Tricycle Talks
Episode #64 with Ruth Ozeki
"Music or Madness, It's Up to You"
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Ruth Ozeki: "A book must start somewhere. One brave letter must volunteer to go first, laying itself on the line in an act of faith, from which a word takes heart and follows, drawing a sentence into its wake. From there, a paragraph amasses, and soon a page, and the book is on its way, finding a voice, calling itself into being. A book must start somewhere, and this one starts here."

James Shaheen: Hello and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. You've just heard Ruth Ozeki reading from her new novel, *The Book of Form and Emptiness*. The novel follows the story of a young boy, Benny Oh, who begins to hear voices after his father's death. In this poignant exploration of grief, Ozeki weaves together Zen Buddhism, global pop culture, environmental politics, and the writings of German philosopher Walter Benjamin—not to mention a whole cacophony of voices. On today's episode of *Tricycle Talks*, I sit down with Ruth to talk about the redemptive power of writing, the interplay between creativity and madness, and relational modes of healing.

James Shaheen: So I'm here with Ruth Ozeki, novelist, filmmaker, and Zen Buddhist priest. She also teaches at Smith College. Hi, Ruth. It's great to have you here.

Ruth Ozeki: Hi, James. It's wonderful to be here.

James Shaheen: So we're here today to talk about your new novel, *The Book of Form and Emptiness*. That comes out in late September, I think September 21, to be exact.

Ruth Ozeki: That's right.

James Shaheen: Yes, I have to say, there's so many layers to this book, I scarcely know where to begin. We could begin in so many different places. We've got Buddhism, the German philosopher Walter Benjamin, Marx, Borges, Slavoj Zizek—I think that's the Slavoj in the wheelchair, the philosopher. I thought that was pretty funny.

Ruth Ozeki: Yes, it's an homage to Zizek.

James Shaheen: Yeah, it was a pretty accurate description, I think. And there's a whole chorus of voices woven into a compelling tale about a boy and his mother. Why don't you help me out and tell me a little bit about what the book is about and how you came to write it?

Ruth Ozeki: Well, it's the story of a young boy named Benny Oh. When Benny is twelve years old, his father dies in a really tragic and stupid accident. Benny is left with his mom to grieve this. He starts to hear the voice of his father calling his name. And this is something that is not uncommon, that when a loved one passes, very often people will hear their voice.

And this, in fact, happened to me after my dad died. It was a memory that I had that was tucked away, but it happened for about a year or so after he died. I'd be doing something like washing the dishes or folding the laundry, and suddenly from behind me, somewhere, I would hear him calling my name, calling out to me. I'd whip around to see, and then, of course, he wouldn't be there because he was dead. At that moment, there'd be this upwelling of grief and loss. And this happened several times. But then eventually it tapered off and faded, and I forgot about it.

With Benny, on the other hand, it doesn't taper off and fade. In fact, he becomes even more receptive to the voices and the feeling tone of things that are in his environment. So, for

example, he starts to hear the voice of a sneaker calling to him, or a Christmas ornament or a piece of wilted lettuce. Often, he doesn't understand exactly the words that these objects are speaking, but he understands that there's something there that they want to convey. And, of course, this becomes very disturbing, especially because his mother, Annabelle, has started working from home and suddenly brings the contents of her entire workplace home with her.

She's a media monitor, so she monitors news, and suddenly their house is filled with stuff. She also develops a bit of an online shopping habit. She becomes a bit of, I wouldn't say a hoarder, exactly, but there's a lot of stuff in the house. And so as a result, it becomes a very cacophonous place, and Benny starts to really suffer. He discovers that school offers no respite. And eventually he finds refuge at a large public library, where libraries are filled with objects, and they're filled with talking objects—books.

But the books are neatly lined up on the shelf. They know their places, and they know how to speak in their library voices. They know how to whisper. So at the library, Benny starts meeting these wonderful characters who are denizens of the library. One of them is a philosopher poet named Slavoj, or the Bottleman, he's also called. Another is a young performance artist who Benny falls in love with, and librarians with magical powers because, of course, librarians all have magical powers.

But the most important relationship he makes there is a relationship with a book. It's a very special book. It's his book. The book speaks to him, as books do, and, in fact, begins to narrate his life and, in doing so, help Benny find a way through this, a way to think about the voices, a way to be with them, but also how to find his own voice in all of this.

