Vedana of Bias: Latent Likes and Dislikes Fuelling Barriers to Human Connection

Anurag Gupta

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VEDANA OF BIAS: LATENT LIKES AND DISLIKES FUELLING BARRIERS TO HUMAN CONNECTION

Anurag Gupta

BE MORE America, New York, NY, USA

ABSTRACT

Our eyes are the windows to our world. In the United States, our eyes also become the windows to the quality and depth of connection between two human beings. Deeply imprinted within the American mind is the story of race. This story continues to consciously and unconsciously determine how Americans perceive, reason, remember and make decisions with respect to human relations. For example, 63 years after the seminal decision Brown v. Board of Education that ended legalised segregation in American schools, over 75 per cent of White Americans have zero friends of colour, and two-thirds of Black Americans have zero White friends. While much has been written about systems and structures that create such realities, this paper aims to delve deeper into the role of vedanā in creating such interpersonal and system-wide realities. The paper will further comment on how feeling tones associated with the myth of different races continue play a role in the opportunities and experiences of differently hued human beings in American society.

All things appear and disappear because of the concurrence of causes and conditions. Nothing ever exists entirely alone; everything is in relation to everything else. – The Buddha

Introduction

The Buddha is famously remembered as one of the greatest psychologists in human history. His teachings have left humanity with a blueprint that any person – regardless of age, ethnicity, gender, class or colour – can use to make sense of the human mind, particularly through wise mindfulness, one of the eight spokes of the noble eightfold path. Having studied and worked with incredibly diverse communities across the globe from the United States and Mexico to Myanmar and Korea, I have dedicated my professional life to understand and transform bias by utilising this blueprint. As a scholar and a practitioner, I am particularly intrigued by the existing parallels between the four foundations

CONTACT Anurag Gupta anurag@bemoreamerica.org

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In this paper, I will shed light on the range of feeling tones or vedana that are associated with the phenomenon of racial bias. My hope is that the reader will walk away with a whole new set of ideas and understanding into (1) the current racial realities as context to understand racial bias; (2) the relationship between racial bias, particularly unconscious racial bias, with vedana; (3) some of the causes and conditions that are responsible for the arising of latent likes and dislikes of vedana associated with cross-racial human contact and relations; (4) and three ways investigation of latent likes and dislikes or vedana of bias, and the chain of emotions, mental states and/or thoughts they initiate, may help with understanding and transforming the arising of bias to alleviate needless human suffering across societies.

**Setting the context: understanding racial bias**

The first spoke of the noble eightfold path begins with wise understanding, or seeing things for what they are. To understand the deeper roots of racial bias within the conscious and unconscious mind, it is first imperative to acknowledge the racial realities in American society. As of 2016, the US Census Bureau estimates that roughly 40 per cent of Americans are classified as non-White, i.e. Black, Latino, Asian, Native Americans and more recently Arab Americans. The figures below provide a snapshot of racial realities in the United States with respect to a few social and economic indicators.

Sixty-three years after the case *Brown v. Board of Education*, the seminal case that overturned Jim Crow segregation in the United States, two-thirds of Americans would have to physically move neighbourhoods for Americans to be fully integrated (Massey 2001). Beyond that, Figure 1 shows the state of social segregation in the United States; a majority of Black (83%), White (91%) and Latino (64%) Americans socialise exclusively with members of their own group (Cox, Navarro-Rivera, and Jones 2016).

With respect to education, as Figure 2 illustrates, 1 in 2 Black and Latino children attend high-poverty and low-resource schools compared to 1 in 20 White children (Turner 2013). Although there are more poor White children in the US than poor Black and Latino children, the majority of poor White children attend socioeconomically diverse schools, while the majority of non-White children attend schools where most students are poor and the neighbourhoods have high rates of violence, crime and poverty (Turner 2013).

When it comes to poverty, as Figure 3 shows, the overall American poverty rate oscillates around 10 per cent. With respect to background, however, 1 in 4 African-Americans, 1 in 5 Latinos and 1 in 3 Native Americans live in poverty, compared to 1 in 11 White Americans (US Census 2016). Not only that, Pew
Figure 1. Segregation.

Figure 2. Education.

