

FREE AT LAST: HEALING THE WOUNDS OF SLAVERY | SHARON SALZBERG & ROSANNE CASH

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FREE AT LAST

Deep Time Liberation takes African American meditators into the heart of slavery's past so they can free themselves from its legacy of trauma.

BY RIMA VESELY-FLAD

“DEEP TIME LIBERATION IS HOW—in the present—we experience the influence of our people’s historical past and the possibilities of our future,” says African American Buddhist teacher Devin Berry. “The deep insights that arise have the power to heal the collective trauma of Black people from the African diaspora.”

That’s the philosophy behind Deep Time Liberation, a series of experiential retreats for meditators of African descent who are grappling with the suffering caused by centuries of enslavement and oppression in the United States.

“I knew I was deeply wounded by generational trauma,” says Berry, who first had the idea for the program. “I felt compelled to bring my ancestors into my practice.”

The first Deep Time Liberation retreat was held in April 2018 with twelve meditators immersing themselves in the history of slavery, and a second retreat is planned for next May. The program’s design was

inspired by the late Roshi Bernie Glassman, who led annual meditation retreats at the Auschwitz extermination camp in Poland.

“Those practitioners were bearing witness, memorializing and honoring their ancestors,” says Berry. “I decided that I wanted to bear witness with those whose ancestors were enslaved on land here in the U.S.”

“You have to touch the thing that you’re being liberated from. You have to sit with it, witness it,” says retreat participant Kabir Hypolite, a meditation practitioner from the Bay Area. “You have to touch and taste and smell the intergenerational wounds.



Deep Time Liberation retreatants (left) bore witness to the trauma of slavery at the Whitney Plantation in Louisiana, where Ken Smith’s statue “Hallelujah” (far left) celebrates Emancipation.

PHOTO BY DEVIN BERRY

PHOTO COURTESY OF DIANNE YASKI



PHOTO COURTESY OF DIANE YASKI

The leaders of Deep Time Liberation created a healing community of laughter, conversation, food, drumming, and ritual. Left to right: Teachers Devin Berry, Rosetta Saunders, Noliwe Alexander, and DaRa Williams with retreat manager Diane Yaski.

When you're walking around with unconscious trauma, you're doing things and holding things that shape you, and you do not even know exactly what it is that's running through you."

To start to heal his own generational trauma, Berry first undertook a solo retreat on a former slave plantation in Virginia. There he practiced *ton-glen*, a Tibetan Buddhist meditation for cultivating compassion, and a version of Thich Nhat Hanh's Touching the Earth ceremony, which is a prostration practice for connecting with our spiritual and family ancestors.

"Touching the Earth was the first practice that allowed me to see through collective trauma and connect my ancestors with dharma teachings and practice," he says.

After his solo retreat, Berry went to the annual three-month retreat at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts. "With Insight practice, I was now able to touch the resilience of my ancestors that was embedded in my DNA and hiding in plain sight in my body," Berry says. "For the first time I realized I didn't need anything other than me sitting

RIMA VESELY-FLAD is a professor of religion and social justice at Warren Wilson College and a meditator in the Vipassana tradition. She's the author of Racial Purity and Dangerous Bodies: Moral Pollution, Black Lives, and the Struggle for Justice.

to be in touch with my ancestors. It was the actual meditation practice—sitting there, quieting the mind, observing the mind, observing sensations in the body—that helped me touch deep places of historical trauma and break down familial stories and habitual patterns. I've been on a clear path to healing since then."

To offer the healing he experienced to others, Berry joined forces with Noliwe Alexander, a graduate of Spirit Rock Meditation Center's community dharma leader program and participant in the current teacher training program there. In the first public iteration of Deep Time Liberation (DTL), they hosted three daylong retreats at East Bay Meditation Center in Oakland, structured around the themes of "Honoring the Ancestors," "Bearing Witness," and "A Portal to Healing."