James Shaheen: Right. Finding one's own voice is a recurring theme in the book. But one of the things I want to ask about is that he hears these voices, and the conventional understanding is that he suffers from schizophrenia.

Ruth Ozeki: That's right.

James Shaheen: So you have this psychiatrist who represents conventional medicine, who diagnoses him. And yet, I think you touched on this a little bit, schizophrenia is understood differently in different cultures. For instance, here it's considered an illness, and the voices are afflictive. Tanya Luhrmann at Stanford, the anthropologist, talks about how in Africa and in India, these voices tend to be more benign, sometimes even helpful. So in a more relationship-oriented, collectivist culture, they tend to be experienced differently. So this is an affliction that is culturally inflected.

I was wondering how you're playing with these voices, because on the one hand, we can say, sure, he has schizophrenia. On the other hand, he's sort of sane in a world that has really been turned upside down.

Ruth Ozeki: Exactly. You've really put your finger on it right there. If there's one thing that I would like to open up for discussion here is this idea that mental health, in the West, anyway, is really defined by diagnoses, and it's treated as a medical condition without any reference to the cultural context. And certainly for Benny, he's a deeply receptive child, and he is having experiences that are unshared and therefore unverifiable externally. But does that necessarily mean that he's sick? The illness model for this is something that I really question.

I think my interest in this grows from several areas, but I have friends who are voice hearers and who are involved in a very active and vibrant culture of people who hear voices and yet who reject the automatic diagnosis of schizophrenia as being the cause. History is full of cases of people who hear voices, but it's never a problem. The voices can be very helpful, and they live with the voices. So certainly the attitudes that the culture has towards hearing voices very much shape the way a person will respond to it themselves.

James Shaheen: Right. At a certain point, Benny's book speaks to him, and I think it's the book that says, "Music or madness, it's totally up to you." That sort of encapsulates that.

Ruth Ozeki: Yes.

James Shaheen: And it also drives a central question in the book: What is real? That question comes up again and again. Can you talk about that?

Ruth Ozeki: It's a question that I think we're all plagued by. The book is trying to help Benny understand what's real. If you do have the experience of hearing voices, one of the questions you ask—and certainly one of the questions I asked myself when I was hearing my father's voice—is "Was that real or was it 'just in my head?'" It didn't feel like it was in my head. It felt like it was outside my head. It felt very comforting on the one hand; it felt sad on the other hand. There was a whole affective tone that was constellated around this.

And then the question is, what is real? Yes, it was real. It was very, very real indeed. That's certainly one take that the book has. But as a fiction writer, to be honest, this is a question I ask myself all the time. I'm in the business of making up unreality. And yet, on the other hand, the stories that I make up are also very real. This question of what is real is something that, especially in a Buddhist context, am I just sort of a dabbler in samsara? It's a very pressing question for me, but I also believe, yes, of course, stories are real. What else is there other than stories? What are we other than stories?

James Shaheen: I found it very interesting that at a certain point, the psychiatrist herself has to question her diagnosis, and she comes around to, "Well, what do I know? I think they're going to be OK," Benny and his mother, Annabelle, who, by the way, I thought was a hoarder. Borderline, maybe. Borderline hoarding. But she kind of represents the culture's consumption out of a

certain despair and grief. Is that right?

Ruth Ozeki: That's right. Yeah, I would say that she's a hoarder in the sense that her house is filled with stuff. But the other thing that I'm really after in the book is to investigate the relationship that we have to the things around us. Certainly here in the West, unless you're living a minimalist lifestyle, most people's lives are just filled with things. I've always been fascinated by the Marie Kondo boom in popularity because I think what she's asking us to do is to just do something that is so automatic in Japan and that the relationship with objects is one that should be respected. So when she asks you to thank a pair of socks before you throw them away, have a feeling of gratitude towards these objects that have served you well, there are analogs to this in Japanese religious services. For example, if you have a needle or a pin and it breaks, you don't just throw it in the garbage. I mean, first of all, it's sharp, and it could hurt you if it gets mad at being thrown out. That could be a problem. And so you don't. You save it, and then once a year, you take it to the temple or to the shrine. They have a ceremonial block of tofu there on the altar, and you insert the pin or the needle gratefully into the soft block of tofu so that it can have a soft resting place. And then there's a whole ceremony that's done to honor all of the pins and needles in the neighborhood that have served people there and go off to a nice afterlife.