Figure 3. Poverty.
Research Center (2016) estimates that the median net worth of a White family is over $160,000 compared to $16,000 for a Black family and $18,000 for a Latino family.

When it comes to commission of crimes, studies have repeatedly shown that controlling for factors such as poverty and social disadvantage, there is no difference in the rates of crimes commissioned across racial groups (Ulmer, Harris, and Steffensmeier 2012). Yet, based on the data managed by the Federal Bureau of Prisons (2017) and the Death Penalty Information Center (2016), as illustrated in Figure 4, 38 per cent of American adults in state, and federal prisons and local jails and 41 per cent of prisoners on death row are Black, when Black Americans comprise only 13 per cent of the American population.

Beyond the above, there are countless other examples of racial disparities with respect to health outcomes to the quality of health care received by non-White patients to disparities in employment, income, college and graduate school matriculation, and access to healthy foods and social services organisations. Economists commissioned by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation estimate that racial bias costs the American economy $1 trillion annually (Turner 2013).

Having skimmed through the figures above, notice the wandering mind, and its possible attempts to explain these outcomes. What theories, scenarios, or stories conjure up? Before proceeding forward, and without needing to explain these social realities, notice the vedana associated with looking at and acknowledging these realities. Unpleasant? Neutral? Pleasant? What underlying emotions are connected to these feeling tones? Shame? Unease? Guilt? Anger? Indifference? What thoughts, storylines or explanations are connected with the feeling tone? Individual Responsibility? Culture? Institutional racism? Something else? Whatever these explanations may be, just hold them for the remainder of the paper and just observe these explanations and emotions with respect to this topic.

I would add the following caution in understanding these figures. Figures and statistics make sense when a comparison is made with a benchmark. Without
judging the nature of the comparison, the benchmark for comparison in all of the above figures is the social realities for White Americans. The statistics are not making a conclusion about who has it better. As wise understanding demands, the figures are depicting reality at the aggregate level for what it is when it comes to certain social and economic indicators. This does not mean all individual experiences fall into the bell curve that these numbers represent. Statistics merely capture trends, not individual stories. With that said, bias as enacted in daily often harmless micro-decisions aggregate into disparities that exist between White and non-White Americans.

**The relationship between Vedana and racial bias**

In the last two decades, some social scientists began working with a simple instrument to be able to measure people’s latent likes and dislikes by measuring their response latencies to various concepts. The Implicit Association Test or the IAT is the most popular of these instruments. It measures the strength of a person’s associations between certain target categories (e.g. insects, flavours of ice-cream, gender, colour, etc.) and attributes associated with those categories (e.g. negative, positive or neither positive nor negative), very similar to the concept of *vedana* that captures the spirit of one’s mental or physical feeling in response to contact with a physical or mental object (Greenwald, McGhee, and Schwartz 1998; Greenwald and Nosek 2001). These associations addressed by the IAT include ‘attitudes (concept-valence associations), stereotypes (group-trait associations), self-concepts or identities (self-trait or self-group associations), and self-esteem (self-valence associations) (Greenwald et al. 2009)’.

At the aggregate level, the time differentials of the IAT effect have been found to be statistically significant and not simply due to random chance (Jost et al. 2009). The strength of these associations are measured on a bipolar scale that starts with strong, moderate or slight preference for one category to no preference for one of the two categories to slight, moderate or strong preference for the other of the two categories. The way this instrument divides response reactions on a dualistic spectrum and provides the strength of these associations on a scale of pleasant to unpleasant is very similar to the Buddhist concept of *vedana*. The Race IAT is the most well known of the IAT’s because it has been able to excavate an aspect of human feeling in America that remains controversial and under dispute – that most people have an easier time making pleasant associations with white faces and unpleasant associations with black faces.

Some scholars have rightfully questioned the instrument’s reliability at the individual level because of its low test–retest reliability. In other words, an individual’s score does not always remain constant when he or she completes the task multiple times. From the perspective of *vedana*, this totally makes sense. Our physical, emotional and mental reactions to our lived experiences are a product of innumerable causes and conditions. Whether we have had enough
rest, nutrition, exercise to our relationships with our family and friends to external stimuli that we have been exposed to will determine the quality of our response and reaction to contact. A person who takes the IAT after a 30-min loving-kindness meditation will likely have a different response to stimuli than if she watched 30 min of the TV show Cops, which is known to portray non-Whites in stereotypical, negative roles. This type of priming will have a direct result on the vedana associated with contact, even if it is the same mental object.

