

Touching the Earth: A Black Buddhist Perspective on Connecting with and Healing Ourselves and our Ancestors

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Ancestors inform so many aspects of our experience. We are our ancestors. In the Plum Village Vietnamese Zen Buddhist tradition, we speak of three kinds of ancestors: familial, spiritual, and land ancestors. I reflect on my own connection to my familial ancestors as a Black bi-racial descendant, and explore the Plum Village practice of Touching the Earth, which supports us in healing the intergenerational trauma passed on to us by all of our many kinds of ancestors as well as strengthening and celebrating the intergenerational resilience and excellence that our various ancestors have gifted us with. I share and explain the specific text of Touching the Earth to our African American Land Ancestors as it appears in the longer practice of honoring all the many groups of land ancestors in the US. This is a practice readers are encouraged to adapt and continue in their own personal, ceremonial way.

When we connect with our ancestors we connect with ourselves and our descendents more deeply and authentically. We understand more clearly who we are, what strengths we have been given and what our purpose is here so we are better able to withstand the challenges of living in the midst of white supremacy and chronic racialized violence. When we touch the love of our ancestors, we grow our hearts and the seeds of compassion and wisdom in us grow stronger and more robust.

K'a te sankun koro siun a ti tièru ti kuti zumon. Ka it tuon gnin a tivla zié ti tisaou déu.

“May all ancestors join forces to wake up our spirit and put good thoughts into our minds. Then we shall see the good that awaits us and accept it.”

– Dagara Prayer shared by Malidoma Somé of Burkina Faso

“It is very important to make a connection with our ancestors and the future generations. Alienation is a kind of sickness. There are people who don’t feel they are connected with anything at all and they suffer from being cut off, from loneliness. There is no understanding. There is no love that can nourish them. Therefore, to practice restoring the connection is very important.”

– Thich Nhat Hanh

In many traditions and lineages, before beginning anything of significance, people call upon their ancestors for guidance, protection and support. Ancestors inform so many aspects of our experience. *We are* our ancestors. In the Plum Village Vietnamese Zen Buddhist tradition, we speak of three kinds of ancestors: familial, spiritual and land ancestors.

I invite you to call upon your ancestors, which may be those you are related to in your family line, as well as the ancestors of your land, your country, or your spiritual ancestors, those who lived in loving, caring and virtuous ways and were models for you or your communities of how to live beautifully. Take a moment to identify someone or some group of people you feel a connection to, who represent inclusiveness, goodness, love, protection, support, virtue, or compassion. Connect in this moment with someone from either your genetic or adoptive family lineage, your geographic heritage, or your spiritual/ethical/humanistic tradition that you feel supports you in some way, who modeled in their life some value you aspire to live by. Pause for a few moments in silence to connect with them. If you wish, you could say their name out loud or simply bring their image to mind and open yourself to feel your connection with them, inviting them to be present here with you now. Sense the flow that exists between generations, of wisdom passed on from one generation to the next.

...pause...

I want to share with you about the ancestor I often choose to invoke, my great grandmother, Jeanette Weatherford. We called her *Mudro* because one of her grandchildren mispronounced 'mother' and it stuck. She lived to be one-hundred-and-one and she was born in Tupelo, Mississippi in 1900. She was the daughter of sharecroppers and the thirteenth of fourteen children. Her grandparents were born into slavery. She raised her children mostly on her own and buried five of her six children. One was as a baby and the others died in their sixties or seventies before she did.

She told me many stories of growing up in the South, the fun she had fishing with her mother, the first time she saw an automobile and how she thought it was a scary animal, and how she and her father survived the Spanish Flu by drinking stewed grapefruit skins. She also told me about the acts of racial terror, like lynchings that she witnessed, and of her journey to the North (as an asylum seeker escaping terrorism, not for greater economic opportunity as I was taught in school) and how even there she and her family had to flee from the Ku Klux Klan's racial terror in Lansing, Michigan and then face crippling racialized poverty in Evanston, Illinois.

Still I remember in all of my time visiting her as I grew up, she had no bitterness about all the injustice that she went through. She had a self-possessed quality that radiated calm and peace, and a confidence and clear purpose which was deeply connected to family and her Christian faith. She was a joker, and gently teased all of us, and was able to laugh at herself, not taking herself so seriously as the family matriarch. She was deeply loving and expressive of her affection. She was also very mentally clear until she died. In the end, she just stopped eating and drinking; she was ready to go. This is a precious legacy, that she survived all of the racism, violence and fear, and managed to pass on love, humor, clarity and a sense of dignity to us.