James Shaheen: I think maybe without that relationship or without an acknowledgement of that relationship, it all becomes junk. Even at a certain point, they're looking up at the sky, and space is becoming full of junk, satellites that fallen into disuse or weapons or remnants of ships, and her house becomes full of what might be considered junk at a certain point, because the relationship is off and it's a cacophony of voices that is oppressive. I found that very interesting.

The book's title, *The Book of Form and Emptiness*, will resonate with a Buddhist audience. Could you speak to the idea of form and emptiness and how it figures into the novel and your work more generally?

Ruth Ozeki: The phrase "form and emptiness" is one of the key teachings in the Heart Sutra, a central Mahayana Sutra. "Form is emptiness. Emptiness is form." It's referring to the notion of what Thich Nhat Hanh calls interbeing, or dependent co-rising or interdependence. I guess the way that I've always liked to think about it is the relationship between, say, a wave and the ocean. Suddenly this wave starts to pop its little head up, and it gets bigger and bigger and bigger. And it looks around and and it's like, "Whoa, look at me. I'm a wave. I'm like really something. This is pretty great. I got this great view," and the wave is just sitting there enjoying its selfhood. And then suddenly it realizes that it's becoming less and it's becoming less, and it's merging back into the ocean. And that wave is freaking out and going like, "No, help," and it just moves back into the ocean.

James Shaheen: Kind of like us, right?

Ruth Ozeki: Exactly like us. It's always such a nice way to visualize this. And of course, everything in the world is like that, too. There's this brief moment of thinking, "Oh, look at me, I'm something, I'm form," and then, boom, it's over. There's something so beautiful about this idea of things coming into being and then receding, coming into being and then falling back into this great ocean of interconnectivity. And that's really what the creative process feels like to me. There's the sort of generative impulse that allows a book or a poem or any work of art to sort of come into being temporarily and then return.

But I think in this book, the real key to Benny's story is that at first he feels like he's alone, but he finds help and he finds what is real in community, in sangha. That's what he finds at the library. The book talks about the sort of rhizomatic interconnectivity of all books, and it's certainly true in mental health circles, more and more, the alternative model of peer support and community support is proving really effective in helping people understand their own experience as a healing force.

James Shaheen: I found it interesting that you talk about community or connection with others. When Benny is looking down out of his hospital room at his mother and he feels this compassion for her, and at that moment, he finds his voice. It's a pivotal moment where he stands up and takes responsibility for himself, his family, his community. That was really beautiful. It was completely believable. He's connected.

Ruth Ozeki: That's exactly what his friends at the library teach him: the importance of connectivity with each other, but also with the natural world, like when they go to the mountain and he experiences the difference between the Made world and the Unmade world. The book teaches him something similar in the Bindery when they go to the Bindery. The Bindery is this kind of mystical place in the basement of the library where books used to be bound, but it's not being used anymore. It's being dismantled.

James Shaheen: And there, he also experiences the Great Unbinding.

Ruth Ozeki: Exactly. Which, of course, ties back to form and emptiness, this Great Unbinding. It's this sea of unbound matter, of ideas.

James Shaheen: At a certain point, Benny becomes the bodhisattva of compassion. He hears the cries of the world, and all of the sudden, it's a question of his learning to live with those voices. So often we find those voices—all of us find those voices overwhelming, the cries of the world. Can you say something about that and the quality of listening he develops?

Ruth Ozeki: I've always found the story of Kannon, the bodhisattva of compassion, very beautiful, especially Kannon with 11 heads and 1,000 arms. The way the story is told in the book, Kannon hears the suffering of the world, and the suffering is so great that her head bursts

open, her head splits and forms 11 heads; her arms explode, and she develops 1,000 arms so that she can better hear and help.

There's something so graphic about that, but there's also something so beautiful about it because who can't relate to the feeling of hearing so much suffering that your head explodes? Or wanting to help so badly that you wish you had 1,000 arms?