Just as our vedana to the same mental object differs depending on context so does our individual experiences to people we interact with. For over the last 15 years, the IAT has been able to show us at least at the aggregate level our society’s latent associations with respect to appearance of human beings. Hundreds of scholarly studies have been written about the instrument to conclude that at the aggregate level, the IAT is able to (1) measure implicit associations, which can also be understood implicit or unconscious bias, and more importantly (2) predict human behaviour, specifically with respect to unconscious behavioural patterns that result in discrimination in various professional and personal settings (Greenwald and Banaji 2013). With millions of sample points given the ease of the instrument’s use, the data collected by the Harvard-based Project Implicit predicts that over 75 per cent of Americans have an automatic preference for Whites, including a majority of non-Whites though not to the same extent as Whites (Greenwald and Banaji 2013). These numbers again do not reflect individual scores but the American society’s latent associations at the aggregate level with respect to people’s appearance.

The data indicates that much of these latent dislikes are unconscious, and is also present among non-Whites. The vedana of bias in these circumstances is the affective tone that stirs the mind to dictate words, actions, behaviours and decisions that are erroneous from the professional decision-making perspective (e.g. hiring a lesser competent person for the job, or prescribing an inaccurate dosage of pain medication) that when aggregated across society aggregate into the disparities mentioned in the previous section. Let’s illustrate with three examples.

Example 1. Two patients, one White and one Black, arrive at an emergency room complaining of knee pain. Both patients ask for pain medicine while they wait to see a specialist. The Black patient is much more likely to be refused the medication or given a lower dose of medication than the White patient. The seminal study conducted by Heins et al. (2006) showed that many health professionals have an unconscious bias that may alter their perception of the pain of darker skinned patients. Hoffman et al. (2016) further showed that many White physicians carry false beliefs about biological difference of Black people, including believing that Blacks age more slowly than Whites, Blacks have thicker skin than Whites, and they have less sensitive nerve endings. How may unpleasant vedana connected to appearance of a patient affect the decision of a health professional?
Example 2. A study conducted by Reeves (2014) asked 60 partners at a law firm to review a memo of a junior associate. While all of the memos are identical in content, half are authored by an associate with a name associated with a Black American and the other half by an associate with a name associated with a White American. It has been shown that the manager’s evaluation of the memo hinged on the perceived race of the associate. When the associate was perceived to be Black, the evaluators found more of the embedded errors and rated the memo as lower quality compared to when the author was perceived as White. This was true for evaluators of both genders as well as those who were non-White. How may unpleasant vedana connected to the perceived appearance and background of the associate impact his or her performance evaluation? What implications may it present with respect to the associate’s compensation, retention, ability to rise in the firm and future career path?

Example 3. A few students, who were Latino, were having a lively debate about sports during recess. Interpreting the interaction as aggressive and contentious, rather than harmless banter common among teenagers, the teacher took the students to the principal’s office for a reprimand. This is common in an educational setting where the mismatch of perceptions and expectations associated with vedana of a student’s accent, gait and appearance to the person in authority leads to disciplinary action against the student. Graham (2015) demonstrated that Black and Latino students are disciplined at rates three to five times higher than White students. How may unpleasant vedana attached to student appearance affect educator behaviour towards students? How may the behaviour affect the achievement and performance possibilities of non-White students?

The vedana associated with physical appearance among Whites further impacts social outcomes for all communities – White and non-White – because members of this group hold decision-making positions and roles of influence disproportionate to their population size as illustrated by Figure 5 (AAMC 2010; ABA 2017; Bialik et al. 2017; Center for American Governor 2017; Deggans 2016; Low 2016; Lynch 2016; Minority Nurse 2015; Ryan 2016; The Hollywood Reporter 2015; The Huffington Post 2015; U.S. Department of Education 2016).

