

Tricycle Talks

Episode #75 with Anne Klein

“Revisiting Ritual with Anne Klein”

July 13, 2022



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James Shaheen: Hello, and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I’m James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Ritual is a foundational component of many Buddhist traditions, yet Western Buddhists are often reluctant to engage in ritual practice. According to Buddhist teacher and professor Anne Klein, this resistance can actually be generative. In fact, Klein believes that working with our resistance to ritual can open us to spaces of wonder, liberation, and belonging. In today’s episode of *Tricycle Talks*, I sit down with Anne to discuss why so many of us are resistant to ritual, the types of freedom that ritual makes possible, and how ritual practices can support us in the face of loneliness and alienation.

James Shaheen: So I’m here with Buddhist teacher and professor Anne Klein. Hi Anne, it’s great to be with you.

Anne Klein: Hi James, likewise.

James Shaheen: So a few years back, you wrote a piece for us called “Revisiting Ritual,” and in it, among other things you wrote about our resistance to ritual. To start, can you tell us a little bit about what ritual is? How would you define it?

Anne Klein: That’s an interesting question. I would say first in a very general way that ritual is a template for an activity where you know in advance to some degree that there is a beginning, a middle, and an end, and it usually has a certain purpose, maybe supremely intentional, maybe less so. So in general, I would say it is an opportunity to feel that you are participating in a kind of complete world as you do what is called a ritual. And, of course, what I was thinking of specifically in that piece were Tibetan rituals called sadhanas, where you have a complete world,



and you have a recitation that you do. You will say the same words, the same melody each time, although nothing's ever the same, which is part of the discovery, actually. But there is a repetitive quality, and there's an intention.

James Shaheen: Could you say something about how nothing is exactly the same? What happens? Because often we do the same thing over and over and over again, and we imagine it is the same. How is it that we notice that it's not?

Anne Klein: Great point. The opportunity for repetition that ritual offers, I think, is directly intended to counter what you describe. We do things repetitively, and we tend to feel—I know I tend to feel—this is an opportunity to kind of go slack. I don't have to pay too much attention. I don't have to worry. “I can relax” would be a positive way of saying that. But there's a kind of dullness that is often present, this sameness of ideation, same old, same old, Groundhog Day syndrome. With intentionally repeating things, let's say a ritual practice, a morning practice—it might be watching your breath, it might not involve recitation—you can't help but notice that it's different from one day to the next. And you might therefore wonder what is making a difference. I'm sitting in the same place, I'm doing the same thing, so to speak, but something in me is different, something in me that actually is an unraveling from all the different threads of my life: I had a quarrel with somebody, or somebody gave me a compliment, my energy is different, I'm feeling good, I can settle it more easily. So perhaps what allows us to notice this difference is that this is a conscious intention to repeat. It's a little different in that way. You know, I open the door of my house every day to go out. I don't really notice, particularly, that some days the doorknob is warmer than others or I feel fresher. I don't. But something that I'm doing with some intentionality, part of which is that it's repeated—I mean, that's just one of the aspects of ritual life. You repeat things. And because the whole purpose of the practice is to bring forth more awareness of various kinds, it seems to come naturally.

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James Shaheen: Yeah, that’s interesting. Once I decided to start opening the door with my right hand instead of the left because I couldn’t remember what it was like to open the door. So I started using my other hand, but then I likewise became used to it and went to sleep in a similar way. So the trick is really with ritual to do it with intention. Is that fair to say?

Anne Klein: I think that’s fair to say. And I think that perhaps most people who do ritual are curious about it, curious about how it will impact them, and that’s kind of part of the whole enterprise. Maybe you have friends who are doing the same practice, and sometimes you talk about it and realize, “Wow, I had a terrible meditation today. I don’t know why. I thought it would be great,” or the other way around.

James Shaheen: Yeah, it’s funny because people talk about a good meditation or a bad meditation instead of thinking, “What was different today?” One is no better than the other.