They were then joined in the DTL leadership team by Rosetta Saunders, a longtime meditator, drummer in West African and Afro-Cuban traditions, and educator focused on the histories of people of color in the United States. "It is a powerful shift in our psyche when we begin to recognize those places of trauma within us," Saunders says. "You have to be honest about trauma—where you hold it in your body and how you work with it—to begin the process of releasing the cellular memories. Drumming has been my medicine in working with and healing my own personal trauma."

PHOTO BY DHINIL PATEL

To delve even more deeply into how to heal historical wounds, they invited in DaRa Williams, a dharma teacher and psychotherapist specializing in trauma healing who is trained in Indigenous Focusing-Oriented Therapy and complex trauma.

"IFOT is the only trauma-based therapeutic practice I'm aware of that was developed by a non-white person," Williams says. "By virtue of this, the mind, experience, and community that it arose from are already devoid of many of the colonized ways of perceiving trauma, especially historical trauma. The decolonization and deconstruction that has to happen with other trauma therapies is not needed. Because IFOT is based on an indigenous worldview, it's accessible and successful at its very core in engaging and transforming multigenerational trauma."

Together, the four facilitators began designing the curriculum for the first weeklong Deep Time Liberation retreat. Then, in April of 2018, they were joined in New Orleans by twelve meditators whose origins arose from the African diaspora—African American, African Caribbean, and African Latinx.

Together, the sixteen created a sense of *sangha*, community, through laughter, conversation, food, drumming, and ritual. The retreatants, along with the facilitators, began by setting up an altar to honor their ancestors. They had been asked to bring pictures and other small items that connected them to their ancestral roots. Their readiness to undertake the healing journey was deeply rooted in veneration of their ancestors.

After bonding in New Orleans, the group made its way to the Flowering Lotus Retreat Center in

The Whitney Planation is the only museum in the United States that narrates the horrors of slavery from the slaves' perspective. There, DTL retreatants bore witness to the lived experience of their enslaved ancestors. "You have to touch the thing that you're being liberated from," says participant Kabir Hypolite.





As one retreatant walked along rows of ceramic heads on poles commemorating those beheaded in a slave uprising, he came upon his own last name. "I was flooded by outrage," he remembers, "but through practice and connection with the group, that changed to a sense of pride."

Magnolia, Mississippi, where for five days they settled into large Victorian houses that had been renovated for residential retreats. Here, they heard dharma talks and practiced mindful meditation, silent walking, reflection, and community-building exercises. They embraced each other with deep gratitude for their mutual presence and commitment to liberation and healing.

One of the practices was dancing to traditional drumming. The rhythm of the music and the movement of their bodies created anticipation, joy, anguish, and a deep sense of ancestral lineage. The drumming evoked the traditions that were forcibly taken away over generations of capture, the Middle Passage, and enslavement. At the same time, it opened up a space to honor their resilience.

In their dharma talks, Berry, Williams, and Alexander often contextualized the retreat using Theravada teachings on the *brahmaviharas*, known as the four immeasurables—*metta* (loving-kindness),

karuna (compassion), *mudita* (empathetic joy), and *upekkha* (equanimity)—along with teachings on being present with the body.

According to Alexander, they grounded their healing journey in mindful meditation, Buddhist cosmology, and compassion practices. As a Theravada practitioner, she says, "there are places within my practice where I've been able to rest, generating a calming presence amidst an array of complex and painful circumstances. Over twenty years of Buddhist practice, I have found an opening in my awareness that enables me to ask: can I sit right here in and with this body?"

"This is a very difficult thing when you're still filtering through unspoken, unseen, and unaddressed trauma. Thus, we intentionally grounded Deep Time Liberation through the lens of self-compassion, in order to allow each participant their own agency through this process."

The teachers told the group about their own journeys to encounter the narratives and places of

their ancestors. Berry spoke of traveling to Virginia and of a phone call with a descendant of the family who had enslaved some of his ancestors, while Saunders spoke about her journey to Camilla, Georgia. "There was so much pain in the one story my mother would tell," she said. "I had to go to that place where the pain had occurred and festered within her."