These unconscious associations impact the policies, priorities and cultural norms of companies and industries these individuals run. Beyond professional lives, it also impacts people’s day to day decision-making. For example, it has been shown that Americans as a whole tip Black servers 18 per cent less, Black taxi drivers 33 per cent less (Greenwald and Banaji 2013). How may unpleasant vedana and the expectations of performance connected to the vedana influence people’s day to day decision-making in the most mundane contexts of life?

Causes and conditions: Vedana of racial bias

The shift from a geographic to a hierarchical ordering of human diversity marks a fateful transition in the history of Western science – for what, short of railroads
and nuclear bombs, had more practical impact, in this case almost entirely negative, upon our collective lives and nationalities? Ironically, J. F. Blumenbach is the focus of this shift – for his five-race scheme became canonical, and he changed the geometry of human order … to linear ranking by putative worth. Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (1996)

Linguists define bias as prejudice in favour of or against a person or group usually in a way that is considered to be unfair. Racial bias thus is a form of this prejudice where the targeted person or a group belongs to a particular racial group. While we now understand the impact of racial bias, what gives rise to racial bias? The *vedana* associated with racial classification is the initial activation point in the chain of thoughts, emotions and the physical sensations resulting from the initial contact. Why does it arise disparately based on how a person is racially classified?

Due to the history of colonisation, enslavement, and a host of policies and practices that socially and institutionally enforced racial bias, the topic of racial bias inevitably gives rise to unpleasant *vedana*. While the unpleasant *vedana* is present, there is a misconception that racial bias is inherent in human societies and in human beings as a species. This is where wise understanding, the first spoke of the noble eightfold path, is once again useful. Unlike social hierarchies connected to class, caste, gender, language and even prisoner of war status, race is a very modern idea. Race does not have a genetic or biological basis (Goodman, Moses, and Jones 2012). Human subspecies do not exist and most human variation, with respect to our genetics, exists within and not between ‘races’. This means skin colour which is usually understood interchangeably with race is only skin deep.

So if there isn’t a biological or genetic basis for race, what is race? Race is a story. The story of race classifies human beings on a colour-based hierarchy based on geographic origin and physical appearance. This story was legitimised in the eighteenth century by European naturalists and anatomists like Carl Linneaus,
George Louis Leclerc, comte de Buffon and Johann Friedrich Blumenbach to justify social inequalities as natural (Ewen and Ewen 2008). Blumenbach’s version of this story was popularised and adopted widely by leaders in business, academia and governments. The story started as follows: after visiting the Caucasus Mountains in the region of Georgia, Blumenbach declared its inhabitants to be the most beautiful in the world, created in ‘God’s image’, and deemed the region to be the origin of human bloodline. He decided that that all light-skinned peoples, including all Europeans, originated in this region creating a new category called ‘Caucasian’. He proposed four other races that were each considered physically and morally ‘degenerate’ forms of God’s original creation. He classified them as Ethiopians (all Africans except North Africans), Mongolians (East Asians), Malayans (South-East Asians, Pacific Islanders and Aboriginal Australians) and Americans (the indigenous populations of the Americas) (Painter 2011). Here’s how he described them:

All mankind … seems to me as it may be best … be divided into the five following varieties … Caucasian, Mongolian, Ethiopian, American, and Malay. I have allotted the first place to the Caucasian … which make me esteem it the primeval one. This diverges in both directions into two, most remote and very different from each other; on the one side … Ethiopian … on the other … Mongolian. The remaining two occupy the intermediate position between that primeval one and these two extreme varieties; that is American between Caucasian and Mongolian; the Malay between the same Caucasian and Ethiopian (reprinted from Ewen and Ewen 2008).