Anne Klein: The other thing, if I may just follow up a little bit more on what you just said, is people do say good meditation, bad meditation, and the sages say it doesn’t matter. What I feel is a kind of middle way as a modern person is we’re curious about ourselves in very particular ways, so to ask, “Well, what exactly happened? What was it?” In other words, the label “good” or “bad” is itself a kind of dulling, and when somebody says, “Oh, my meditation was really good,” oh, what occurred? If I feel that, I try to remember what occurred exactly. Then something will open up that will be important. Good or bad doesn’t really take us anywhere, as you already know.

James Shaheen: Right. So can you give me an example of a ritual that has been particularly significant for you?



Anne Klein: There's a Green Tara practice that we do. There's a Yeshe Tsogyal practice that I'm eventually going to be writing about. So these are both opportunities to meet with an iconic being from the Tibetan tradition, Green Tara and Yeshe Tsogyal. What I feel is important and interesting about these kinds of practices is the sort of liminal space of who is Tara? Where did she come from? This would be true, really, of any of these kinds of practices. Somebody from outside—that is one way of looking at it and one way of teaching, as I'm sure you know—the deity appears from space in front of you. She's coming from somewhere, from her heaven, her pure land. But then of course, the whole purpose is to find that connection and finally actually recognize that being, or maybe it's easier to say the qualities of that being in your own being. And so it's a constant kind of negotiation, really, and I think conversation. It's a dialogue. Whose voice is it? Is it Tara's voice? Is it my voice singing the practice? And that's the kind of endlessly fascinating ball of yarn to unpack because it does begin to get to the actual purpose of the ritual, which is to unwind ordinary ways of thinking about oneself.

James Shaheen: So I wanted to ask a little bit about resistance. Why do you think we can be so averse to ritual? When you say that Tara appears and where does she appear from, does she appear from a pure land and so forth, I can just hear people responding, “Oh, that's superstition,” or “Ritual causes me to sacrifice my agency” and so forth. Why do you think we're so averse to ritual, so many of us who nonetheless attempt to participate and perform it?

Anne Klein: You know, I think part of the very reasons that we are averse to it are part of the same reasons that attract us to it. So I think the aversion comes, as you suggested. We're moderns, we're independent, we do what we want to do, we're creative, we're not going to necessarily believe that there are beings like Tara or Yeshe Tsogyal. OK, maybe we don't. And nobody ever asks you, “Do you believe in Tara?” I've never been asked, “Do you believe in Yeshe Tsogyal?” I have been asked, “Do you think you can wake up in this lifetime?” That's really the question.



James Shaheen: There’s a certain cognitive dissonance. You sit here, here I am, this modern Western person engaging in a practice that is foreign to me, say.

Anne Klein: Foreign to me, and even more foreign to people I hang out with, like my colleagues at Rice, who are very sympathetic and very actually far out in many ways in their thinking. You know, there’s a voice inside the head that’s like, really? How can you feel passion about something that is introduced in my life in young adulthood, but still adulthood? And, maybe it’s not right to claim another culture so intimately as something that is part of one’s own world. There are those kinds of issues that are not insignificant, and anyway, just my whole way of being in the world is not that of a traditional Tibetan for whom these practices were originally given. I feel I have to carve my own path in the world in ways that people in traditional cultures, which includes Tibet until fairly recently, didn’t have to do. The challenge of life is in some ways different. Unless we get down to the core basics of the challenge of life being to minimize suffering, I think that’s universal. But the routes that we take to that, they look very different, including listening to a podcast, for example. So I think the resistance comes partly from a kind of cultural dissonance, partly because as it’s intended to be, it’s a break in the way I usually do things. I do give up my agenda for the day in a certain sense. I’m not working on my book, I’m not creating notes for my classes, I’m not going to meetings, I’m just doing this. And I think that’s quite hard, actually. I know it still pulls on me, after all these decades, and I’m committed to doing it. For people who are relatively new or are quite seasoned practitioners, I think the pull of the world to do what we’re supposed to do, and we all have responsibilities of the kind that people who were traditionally doing these practices didn’t have, not to mention devices that they didn’t have that I think pull at us. So I think in some ways, resistance is quite a natural response to our actual situation. There’s nothing wrong with it.

