away from me as she tried to recapture her secrets and tuck them back into their hiding place. I watched her put her mask back on and go back in the world like she was all alone and I couldn't even bring myself to whisper . . . me too.⁹

Despite turning away from this girl, ultimately, Burke found an opening for connection in the courage these young girls demonstrated when they faced their trauma. Through these experiences, she found herself confronting her own apparently unresolved trauma and realized that healing is a painstakingly slow process that requires the practice of attention. She would later discover that the power of deep listening—being present without judgment or reaction—is critical to healing trauma, one's own

and others. Without deep listening, fostering alliances built on trust is virtually impossible. By shifting the dominant cultural views of sexual violence away from stigmatizing girls as victims and, instead, encouraging them to connect with one another, Burke recognized that healing was possible. Healing is possible when the toxic criticism that can trigger shame and self-hatred is eliminated.

Learning from her own experience, Burke saw that emotional patterns interrupt the ability to connect and stay connected with others. Building strong connections with others is the cornerstone to constructing a solid foundation for healing work and reducing the impact of trauma. Myspace, an interactive social media website, became the place where these young girls connected online and shared their stories of sexual violence. Seeing the beauty of black and brown bodies reflected in one another, they experienced a measure of safety and affirmation previously unknown to them. The process of healing began when they claimed their realities and refused to let others shape their identities. They were not victims; they were survivors of sexual violence.

After a Twitter post by actress Alyssa Milano on October 15, 2017, #MeToo went viral. Although Burke had coined the phrase “Me Too” back in 2003, it was Milano’s tweet that received global attention and underscored the presence of black women as invisible survivors in all communities.¹⁰ Milano’s post encouraged women who had experienced sexual violence to add “#MeToo” to their Twitter status to gauge the prevalence of sexual violence among women. What began as a gesture to raise awareness drew an unprecedented response from women globally. Allegations of sexual abuse in the entertainment industry and the consequences of those allegations soon followed. Like Tarana Burke, Milano attempted to create a platform for women to call attention to sexual violence without making their personal stories public. When the post went viral, Burke was thrust into the spotlight, reminding us that #MeToo had begun in communities of color and for the benefit of underresourced young black girls.

Since the explosion of the #MeToo movement in the news and on social media, Burke has articulated the broader vision of building a coalition of survivors and advocates at the forefront of creating solutions to interrupt the destructive consequences of sexual violence. Among these initiatives, education and advocacy are critical to facilitating healing of survivors and preventing assault.

CONNECTING TO SELF, CONNECTING TO OTHERS

Those of us who struggle with trauma often find it difficult to manage the stress of everyday life. When my mother died, I was inconsolable. Several weeks after the funeral, I was depressed. Friends reached out to comfort me, but it was difficult to accept their care. The rawness of my grief was palpable. One close friend suggested that I attend a retreat at Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts. Although I was new to meditation, I was familiar with silent retreats from the days when I was a practicing Catholic. I registered for the next seven-day retreat and put it in my calendar. I had no idea what I was stepping into. As the retreat approached, feelings of sadness gave way to curiosity about what I might learn during a week of intensive meditation. Could meditation bring calmness to the inner chatter that dominated my thoughts? Could sitting quietly help me become aware of the feelings and sensations in my body that often caught me off guard? I was grieving the loss of my mother, and I was terrified that I might become so overwhelmed by depression that I would lose myself.

I settled into the retreat and focused on following the daily structure of sitting and walking meditation. As I sat on the cushion, my thoughts gradually settled. I was wrapped in a warm silence that brought me to tears, releasing a deep well of pain. Throughout the week, I concentrated on my breath and watched my thoughts come and go, feeling brief moments of freedom. Learning *metta*, or lovingkindness practice, helped me to tolerate the noise that filled my head and cope with my own judgments about them. Though I struggled at times, by the end of the retreat,

I was no longer afraid of the passing noise in my head and welcomed the silence as a refuge.

In the weeks after the retreat, I began a daily meditation practice and was determined to find a therapist to help me deal with my grief. Working with a therapist who is trained in trauma work is critical to healing. When I had started a doctoral program in clinical psychology a few years earlier, we were strongly encouraged to find a therapist, but finding a therapist who could understand my experience as a black, queer woman was challenging. Friends and colleagues helped me find people they trusted, and I met each therapist before I committed to therapy with that person. As you can imagine, this process took time but empowered me to find someone who was not just well-trained but who was also human enough to bear witness to the suffering in my black body.