Williams speaks of coming to this work as "the culmination of all that she has lived and trained for, and the family that raised her up." Both of her parents were originally from the South and were part of the Great Migration, from the South to the North. For Williams, who describes herself as "a true believer in the bodhisattva way," liberation from suffering is deeply tied to liberation from the suffering caused by historical trauma.

"I spent many years of my youth traveling down South from Brooklyn with my mom, dad, and aunts, listening to the stories of my people and the history of Southern living," says Williams. "I remember having to make sure we left at the right time of day so we didn't get caught driving through Virginia and North Carolina in the middle of the night, and having to always make sure we had enough gas to make it through. I remember the fried chicken and potato salad we made to eat on the road, which was delicious, but the adults knew it was to make sure we did not have to stop and face being unable to purchase food or eat at certain restaurants."

The facilitators offered several experiential exercises to investigate and illuminate the silent trauma, to strengthen group belonging, and to bear witness to each other's family stories. The small number of participants allowed for a depth of intimacy that surprised many participants, who felt that they expressed more emotion to fellow retreatants than they ever had to friends, coworkers, or family members.

"I saw that people were suffering the same way I was," says participant Aliyah Rowe, a New York-based meditation practitioner in the Vipassana tradition. "We cried with each other. We shared things with each other that we haven't even told members of our family."

Beli Sullivan, a fellow retreatant, agrees. "It was the perfect group. The teachers were so incredibly

loving," she says. "They were the beacon we were looking for. They were always present."

On the third day of the retreat, the group of sixteen traveled to the Whitney Plantation in Louisiana. As the only plantation in the country to narrate the horrors of slavery from the perspective of the enslaved people, it allowed the DTL participants to sit with memorials to infants, children, and adults who lived and died on the plantation, as well as a monument to the largest slave uprising in the history of the U.S.

Retreatant Kabir Hypolite was particularly struck by this monument. As he walked by rows of ceramic black heads on poles commemorating those beheaded in the uprising, Hypolite came upon his own last name.

One of the healing practices the group did during their five days at Flowering Lotus Retreat Center in Magnolia, Mississippi, was dancing to traditional drumming, led by facilitator Rosetta Saunders (below). "Drumming has been my medicine in working with and healing my own personal trauma," she says.



PHOTO COURTESY OF NEW ORLEANS PLANTATION COUNTRY

PHOTO BY DIVINE YASKI

“I was devastated,” he says. “I didn’t know anything about the uprising and I certainly didn’t know that I would see the figure of a man with my last name, who very well could be a relative. I stood there in a state of shock. I was trying to take in the enormity of it all and wondering, What happened? Who were these people? Why is it that my name is on this monument? I remember being flooded with outrage. And then—through the process of practice and community connection with the group after we came back—all of that changed to having a sense of pride.”

Other retreatants agreed that much of what the narratives at the Whitney Plantation communicated was the resilience of slaves.

“I came out of the plantation angry and crying,” Rowe remembers. “Everyone else was pretty sad, but I was angry. DaRa told us that these things hap-

pened in history, but we can’t stay there. We need to look at where we are today. Look at how strong we are as a people.”