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James Shaheen: Right, to quote you, ritual performance can seem “in tension with modern modes of self-expression and identity.” So on some level, it’s threatening to our sense of self somehow. How and why?

Anne Klein: Well, I think it’s threatening on two levels. I think one, the level that we’ve just been talking about, that it is a certain kind of undermining, at least for certain periods on a daily basis, of the agenda of being a modern 21st-century person with a profession, with a family, with obligations, with talents to display and hone. I think these pressures are very real for us. It would be foolish to deny that. That’s why I feel that resistance is not a bad thing. It’s speaking some kind of truth from us. And then there’s also the level, of course, in which the intention of practice in general, as Buddhist practitioners know, is to unpack and then undo the way we ordinarily manage ourselves or see ourselves or live our me-ness in this life. That’s the purpose: to undo that. So no wonder we feel threatened. I mean, I think even without the cultural contrasts or contradictions, one is meant to recognize that the same old, same old habits are indeed coming under scrutiny. And that’s going to feel threatening to the habitual self. There’s no way around that. And that’s widely recognized in the tradition.

James Shaheen: You know, you could take something like meditation. I know a lot of people who meditate, but they say they don’t like ritual. But I think that meditation itself is a ritual. One of the things that I find interesting is that there’s a certain pride that takes a hit. When you engage, you suspend belief, you participate. Once you enter that sacred space, you don’t want to be caught believing in something, it seems too counter-rational: “Oh, I’m not that person. I’m more intelligent than that.” Do you want to say something about that? Because I certainly felt that in the beginning.

Anne Klein: What do you mean, in the beginning?



James Shaheen: When I first came to Buddhist practice, having left Catholic practice for years, to engage again, I thought, “Well, I’m not one of these believers,” yeah, so it was an interesting kind of, OK, I’m going to suspend all belief and just simply do this without knowing what’s going to happen. That was the only way I could come to it.

Anne Klein: That’s the only way indeed. That’s perfect. That willingness and that curiosity. In one way, it is a kind of surrendering of the baggage of being me, which seems so important, honestly, for all of us. And, there’s a relief. Perhaps the resentment toward ritual is because it feels like it’s a kind of stifling of one’s exuberance and creativity and in-the-momentness, which are things that we value and which our culture also crushes in certain ways. You know, you have to behave a certain way according to your role. Who wants to do that? So, I feel like there’s a natural creativity that everyone has, and it is actually invited into the ritual. Now, traditional instructions on ritual don’t say to bring forth the creativity exactly. But they do say to relax: relax thought as possible, relax your whole body, let your attention be with your breath. What happens? On the way to calming down and actually being able to stay with your breath, incredible creativity arises. We call it distraction. Or it may be very fruitful. I don’t think I’m alone in keeping a notepad by my meditation cushion, because you get all kinds of ideas. Something is let loose. Something is actually set free. Now, of course, it’s not the purpose of the meditation, traditionally, to capture that, but it does suggest that it’s to use that energy, which is also an energy of creativity. It’s also creative to arrange your attention in a different way than we do habitually. Imagine just resting on your breath. That sounds insane to a lot of people, maybe impossible, maybe attractive. People usually like it. They even have a few moments of respite, just tremendous gratitude.

James Shaheen: You talked about the relief of surrender. When I realized it was surrender, not submission, there was a real difference there. How do you work with your own resistance? You wrote about some in your article, and I was just wondering if you could talk a little bit about it.



You talked about the water and the boulders and so forth and the interplay between the tension of resistance and surrender. Could you say something about that? I think it was the middle way between acknowledging resistance to ritual practice and recognizing the rewards the ritual brings?