It took me years to recognize that feeling invisible, broken, and unworthy were parts of my experience being repeated from a history of intergenerational trauma. Traumatic memories don't have a beginning, middle, and end. They can be triggered any time, including during meditation. On the one hand, for some people, meditation may not be helpful. According to Dr. Willoughby Britton, a researcher at Brown University, "Meditation can lead people to some dark places, triggering trauma or leaving people feeling disoriented."¹¹ Britton has studied the adverse effects of meditation on people who have had distressing experiences and found that they can show up even in people who do not experience mental illness. She suggests that people who experience adverse traumatic reactions to meditation focus on mindful actions as an alternative practice.

On the other hand, for many, meditation provides a path to resilience and strengthens body and mind. One meditation practice that I have found helpful is the benefactor practice developed by Dr. John Makransky.¹² Makransky is a Tibetan Buddhist meditation teacher, scholar, and author of *Awakening Through Love: Unveiling Your Deepest Goodness*. His work has focused on adapting traditional Tibetan meditation practices of love and compassion for secular application in social service and interfaith settings. The

practice begins by identifying a benefactor, someone in your life who sees your goodness, loves and accepts you unconditionally, and wants the best for you. Benefactors can be teachers, friends, ancestors, mentors, coaches, ministers, or neighbors. Benefactors may be spiritual leaders or public figures, like Martin Luther King Jr., Harriet Tubman, Mahatma Gandhi, Barack Obama, or Audre Lorde, whose presence in the world inspires or motivates you. As you use this practice, more benefactors from your past may come to mind, creating a field of loving support on your behalf. When I offer this practice, I begin by recalling my black, enslaved ancestors as a field of unconditional loving care, resistance, and models of liberation, and I dwell in their presence. You can personalize the practice by, for example, using music, poetry, and journaling along with meditation, creating your own sacred time and space.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR BENEFACTOR PRACTICE

Find a comfortable place on your cushion or chair with your back straight, eyes gazing gently downward.

Begin by taking three slow, deep breaths from your abdomen, pausing slightly between each breath. Allow whatever feelings, thoughts, and sensations arise and notice where they are present in the body. Continue to breathe deeply until the breath settles into a natural rhythm.

Call to mind a benefactor or caring figure who is a source of love and inspiration to you. This person may be in your life, someone who has died, or someone you do not know but who inspires you.

Imagine your benefactor or caring person with you now, not as a memory, but present with you. Standing beside you.

Sense them smiling at you with deep admiration and unconditional love, seeing your goodness beyond any limiting thoughts you may have about who you are.

Stay with this image for a while. Relax in your benefactor's radiant light, allowing this light to soothe any tension you feel in your body or any anxiety or worry.

Rest in the light and let it fully engulf you, receiving this love and communing with your benefactor.

After a few minutes, slowly allow the images of your benefactors to dissolve and fade away.

Continue to sit and let your whole body be infused with their love and compassion for you.

Rest in this moment and after a few minutes, bring the practice to an end.

The benefactor practice weaves together the threads of ancestral myth, memory, and connection with others, all of which may be modes of healing intergenerational trauma that lives in our bodies. Integrating these threads is a lifelong process that can be supported by bringing our benefactors into our meditation practice. We know trauma lives in the body. We carry it every day. Trauma cannot be buried, ignored, pushed aside, or denied. As long as we breathe, trauma reminds us it is with us and rises to the surface. Transforming trauma means being willing to address it in our lives. Developing a daily practice helps us to be with whatever comes up and not shut down.

Several years ago, I was on a weekend retreat in New Hampshire during the summer and met Lama Rod Owens for the first time. He had just completed a three-year silent retreat at Kagyu Thubten Chöling Monastery outside of New York City and received authorization to teach from his root teacher, Venerable Lama Norlha Rinpoche. With this authorization, he became a *lama*, or teacher, in the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism. I remember nervously leaving him a note to ask if we could meet after the retreat. When the retreat ended, we took a walk along an old, winding road near the retreat center. It was hot and I was sweating profusely, and I was anxious about making myself vulnerable to someone I hardly knew. Breathlessly, I blurted out that I struggled with depression my entire life and asked him if he believed meditation could make a difference.

Without hesitation, he spoke in a soft voice about the impact of intergenerational trauma on black and brown bodies, and encouraged me to sit every day, even when I was feeling depressed.

He listened to me; I knew he was familiar with my struggle. But through regular spiritual practice, he had found freedom from the darkness that had haunted him and was haunting me at the time. Through meditation, he said, eventually feelings of depression would find open space and develop into equanimity, or mental calmness. By learning to sit with discomfort, you develop an ability to be with whatever feelings, sensations, and thoughts arise within the body with presence and the courage to be with yourself just as you are in each moment.

Whenever I feel stuck, I return to these words of wisdom from Lama Rod that connect me to a powerful lineage of ancestors. From the myths of enslaved ancestors to finding connection with others who share similar trauma, there are many tools of healing available to us. Our healing, regardless of how we choose to heal, begins when we have the courage to lead with love and honor those connections as we seek collective liberation.