Once the story was created, each one of the categories were prescribed a host of aesthetic, intellectual, moral and behavioural attributes, as illustrated in the Table below. Notice the vedana that is connected to the choice of words and images used to describe and depict the people in each of those categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Racialised name</th>
<th>Attributes prescribed by Linneaus and Blumenbach</th>
<th>Associated Vedana</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Vigorous, muscular. Flowing blond hair. Blue eyes. Very smart, inventive, ruled by law, creative, pinnacle of human perfection</td>
<td>Pleasant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malay/American</td>
<td>Ill-tempered, impassive. Thick black hair; wide nostrils; harsh face; beadle. Stubborn</td>
<td>Unpleasant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mongolian</td>
<td>Melancholy, stern, black hair; dark eyes, strict, haughty, greedy. Covered by loose garments, ruled by opinion.</td>
<td>Unpleasant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopian</td>
<td>Sluggish, lazy, black kinky hair, silky skin, flat nose, thick lips, crafty, slow, careless. Covered by grease. Ruled by caprice</td>
<td>Unpleasant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This racialised hierarchy of humanity elevated the fictional category of Caucasians to the highest level of creation, ranking all other human beings in terms of their innate pathology. Simultaneously in this period, European elites amassed booty from global expeditions, creating curiosity cabinets in which their hierarchical worldview was articulated through a strategic arrangement of natural artefacts. These cabinets evolved into world fairs, public museums, orientalist images, books, stories, motion pictures, minstrel shows and circuses of nineteenth and twentieth centuries for the consumption of the broader public.
In addition, Blumenbach’s system of racial classification was adopted globally – from the United States to Latin America, colonies in Africa and India to Australia and Dutch Indonesia – often reserving citizenship and a host of social, political and economic rights exclusively for members of the White ‘race’. For example, the American Naturalization Act of 1790 required that a person be a ‘free white person to be admitted to become a citizen’; this law was changed in 175 years later with the Immigration Act of 1965 (Lopez 2006). These policies placed onerous limitations on the lives and livelihoods of people who were classified as non-White, including their ability to be educated, travel, own property, engage in commerce, engage in the political process and be protected by the law.

While most legalised forms of discrimination based on the story of race are no longer state policy, the stereotypes and attributes associated with members of non-White groups remain prevalent. These stereotypes and false beliefs continue to be perpetuated by advertisers, marketers, film-makers and media makers to subtly strengthen the vedana attached to the phenotype of being White and non-White. For example, whether intentionally or unintentionally, the news and the entertainment media instruct and teach their viewers about the character attributes of non-Whites. With respect to media’s mind-training through stories and character representation, two issues arise. First is the issue of non-representation or invisibility. A comprehensive study on diversity in entertainment showed that 7 per cent of American films and 19 per cent of American TV programming had a cast that reflected the country’s diversity.
Second is the issue of sustaining stereotypes. Non-White characters are often depicted in stereotypical roles that for the viewer strengthen the associations and *vedana* attached to those roles. Given the hypersegregation in the United States, this mass media curriculum has a particularly powerful educational impact on people who have little or no direct contact with members outside their groups (see Figure 1), strengthening the pleasant and unpleasant *vedana* associated with group membership. Studies have shown that this also impacts the self-conception and self-esteem of non-Whites at the unconscious level, which may be an explanation for why a majority of non-Whites also display an unconscious preference for whites on the IAT. Figure 6 illustrates this process of the causes and conditions that till the *vedana* of racial bias in the human consciousness.

**Future directions: Vedana as means to hack bias?**

Five decades of robust research has provided us with significant data on the multitude of benefits of mindfulness practices, including mitigating unconscious racial bias (Lueke and Gibson 2014). More broadly, the research makes clear that the *vedana* attached to different racial groups is conditioned as described by the Hebb's Rule: neurons that fire together, wire together. The *vedana* of racial bias is a product of repeated reinforcement of the latent likes and dislikes people are exposed to through the barrage of stereotypical, exaggerated, non-representative and often images and stories they receive through the senses about human attributes based on the story of race. When coupled with institutional decision-making, these perceptions held within the human consciousness make social, economic and political inequities a self-fulfilling prophesy. With that said, Buddhist mindfulness practices present numerous opportunities to transform racial bias, particularly in three ways.

First, institutionally through a greater mindfulness of representations and depictions of the humanity of different human beings, institutional decision-makers have an opportunity to transform the causes and conditions that mould, enable and sustain the latent likes and dislikes, or what marketers like to call ‘tastes’, of the public. The opportunity this presents is to undo the myth of different human races once and for all and imagine the possibility of human multiplicity arising out of different cultural and geographic environments, each one symbolising the creative and innovative nature of human imagination. This may strengthen the virtue of wisdom in our social and cultural life and enable human connection. After all, all humans are 99.9 per cent genetically identical (Goodman et al. 2012).