Anne Klein: Yes. And that recognizing the resistance itself, in a nuanced way, is actually very helpful. And I still think it's a middle way. So what to do? I think the first thing is not to get caught. This goes back to what we said earlier: “Oh, this is bad. There I am, distracted again.” That seems to be mostly where people go, self-scolding, as if that is some kind of wise acknowledgment of what has occurred. So I mean, I still do that. And then I remember the advice I have for myself and everyone is: What exactly is occurring? I say distraction. But what exactly do I mean? And usually, most often it will be some kind of kinesthetic activity that I in a way build up by calling it distraction. It's just some kind of restlessness in the body. So I can see it. And just giving it attention is often enough for it to subside. There are also sometimes images in the mind, or ideas. The cognitive train gets going, creative ideas just rolling through with trombones and the whole thing.

James Shaheen: I like the trombones, yes. Those happened too. Trumpets, too.

Anne Klein: Trumpets. And then, OK, there's a moment. I've been working on something and trying to figure something out, well, bang, suddenly, I get it. I'm not saying it's a great thing to do, but I do sometimes just write a note because then I can get rid of it, or I think I can, because I tend not to remember things that come up very, very quickly like that. I think I'll remember and then I don't. So the other choice is well, OK, that's great. Maybe I'll remember this later. But I really want to focus now and see where I can get to in the path that I've chosen for this meditation session. But then still the curiosity, so what exactly is it? Well, there's this image, okay, great. It's not going to last forever. One can let go of a thought or an emotion. That's a



huge, huge, huge lesson, I think. Thought seems so demanding. Our feelings. It's like we feel they're our bosses, they own us. I mean, talk about wanting independence. That's real independence: I'm not going to listen to that. I'm going to listen to something else that's coming forward through my whole system. It's not just some particular thought.

James Shaheen: So independence can emerge in the performance of ritual then.

Anne Klein: A particular kind of very profound independence, which isn't the Wildcat teenager wanting to get away from parents, which probably lives still in all of us. It's the independence from the demands that arise from our own psyche, which are pretty insistent, and they're not always sensible or helpful. And so there's a different kind of autonomy in presence. I think that's what people really see and sense, and that grows and it's very attractive.

James Shaheen: You write that ritual engages the whole person, encompassing all our senses and giving us a chance to “hone skills of wonder-filled inquiry.” Can you share what you mean by wonder-filled inquiry? How can wonder help us come alive?

Anne Klein: Oh, wonder is a huge, huge help. Instead of saying “bad meditation,” to wonder: What just occurred? What did I actually experience? Taking away judgment is really important. We think judgment is so smart. “Oh, this was bad because I did this or that.” So the wonder-filled is, “Oh, what occurred? Oh, there was a sensation. Oh, there was this memory. Oh, there was this connection or this sudden dropping into my belly.” That sense of wonder, which is really a principle in Dzogchen of delightful and delighting in wonder. And it really shows the wonderfulness of wonder. Maybe moderns would say freshness. You know, it's not exactly Alice in Wonderland kind of wonder, but maybe a little bit. You know, this life is quite a miracle.

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James Shaheen: Does that come from curiosity? Like what just happened? How is this different?

Anne Klein: Yes, I think it is curiosity. I think the word wonder has a little wider horizon emotionally on it than curiosity.

James Shaheen: But I wonder if it arises from curiosity. I think curiosity would put me in a state of mind where I can wonder what is actually going on. But on the other hand, wonder sometimes just comes spontaneously.

Anne Klein: Exactly. I think you're right, that there's a subtle spectrum here where you could be curious, and it could be a kind of intellectual surface, sort of like news people talking. They don't really care. They just have to have something to write down. So it can be like that. I think it's a combination of a kind of tenderness with respect to one's own experience. Like, oh, this is tender, it's delicate. Maybe the way you would wonder what a baby is feeling when they smile, because you just don't know, but there's something so sweet and alive there. You want to. It's not like you have to take notes to make a report. It's just this sense of combination of maybe tenderness, aliveness, intimacy, a sense of actually being intimate with one's own experience, which is not a habit most of us have. And that's why it seems important to cultivate that as a habit. Even mindfulness might not mean you're intimate with your experience. It might mean you're able not to get snagged by it. But what I believe the practice overall is intending is neither being snagged nor feeling at a distance.