When Benny is identified as being the bodhisattva of compassion, we've watched him grow up over the course of the story of the book as his head is exploding, as his body is transfiguring. There's something so beautiful about that story, and I just wanted to evoke it in Benny somehow.

James Shaheen: You see him go from feeling shame and anger, even sometimes hatred, towards his mother to someone who takes care of her with compassion and equanimity. It was a very moving thing to see at the end—I guess that's a spoiler—when he's able to love her in a very open and caring way.

Ruth Ozeki: Exactly.

James Shaheen: He's hearing the cries of the world and he can actually deal with it. He grows up.

Ruth Ozeki: He does grow up, and I was so proud of him when he did.

James Shaheen: He came into being.

Ruth Ozeki: Isn't that what all characters do? They just come into being. When I write, I don't know where I'm writing to. I have a sense of the character, I have a sense of their problems, and

then I'm like the typing lady in the library.

James Shaheen: Yeah, I was wondering that.

Ruth Ozeki: Yeah, I'm just the typing lady in the library, and I sit there as my fingers move and I watch. That's my role.

James Shaheen: Coming back to this notion of a book coming into being, there's an interesting thing you do with agency there. And I believe we sent you something we wanted you to read. It's "In the Beginning," that short piece that opens the book about how a book comes into being, and it's not you writing this book, it's something coming into being. Would you mind reading that?

Ruth Ozeki: In the beginning. A book must start somewhere. One brave letter must volunteer to go first, laying itself on the line in an act of faith, from which a word takes heart and follows, drawing a sentence into its wake. From there, a paragraph amasses, and soon a page, and the book is on its way, finding a voice, calling itself into being. A book must start somewhere, and this one starts here.

James Shaheen: That's really wonderful. As soon as I read that, I was hooked. I want to say something else. Inanimate objects have voices. Benny hears them, and he hears them to the end. He's just no longer threatened by them; rather, they're supportive in the way that Tanya Luhrmann describes cultures in which these voices are supportive. But I also think of Dogen's insentient beings preaching the dharma, that everything always has something to teach us. Whether or not we're able to hear it is another matter.

Ruth Ozeki: Absolutely, that story was certainly an inspiration for the book. It's always funny

talking to people who are conversant with Buddhist literature because they can tease out the hidden Buddhist strands in these stories that I'm writing. In the same way that in *A Tale for the Time Being*, I was playing with Dogen's fascicle, "Uji," kind of thinking of the book as almost a ridiculously long commentary on uji, this book was certainly playing with this idea of do insentient beings speak the dharma. And my feeling always has been of course they do. Of course they speak the dharma. And so I wanted to take that question and then just keep turning it and turning it and turning it and see where it would lead.

James Shaheen: Yeah. You also play with the notion of authorship. You read "In the Beginning"—it's clear that something comes into being. We think of sutras as spoken by Buddhas and also speaking Buddhas into being. So there's that too, like the Heart Sutra as the mother of all Buddhas. Is Benny writing the book? Is the book creating Benny, and he's a kind of Buddha in a certain way?

Ruth Ozeki: That's so beautiful. And I think it's true. That was something else I was thinking about as I was writing it. It's sort of which came first, the book or the boy? Who's creating whom? I tried to keep that question alive and ambiguous, unanswered throughout the book because it's unclear. I mean, I think they're cocreating each other. It's only a Buddha and a Buddha—you can't be a Buddha on your own. You can't be a character without a book. You can't be a book without characters. So it's that same interdependency. It's pointing back towards that.

James Shaheen: So Ruth, you write these characters, but would you say that they also write you?

Ruth Ozeki: Of course they do, in the same way that we write each other, don't we? I meet you,

we talk, you write me, I write you. The same holds true for characters. One of the things I kept thinking about is the way that real healing comes about through relationship and through the way that we talk to each other and the way that we listen to each other. It's this performance of interconnectivity, and I mean that performance not in an acting kind of way, but the enactment of two people coming face to face and talking and listening that provides the redemption and the healing.

James Shaheen: I don't know if you have this in front of you. I prefer, actually, that you read it, but the book has a voice like everything has a voice, and books have a purpose, and books also speak collectively. There's this mourning of the passage of books as central: the Bindery closes, there's electronic media, and of course, we have a love of books.