Invoking ancestors in this way is an important reminder that we are not alone, that we are here because of many others. We are but a continuation of our ancestors, they are in every cell of our body. Without them, we couldn't be here. We can draw on their strengths when we are in need. We can call on them for help and ask them to take over when we are facing a challenge.

I did this quite spontaneously as an eighteen-year-old when I got into a difficult position when I was interning one summer in a rural community development project in Portugal. I assisted in the kitchen, took part in training and joined in the life of the community. An accident occurred and I felt those in leadership were treating me unfairly by asking me to take responsibility for a situation that was theirs to resolve and overwhelming for me. I remember lying on my bunk bed, far from all my networks of support in the U.S., and just calling on my great grandmother, Mudro, who was still alive at that time, asking for protection and guidance. I don't know how I knew to do this. I'd never done it before and no one specifically taught me to do it. I just knew that was where I could get strength from. And sure enough, in those next days I was able to stand up for myself in that situation and call on support from others to move through that challenging moment. Even at this moment my ancestors are helping me to write this article, I'm not writing it alone. And your ancestors are reading it with you, you are not reading it alone.

So calling on our ancestors helps us see we are more than our small, separate self, that we belong to, are supported by, and are also accountable to something larger, something bigger.

Connecting in this way to our ancestors can help us heal from the pain of self-doubt, self-sabotage, as well as from the complexes of inferiority and superiority. If we see ourselves as a stream, we know that our ancestors' suffering, unhealed trauma and ignorance flow into us from the past into the present, and we can learn to see that our failures and our self-destructive habits are not ours alone, but were transmitted to us. So we can have compassion for ourselves when we miss the mark and release feelings of inferiority. Our task is to transform these inherited weaknesses, but we are not to blame for them. In the same way, as a continuation of our ancestors, we know that our skills and talents are not 'ours' to be individually proud of. So we cultivate humility, feeling gratitude and reverence for the wisdom, resilience and joy that flow into us from past generations, and letting go of our egoic pride, and any feeling of superiority.

Our work as spiritual practitioners is to strengthen the goodness our ancestors passed onto us so that we can help it grow and deepen

in our generation, and pass it on to future generations, not letting any of the jewels be lost. And we also have the responsibility to transform the unskillfulness they passed onto us so that we don't unconsciously transmit it to future generations, hobbling them unnecessarily.

As we connect more to the suffering our ancestors passed onto us, it is important to see clearly a particular suffering we have all inherited: the legacy of white supremacy. All of us, regardless of our ethnic and racial backgrounds, have been shaped by this whether we wanted to be or not. Generations of Europeans who colonized different parts of the world from the 16–20th centuries, acted out of a foundational illusion and belief in the inherent supremacy of white-skinned bodies. This was constructed, articulated and refined over these centuries for the express purpose of economic, political, religious and cultural domination, all fueled by capitalism. This illusion of white supremacy has come to influence every part of the planet through the history of colonialism, our globalized economy and mass marketing culture.

Through connecting with our ancestors, we have an opportunity, albeit a painful one, to atone for and begin to heal our land, spiritual or familial ancestors' mistaken and misguided belief in white supremacy, the ignorance of their discrimination and the violence of their oppression, which has contaminated and sickened all of us.

Each of us can do what we can, in our own small spheres of influence to correct and heal the damage our genetic, land or spiritual ancestors caused and passed on. We can use the privilege we may have received due to our non-chosen social identities (race, class, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, nationality, English mother tongue, etc.) in the service of uplifting those with less privilege.

Let us draw upon the goodness and strength of our ancestors to support us to honor and uplift the vibrant, thriving, living communities, of those of us of the African Diaspora. We can each aspire to continue their strength, resilience, wisdom and creativity in our daily lives and to bring this legacy into the world.

One practice I invite you to do is to connect specifically with the lineage of African American ancestors, who may be genetic ancestors for some of us, land ancestors for others of us, or spiritual/ethical ances-

tors for yet others of us. In this practice, we open ourselves to touch the suffering our black ancestors have endured and we also touch the strength, resilience, wisdom and creativity of our Black ancestors. Then we aspire to continue this richness in our daily lives and act to bring their beautiful legacy more into the world.