James Shaheen: You know, it's interesting because you just talked about this kind of dry curiosity. If I'm acting as a reporter, I might think, “Oh, what are the facts,” which brings me to something else that you write about, that we live too much in our heads, which is very much related to that. You see that as impoverishing. So how can ritual practices help us move past



getting caught up in our own stories and thoughts? And what resources can rituals offer in better embracing the whole of our experience rather than this sort of heady, trapped feeling that we so often as moderns experience?

Anne Klein: Well, the ritual gives every part of you something to do, as it were: your body is a certain way. In any case, your energy has something to do. If you're just sitting silently, that means your energy gets invited to settle. So that's something. It's an experience. Your mind is intent on whatever the focus of the practice is. You're being fed in body, speech, and mind, I think in any practice, and certainly very obviously, in the kinds of Tibetan practices that I'm speaking of. You're engaged in a different way than you were before. So just posture is bringing attention to body. It seems so important. I always start with that. Tradition starts with that. You take your seat, and you feel your seat. And that is a through line to the present moment right there. You don't have to do anything complicated. You don't have to finish your thought. Just feel your cushion, feel your seat holding you. Any sensation is in the present, is in this moment, and it's not in your head. It's an actual felt sense experience. That's hugely significant. And it's very important to me personally. I was a practitioner within the Theravada and Tibetan traditions for 17 years before I discovered that I had a body. Even though I was doing the sweeping meditation with Goenka, there was just some way in which I felt what was important was my understanding and nothing else. And that really was a big flaw and a big obstacle. I mean, I thought it meant that I was smart, but it was actually a tremendous obstacle. So attending to the body in whatever way, whether in terms of posture or sweeping or turning into light, as one does in all kinds of different ways in Tibetan traditions, is a great antidote for being in your head.

James Shaheen: You remind me of something that Joseph Goldstein said. He said that reading the Satipatthana Sutta, it finally occurred to him that there's a line that's something to the effect of "be mindful that there is a body." So now he begins the meditations with "There is a body," which allows you to be aware of this whole body. So that embodiment is not something that I



came to quickly. It was a very long time before I thought, “Oh, that’s the primary experience, in fact.”

Anne Klein: It’s hard to get out of our heads. No blame, you know. We’re trained. I use that same line in the Satipatthana Sutta, the monk—always a monk—takes his seat or something like that. That is the first step. That is the first step. And it seems so uninteresting to the head. But then you turn your mind there, oh, my God, it’s fantastic. I’m actually being supported. That’s a relaxation of a kind of false autonomy. You know, instead of I have to hold my head, I have to hold myself in a certain way, I could just allow support, and that allows a completely different set of factors to arise.

James Shaheen: You also talk about in ritual, in the performance of ritual, regardless of what that is, whether it’s meditation practice or Tara practice, that the process can surface patterns that until now were invisible, and those patterns do come up, and sometimes it’s even painful to see them. But how do we work with those patterns?

Anne Klein: Seeing a pattern is a big deal, just seeing it, because it is so much the water in which we swim. We don’t notice it. It’s amazing to notice something that you realize, oh, I have a little bit of fear around this, just a little bit, but it impacts me, or I’ve always had this association, I didn’t even know it, I associate this such and such. It is really significant. A lot of times just attending will loosen it up. And if it’s really a big issue, if there’s trauma involved, if there’s severe emotions around it, it’s probably a good idea to talk to someone, whether a teacher or a friend. Therapy in the West is a good system for dealing with a lot of our ills in ways that the dharma won’t necessarily address in the most direct fashion. Some people feel otherwise that that shouldn’t be necessary, because the dharma will unravel everything, but in my experience, personally and among friends and students, I don’t think that’s always the case. So first noticing, letting be, seeing what occurs, and maybe a good idea to talk about it.