Ruth Ozeki: I'd love to read that. "Every person is trapped in their own particular bubble of delusion, and it's every person's task in life to break free. We can make the past into the present, take you back in time and help you remember. We can show you things, shift your realities and widen your world, but the work of waking up is up to you."

James Shaheen: That's so wonderful. Could you talk a little bit about that? It speaks so clearly to our situation, doesn't it?

Ruth Ozeki: It certainly does. The book is just trying to explain to Benny here the limitations of books, the limitations of that particular kind of experience, the experience of reading, the experience of learning about things. But the book is also pointing to this bubble of delusion that we are all trapped in. The philosopher Timothy Morton talks about hyperobjects, for example, like capitalism being a hyperobject. It's a bubble of delusion that we perceive as being real. This is reality. But it's a bubble of delusion, and it's just that it's so big that we can't see it for what it

is, that there's a way of breaking the bubble and waking up to some other reality.

And so I think that that's certainly something that I was thinking about as I was writing the book, particularly in terms of Annabelle and her relationship to the world. She's a media monitor, so she's just constantly listening to television, to radio, reading the newspapers, and she's just trapped in this bubble of news sound. Forests are burning and presidential elections are looming. And she, too, in the way that we all are, is trapped within this bubble of delusion, and we perceive that to be the only reality that's available to us. How do we even see the bubble as being a bubble? And then how do we break out of it?

James Shaheen: Two things. One thing I thought when she was immersed in her media world, looking at everything and keeping track, I thought of that feeling that you can get from watching too much news, and it becomes like so much more junk. The information becomes the junk that clutters our lives. The other thing I thought about in that quote that you read on how it's up to us to wake up, that's the part we have to do—I think of a teacher can only tell you so much or a book can only tell you so much of the experience. I thought of the finger pointing to the moon, and the experience has to be embodied, something that you go through. And I thought that the character Benny actually goes through it. He wakes up in this particular moment.

Ruth Ozeki: You just put your finger on it. It's work to wake up. It's why we practice. Yes, we are all Buddhas. Yes, we all have Buddha nature. And yet in order to realize that, we have to do the work, and I think this is obviously true for anything, but it's certainly true for any kind of spiritual awakening, and I also think it's true for any kind of social justice awakening. It takes teachers, it takes community, but the individual has to make that effort as well.

James Shaheen: I want to go back to your writing for a moment. There's a certain quote from Slavoj. He says, "'Let me tell you something about poetry, young schoolboy. Poetry is a problem

of form and emptiness. Ze moment I put one word onto an empty page, I hef created a problem for myself. Ze poem that emerges is form, trying to find a solution to my problem.' He sighed. 'In ze end, of course, there are no solutions. Only more problems, but this is a good thing. Without problems, there would be no poems.'" I thought that was a wonderful description of the writing process, perhaps for you.

Ruth Ozeki: It certainly is. Yeah, it's how I justify all of my own suffering. It's how I explain it to myself. It's like, oh, OK, I'm suffering. Great, I'm a writer; nothing is wasted. Without suffering, there would not be literature, right? What is literature except a chronicle of our suffering?

James Shaheen: And yet there's redemption in the book. There really is.

Ruth Ozeki: I think the vision of some kind of redemption is important. And I think that the reason I write is to find my way towards that. For me, the writing itself is the redemption, the process of writing. So, yes, we have suffering. Yes, we have questions. Yes, we have confusion, we have delusion. But the process of writing, that's the work that I do in order to try to find a way of being with the experiences of my life.

What's really wonderful about writing fiction in particular is the way that you get a chance to rewrite, that writing is rewriting. The process of writing a novel is this process of taking the questions of life that perplex me or confuse me and then testing them. It's like a thought experiment: I write and then rewrite and rewrite until some kind of resolution emerges.

That's why we read, too. We think of the writer as being the person who writes the book and puts it out into the world and the book as an object. It's a thing, and in that sense, it's solid and unchanging. But it's not. The book is a mutable object. I can write a book and you can read it, James, and in doing that, we've engaged in a process of cocreation. The book that you read is

not the book that I wrote. Partially, it's the book that I wrote, but it's also the book that you're reading.