Below is an excerpt from a longer practice of Touching the Earth¹ which includes respectful acknowledgement of all the different land ancestors of the U.S. (Indigenous, African American, Asian American, Latinx, those of Middle Eastern and Arab origin, and European American) that a group of practitioners at Deer Park Monastery created in our first mindfulness retreats for people of color, which were taught by Thich Nhat Hanh. A link to the longer practice is included below, and you can also find the full practice in the book *Together We are One* by Thich Nhat Hanh.

While this practice is particular to the U.S., even if you are not from the U.S., we all have benefited from the contributions of African Americans, so they are ancestors all of us can call on for support and inspiration. And if this practice speaks to you, you are welcome to create a version that is more suitable for the land you live in, to honor your particular land ancestors.

In the Plum Village tradition when we do the complete practice or ceremony of connecting to our land ancestors, we prostrate and lay our bodies on the earth, either in the child's pose with our four limbs and head touching the earth, or lying flat on our bellies. Feel free to put a towel or yoga mat down on the floor, and to rest your head on a pillow or use other supports if that is helpful. In the prone position, you might orient your head toward something you consider sacred, something that reminds you of your inherent worth, maybe an altar you have at home or in the direction of a place that inspires you. But it's not necessary to prostrate as you practice, you can simply sit comfortably and take a posture of receptivity and openness, perhaps with hands in your lap with palms turned up in a gesture of receiving, surrender and

1 Here is the full version of Touching the Earth to Our Land Ancestors: <https://bit.ly/3DZ3H1D>

letting go. Alternately, you can visualize yourself touching the earth in your mind's eye, seeing your body and head gently bowing down to the earth while you sit in stillness or even lay down.

You can listen to this as an audio guided practice on Insight Timer for free under Kaira Jewel Lingo's meditations². I invite you read it or listen to it and simply let the words land in you like rain falling on the earth:

I honor my ancestors of African descent, you who were enslaved and brought to this land, who poured your blood, sweat, and tears on this land, whose unrewarded labor. (If you wish you can touch the earth or remain seated, and you may wish to invite a sound of the bell here).

I am in touch with the crippling violence and inhumanity that my ancestors of African descent faced every day, the loss of your land, language, culture, family, and freedom, and how you always found ways to resist, to subvert oppression, to maintain your humanity, through soulful singing, prayer, humor, revolts, communities of escaped enslaved people, as well as through political struggle, a strong commitment to education, and economic empowerment. I aspire to preserve, nourish, and pass on your strength, patience, perseverance, love, forgiveness, humility, creativity and innovation in agriculture, inventions, history, music, dance, art, the sciences, sports, oratory, literature, religion, civil and human rights activism, and community spirit. I see Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, George Washington Carver, Garrett A. Morgan, W. E. B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, Ernest Just, Roger Arliner, Rosa Parks, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Audre Lorde, Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, John Henrik Clarke, Ivan Van Sertima, John Lewis, Marsha P. Johnson, Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, C.T. Vivian, Paul Robeson, and all others known and unknown inside of me, and in gratitude I honor you all.

Please take a few quiet breaths. And with the sound of the bell if you were prostrating you can rise.

2 <https://insighttimer.com/kairajewellingo/guided-meditations/touching-the-earth-to-our-african-american-ancestors>

Take time for a short pause here and notice what is arising in you, in your body, heart, and mind. Spend time honoring this. You may also want to journal about what you experienced.

The above version is only a suggestion of how you might connect with your ancestors. The basic formula of this practice is: 1) recognizing the gifts and strengths your ancestors transmitted to you that you want to strengthen and grow, and 2) recognizing the unskillfulness, unmetabolized trauma and suffering your ancestors passed onto you and making the commitment to transform them. Once you are familiar with this process, you are invited to create your own touching of the earth practice to your particular ancestors, using their names, their specific characteristics, geographies and histories. This will make the practice deeper and more powerful.

When we connect with our ancestors deeply we connect with ourselves and our descendants more deeply and authentically. We understand our purpose more clearly and we are better able to withstand the challenges of living in the midst of white supremacy and chronic racialized violence. When we touch the love of our ancestors, we grow our hearts and the seeds of compassion and wisdom in us grow stronger and more robust.

May this practice continue to support you in deepening your connection to all of your ancestors.