Second, interpersonally through a deeper investigation into the *vedana* when it comes to interacting and relating with people from groups other than our own may result in two very desirable outcomes. First, it will strengthen social connection, belonging and intimacy between people and thereby reduce
conflict, anxiety and worry that presents itself in cross-racial and cross-cultural interactions. Second, it will enable healing internally, particularly around the unfounded fears that the mind and body has been conditioned to carry because of the story of race and the barrage of media images and depictions that have strengthened that story in human consciousness. This process would require a much deeper awareness of and insight into the sensory/mental experience of *vedana* when contact is made with the human senses. At that initial moment of contact, the mind–body unit responds based on its conditioning. The awareness of the initial moment of contact and the associated *vedana* can transform not only feeling tone of racial bias but also become the social balm humans crave and need to build connection with other members of our species. This can only result through making the *vedana* of bias seen, felt and known in a cross-cultural and cross-racial context – whether it is with a Black, Latino, Native, Asian or a Muslim person. What is the nature of latent like or dislike? What are the stories attached to it? What past experiences arise? Are they based on an in-person experience or something acquired and stored through another vector such as the media, education, the experience of another person or something else? This chain of dependent origination can become better known through heightened awareness and intimacy with the *vedana* of bias.

Last, internally. There has been a plethora of research in psychology to demonstrate the numerous unconscious ways humans limit their own potential based on unfounded, false beliefs. In the Buddhist realm, these beliefs come under the purview of the poison of ignorance or delusion. Just as there is a *vedana* attached to racial bias that is being enacted externally, whether conscious or unconscious, there is also a *vedana* attached to that bias being enacted internally when it serves as a roadblock in individual performance or ability to enjoy life. Research into the phenomenon of stereotype threat and overcompensation are helpful in understanding how *vedana* associated with a model of perfectionist self may create and further feed loops of suffering in people’s internal life. This reaches further into the attachments people have to their thoughts, perceptions and identity. Strengthening awareness of *vedana* of bias with the experience of the self may also interrupt the *dukkha* of becoming and the epidemic of self-loathing that appears to be rising in Western and even non-Western societies. This may be especially important in a fast-moving world where the senses and regularly interacting with an onslaught of stimulation from the outer world.

**Conclusion**

Bias is a complex phenomenon. It is a topic that stirs for each one of us a response that is uncomfortable and disheartening, consciously and unconsciously. In this paper, I attempted to provide an interdisciplinary summary of the multidimensionality of racial bias, particularly from the lens of *vedana*, the
second foundation of mindfulness. To ease into this topic, the first section set the context of racial bias in the United States in particular as evidenced by the leading social and economic indicators. I find this context setting helpful in seeing the forest as a whole before we zoom into the individual trees to understand the deeper roots of the occurrence, manifestations and impacts of bias. The section provided with an overview of unconscious racial bias using cutting-edge research from the discipline of social psychology that is relevant in understanding and measuring what the Buddha referred to as vedana. The third section outlined the historical and contemporary causes and conditions that created and sustain latent likes and dislikes associated with human racial classification. This section also sheds light into how vedana of racial bias persists in American society today and its possible role in enabling the disparities outlined in section one. Lastly, the paper ends with insights into how mindfulness of vedana can help hack and transform bias in society institutionally, interpersonally and internally. Though this paper focuses on racial bias, its themes can be applied to understand the role of bias for other human identity dimensions such as gender, sexual orientation, religion, class, age, ability, size, among others.

In his most celebrated speech, ‘I Have A Dream’, Dr King soulfully invited millions of people into a vision for the world with the following words: ‘I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character’. Fifty-five years later, this remains a collective dream. May mindfulness of vedana inspire and empower scientists and leaders across sectors to innovate creative solutions to enable Dr King’s dream. May these solutions actualise a nation and a world where people can live and reach their full potential, a world where opportunities and possibilities do not hinge on the colour of their skin, but on the content of their character.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**Notes on contributor**

*Anurag Gupta*, MPhil, JD, is the founder & CEO of BE MORE America. His research interests include building technology that strengthen intergroup trust, and training health providers and business leaders in science-based tools to reduce implicit bias in their decision-making. He sits on the Board of Barre Center for Buddhist Studies (BCBS) and serves as a fellow with On Being Studios.

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