You're bringing your entire lived experience to it as well. And that holds true for every reader in the world who reads this book, so if the book sells half a million copies, then that's half a million different books that are out there in the world. They propagate. It's a kind of multiverse, to go back to the metaphor of *A Tale for the Time Being*. I can write something, but I have no idea and no control really over how the book is read and what it becomes in the hands of another reader. And that's exciting to me.

James Shaheen: What I love is when the debate among the books occured where they were arguing about whether a book must uplift one or make one happy. And I was saying, well, I certainly hope this one makes me happy because there was a lot of suffering in it. So I found it very redemptive. And I thought, I think the book is supposed to uplift me a little bit. That was my reading.

Ruth Ozeki: That's wonderful. Well, I think that it's kind of selfish on my part because I am writing to try to understand and to try to find some redemption myself, and hopefully then that experience will be reflected in the book.

James Shaheen: Okay, back to your writing for a moment. Benny hears voices and his first attempt at writing. He listens to a table leg that speaks to him. It has its own voice, its own memories. And he writes that down. Can you talk about your own writing in terms of listening?

Ruth Ozeki: Well, I've always said that novels come to me as voices, and I think that's generally true. Usually, it's the voice of a character. I remember with *A Tale for the Time Being*, it was very clear. The first words I wrote down were the main character's words. She just showed

up one day and introduced herself, and she said, "Hi, my name is Nao, and I'm a time being. Do you know what a time being is? Well, if you give me a moment, I'll tell you." And then she proceeds to tell me for the next 400 pages or something. That's always kind of a strange experience when a character does that.

You asked earlier where this book came from. To some extent, it comes from that experience of hearing voices. As a novelist, I remember I was at a library, actually, and I was talking about this. I was talking about how novels come to me as voices. And afterwards, in the Q&A, a man raised his hand and he asked me, "When you talk about hearing voices, are you really hearing them with your ear as if they are outside you in the room? Are they real in that sense, or are you hearing them more with your mind?"

I explained to him the difference that, for example, when I heard my dad's voice calling to me, I very much heard it with my ear as though it was on the outside of me. But when I hear Nao's voice talking to me, it's more like a feeling in my mind. And then the man went on to tell me about his son, who was a voice hearer and heard voices as though with his ear that were outside of his head.

And he talked about what a disturbing experience that was for his son. That really got me thinking about this relationship between or almost a spectrum of voice hearing. When do we call it creativity? And when do we call it madness? When do we call it creative inspiration? When do we diagnose it as schizophrenia? It's important to think about this because right now we have such a dualistic notion of what illness is, and particularly psychiatric illnesses have fallen within a medicalized diagnostic model.

But I think that it's worth considering a different model, a spectrum model. Novelists, certainly—well, I won't speak for all novelists, but I would certainly put myself on that spectrum. I start writing a novel like this, for example, eight years ago, and I fall completely into a fictional world and become pretty dysfunctional for everything else.

James Shaheen: It's like being on retreat.

Ruth Ozeki: Yeah, exactly. It becomes very, very difficult for me to do anything in the "real world." I fall completely into this imaginary world. It's completely real to me. When I'm in the throes of this, when I'm in the thick of it, I always find myself feeling very grateful that I live in a society that not only condones but celebrates this kind of artistic production. Because if it didn't, if our society condemned the making up of stories as something that was sick or evil or bad, then I would certainly, people like me, would probably be institutionalized. We would be diagnosed and institutionalized and condemned.

James Shaheen: In other words, if we pathologized it the way we pathologize hearing voices.

Ruth Ozeki: Or criminalized it. Pathologized it or criminalized it.

James Shaheen: That could happen.

Ruth Ozeki: Yeah.

James Shaheen: So let's talk about the redemptive quality of your writing then. We think of art as a means of survival. The characters themselves get through their lives making art—performance art on a pediatric psych ward, snow globes of nuclear fallout that the Aleph creates, or, going back to your last novel, large-scale environmental installations. So how do you see the role of the artist in the face of, say, climate catastrophe, injustice—well, samsara, I guess, to put it simply?