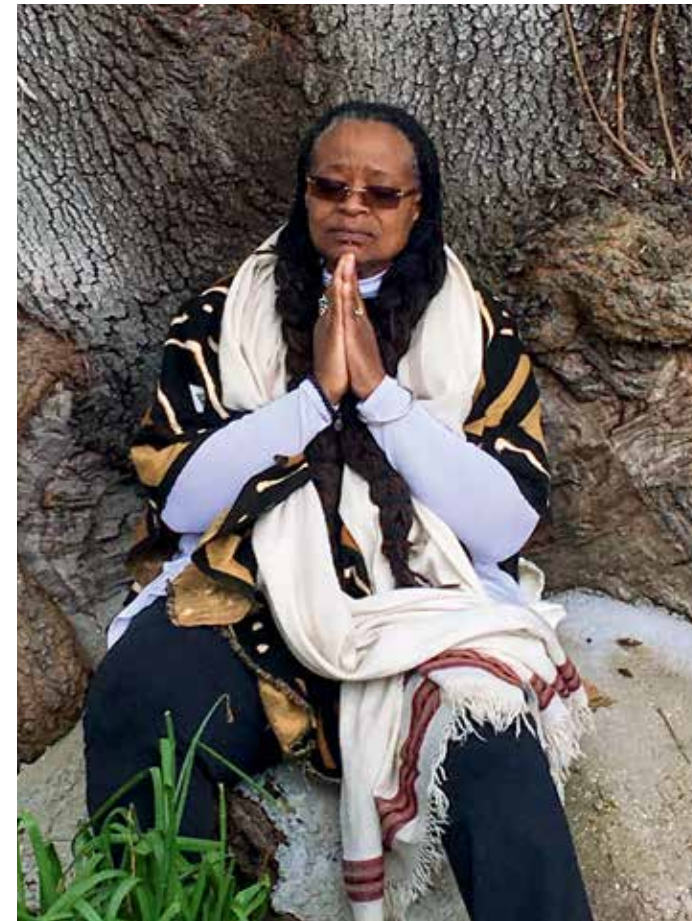
When they returned to Flowering Lotus Retreat Center, the DTL teachers created a safe container to share what was witnessed at the plantation and acknowledge the stories that were told and the legacies remembered. Participants drew genograms—pictorial displays created to trace their family histories. This exercise explored their internal and external conditioning and helped them see how these traumas have manifested in physical illness, psychological wounds, and other forms of suffering.

Retreatant Beli Sullivan describes how “bizarre” ailments had culminated in life-threatening illnesses that mirrored her mother’s trauma. “Not knowing my Sullivan grandparents and cousins is an emptiness,” she says. “It is traumatic. In the silence of the

The retreat ended in New Orleans, where they visited St. Augustine’s Church, site of the Tomb of the Unknown Slave, and Congo Square, where slaves were permitted to celebrate with music and dance on Sundays, as depicted in the sculpture “Spirit of Congo Square,” by Adéwalé Adénlé (below).



PHOTOS BY (L) NOLIWE ALEXANDER, (R) DIANE YASKI



retreat, it came to me that all my illness was a manifestation of spiritual pain. The retreat allowed me to admit to myself that I was holding in family secrets.”

Buddhist teachings and practices are particularly useful for mapping physical trauma, says Alexander. She explains that the primary reason to hold DTL as a Buddhist retreat is to bring teachings about compassion, self-compassion, and awareness to the participants. “We can rest in Buddhist practices,” she says. “We are calming the mind. We are touching the heart. We are unearthing our identities. We are piercing the veil of the manifestations we’ve been attached to in order to use our direct experience to heal collective wounds.

“We met each participant exactly where they were, be it vulnerable, wounded, longing for connection, or merely curious about the patterned nature of their lives,” Alexander continues. “For many, being able to hear, ‘I see you,’ began a cycle of compassionate responses needed to embody deep discoveries.”

The first Deep Time Liberation retreat ended with two days in New Orleans, which contains one of the

first slave ports established in the British colonies. The group visited Congo Square, where slaves were able to rejoice on Sundays with drums and dancing and singing. They visited a well-known, Black-owned restaurant and St. Augustine’s Church, where the tomb of the unknown slave is resting.

In visiting the historical sites of slavery, the facilitators write, “We come to know who we are. We are walking onto the ancestral lands as the enslaved did, sensing that experience, reflecting, then peeling back the layers of where our own history and our own family’s stories connect to our present-day experiences. The DTL journey calls forth resilience and helps reveal our true nature that has been lost, stolen, and forgotten over generations of historical harm. We actually are extremely resilient.” ♦

The second Deep Time Liberation retreat is planned for May 2020, when the organizers hope to offer the retreat as dana to those who can’t afford it. You can offer your support to make this a reality at www.deeptimelib.org.

Above left: Retreatant Ginetta Glass in silent contemplation at the Whitney Plantation. Right: Rosetta Saunders and retreatant Beli Sullivan embrace. “The teachers were so incredibly loving,” says Sullivan. “They were the beacon we were looking for.”

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