James Shaheen: As you were talking, it just occurred to me that we can think, “Wow, this has been going on for such a long time, and I didn’t see it,” we can be judgmental, we can despair. But we can also think, “Wow,” and that wonder can also happen. That’s so liberating. It’s like, oh, just in the seeing, there’s a certain excitement and wonder. It could go either way.

Anne Klein: Totally, totally. And sometimes it has to go the first way. Oh, yeah, there I go again, and what happened?

James Shaheen: Right. So your training is in Tibetan Buddhism, and you write that Tibetan ritual practices are processes of dissolving and evolving. So what do you mean by this? And how does this correspond to Tibetan understandings of enlightenment?

Anne Klein: Well, dissolving and evolving is kind of shorthand for the way the practice itself goes. In a tantric practice, there is manifestation of a light: one’s body becomes light, light goes out throughout the universe, and then it dissolves back into where it came from, which is naked reality, deepest mind, emptiness, Buddha nature, dharma dhatu. There are many wonderful words for it. But in any case, it dissolves. Or in a practice where there isn’t that kind of evolving and dissolving, the body itself seems so solid. And looking closely as practitioners of Theravada and training with it, it can dissolve to your own experience. Looking closely at anything, in the end, will dissolve, because nothing will bear the kind of scrutiny that assumes there’s actually something to find there. And throughout Buddhist practice, we find this. So there’s the evolving of our “I’m going to get somewhere, I’m going to get to enlightenment,” for example, and then there’s not exactly any there there. And that’s the big discovery. That’s kind of amazing. You know, we were just doing a resounding part of the 18,000-verse Perfection of Wisdom Sutra that 84,000 put out yesterday, and again and again and again, the bodhisattva practicing the perfection of wisdom is not practicing the perfection of wisdom. So there you have it right there.



Bodhisattva is practicing the perfection of wisdom. He's evolved to be a great bodhisattva practicing the perfection of wisdom. And then what? No such thing exactly. So I mean, it's another way also of talking about the famous two poles of error in the Buddhist tradition, permanence and nihilation, and neither one is true, and not a mix of them is true, either. There's some famous middle way, and that's mysterious because what the mind knows how to do is to grab onto things. There are actually physiological reasons for this. Larry Barsalou wrote a great article called “The Vice of Nouning,” which is about how even as children what we first learned are nouns: this is a flower, this is a cat, this is truth. What's that? There's something about the way our minds are constructed, it's not that we're bad people, that the rigors of something that has structure and really seems to be there, we gravitate toward that. And we want more of it. And maybe we think that awakening is going to be more of that. But it's not. So there's an unwinding and unraveling, and I think there's no help for it. But to go into the evolving full on, full-on error, full catastrophe living, a famous phrase, just see what that's like. You can't deny what you haven't seen in a meaningful way. People say, oh, there's no self, yes, but if you don't know what that means in your own experience, it's just something in your head. And that's very hard. It's actually very hard. It's harder than following the logic, which can be challenging, to actually reckon in your own experience: Who is this? What is the phenomenology, the experienced, the lived sense, the felt sense, the phenomenology of feeling real and feeling “I have to have that” and “I'm going to get that”? Just without judgment, what is occurring? Is it really something that you could tie up in a bag and say, hey, here is this. And we're always told even Samantabhadra can't point to anything, much less reality and say, there's a there there.

James Shaheen: Yeah, we all say so cavalierly “There is no self,” but what are we experiencing in fact?

Anne Klein: Very cavalierly. I say my students at Rice, they understand emptiness after one or two classes. They're so smart.

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James Shaheen: I could have been one of them. I still am one of those sometimes.

Anne Klein: Exactly, me too. Like, what? What have I been doing wrong? But when you bring in the realm of experience, actual experience, not what the book said, it's a whole different landscape. It's much more interesting because it's alive. It's really alive. And then you understand better, I think, how very simple the whole principle is, in a way, and how complicated it is. Maybe it's not so complicated intellectually, although we have texts that are very complicated intellectually. Maybe it's more complicated, or there's more subtle nuancing going on.

James Shaheen: The experience of it is far more elusive than the intellectual construct.