Ruth Ozeki: I've always liked Kurt Vonnegut's diagnosis or analysis, which is that artists and

writers are sensitive. They're so sensitive, in fact, that when something is off, they're like the canary in the coal mine, and they start squawking and flapping and screaming, and when something's off in the world, like, for example, climate disaster, climate crisis, that artists and writers, it's our job to start squawking and flapping and Keeling over. I think he said that's our only useful function, in fact, is being kind of an indicator species for imbalances in the world. That seems good. I like that. I like that a lot. I can take on that role.

James Shaheen: Talking about a specific species, let's talk about crows for a moment. Crows have quite a role in this book. They're messengers, protectors, even bodhisattvas. I'm curious—why crows?

Ruth Ozeki: Oh, gosh. I just love crows. They're so smart, and they're so interesting and interested and curious, and they're such troublemakers. And that really appeals to me. I lived in Japan for years, and crows are just a thing. They're everywhere. If you read Haruki Murakami, cats and crows are in all of his books, and that's because cats and crows are just everywhere in urban Japan. I guess when I put crows into the book, it's just because I've always been fascinated by them. And I love the way that they interact with human culture, the way they bring gifts if they feel grateful, the way they will band together and punish people if they feel that they've been wronged, the way they mourn for their dead. They're just such amazing animals.

James Shaheen: Well, they're said to be so intelligent.

Ruth Ozeki: They're very, very intelligent animals. Very intelligent. Crows and ravens have been such potent symbols throughout literary history. Anyway, I love them.

James Shaheen: I'm going to go from your own writing to teaching writing because you teach

writing at Smith College. In one of our latest episodes, Andy Rotman, a colleague of yours at Smith College, talked to us about his book on hungry ghosts, and he insisted that we ask about your approach to teaching writing. So what happens in your creative writing seminars?

Ruth Ozeki: That's so funny. Andy, outing me. I guess because I'm a Zen practitioner and have been for so long, I've just discovered that for me, having a formal contemplative practice, a meditation practice, has just been really helpful with my writing. And so I warn my students before they apply for the course that there will be a formal meditation contemplative practice built into the class. And so that's what we do. In fact, the first thing I teach them is how to sit.

We start every class with meditation. I teach a very simple body-breath meditation but then also encourage them to explore the senses as well and encourage them to think about the mind as a sense organ and thoughts as being equivalent to smells and tastes. And so it's just a way of bringing them back into their bodies, because one of the things that I think is such a danger now with all of the devices and all of the ways that we have of sucking ourselves out of our bodies into cyberspace, into this kind of disembodied state, it's hard to write from that disembodied place.

I think that the best writing is embodied writing. When you read writing that's clichéd, for example, that's lazy writing. That's disembodied writing. It's writing where the writer has not really taken the time to drop back into the body and feel the feeling that the character is experiencing, and then to express that on the page. And I realized that as I'm saying this, a lot of what I'm talking about, too, is the practice of dropping back into the body, but also being patient, learning the patience that meditation will teach you.

Writers are impatient. I'm impatient. Most writers I know don't want to write. They want to have written. This is something that we all struggle with. I think anybody who's creative is going to be impatient, but I don't think that's necessarily a bad thing. I think we just need to learn how to sit with that. We need to learn how to hold that patience, because somewhere in that

tension between patients and impatience, there's a kind of generative impulse that comes from that tension. That tension itself is generative.

And so learning to sit quietly with your mind and become intimate with your mind, that's what you learn. That's what it teaches you. And it's a very, very helpful thing for not just writers, obviously, but for all human beings. So I figure even if the students forget everything else I've taught them, maybe they'll remember that. Maybe they'll remember the experience of sitting quietly and being intimate with their mind.

James Shaheen: I was going to ask you if there's a go-to exercise that you give your students, but I think you've just given me a lot of that. That's wonderful. So, Ruth, thank you so much for joining us. It was such a pleasure to have you on. When I make it up to Northampton, I'll certainly let you know, and I hope you'll be back. And for our listeners, you can pre-order a copy of *The Book of Form and Emptiness*, which hits the shelves on September 21. So thank you, Ruth.

Ruth Ozeki: Great. Thank you so much, James.

James Shaheen: You've been listening to Ruth Ozeki here on *Tricycle Talks*. We'd love to hear your thoughts about our podcast. Write us at feedback@tricycle.org to let us know what you think. *Tricycle Talks* is produced by As It Should Be, Sarah Fleming, and Julia Hirsch. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!