Anne Klein: Well, that's a very interesting statement. In a way it's more elusive, but it's also more present. It's hard to describe, and I don't know if that's what you mean by more elusive. It's definitely hard to describe, but it is very articulate in its sensibility. You know what you're experiencing, and if somebody gives you a word, or you yourself try out words—What do you mean? Are you scared? Are you afraid? Are you in a hurry?—you just know right away if the word is right or not in the same way that when you hear a song that's familiar, and you know that song, and you hear every note, and it's so alive for you, because you love it and you've heard it a million times, but you can't rest with it because you can't remember the name of the song. You start: Is it this? Is it that? And somehow out of the deep echo chamber of your mind, the right name comes, and you know. You know when you have it right, and it's a little bit like that.

James Shaheen: Well, what I meant by elusive is just pretty much what you're describing. But it's kind of like you're standing there with a friend whose name you don't remember, an acquaintance, say, and somebody's approaching and you think, “Oh no, I can't remember their



name,” and you’re not going to find it if you cast about trying to find it. The person comes, you somehow or another get through this awkward social situation, and then the person leaves and all of a sudden, their name bobs to the surface of your mind because you stop trying to dig down deep and find it. It happens when you stop that certain kind of trying. I don’t know how else to explain it.

Anne Klein: You explained it perfectly. And that’s exactly what happens in meditation also. You have to try a lot because the trying, Rumi has a phrase like this: if I had known that this is how it was, I wouldn’t have been trying so hard, but the trying was part of your getting to know how it was. There’s just no way around it. Research on intuition, Claire Petitmengin, who’s been quite an influence for me lately and her microphenomenology. What was discovered in reports on intuition is exactly this process. There is a feeling of kind of effortlessness, even a feeling of a dissolving of the boundary between inside and outside of the body, between the outer world and the inner body, a softening of that in-out, a softening of duality, a sense of being in intimate contact. But it’s just a moment. These aren’t people who are meditating. These are just people, artists, scientists, musicians, intellectuals, who are describing what happened in a moment just before an intuition. What’s interesting to me is how similar this is to what occurs in meditation, as in life. I feel what’s important about that is that the rituals, the practices that we do are sold, or we imagine they’re attractive because they’re kind of exotic and strange and unique. And for me, more and more, it’s very wonderful to recognize ways in which what we’re doing in practice is something very human. It’s very human to finally give up trying and see that something occurs. And this, apparently, is how awakening itself occurs. So from the deepest processes imaginable to a human being to everyday events of suddenly remembering the name of the song, there’s some kind of similarity, a lot of difference but a meaningful similarity, which perhaps makes it all the easier to feel that yes, awakening really is something possible because in fact, it’s a process. It’s a furthering of a process that’s actually completely natural.



James Shaheen: So nicely put. You give the example of bowing to Tara, and you write, “In bowing to Tara, we’re bowing to the enlightened tenderness already within us. We are not surrendering to a fiction. We are present at the dawning of something new in our own experience.” Can you say something more about that dawning of something new? I was just very moved by that.

Anne Klein: Thank you. Dawning. In Tibetan, it’s a very simple word that means the beginning, something freshly emerging, that kind of sense. It literally could be translated as something arising, I think, as the human organism responds to dawn. I think all life responds to dawn. And it’s a very powerful phrase for me also. Something new is being illuminated—a new day, a new dawn, there was light, very significant—and it speaks on the one hand to the intimacy. Somehow dawn is a very intimate experience. Even though you’re watching the sky, perhaps, it’s quiet, not usually too engaged in things yet, birds are starting to chirp. It’s all these indications. freshness and newness, and it’s the dawning of something that you hadn’t noticed before, a fresh flower, something like that. That’s just more images.

James Shaheen: You link this openness to a Tibetan word that is often translated as faith. So we tend to associate faith with a strict sense of belief. But can you say more about the type of faith that makes ritual possible? I talked a little bit about it earlier saying suspending disbelief and so forth.

Anne Klein: The belief you are not asked to have really is a kind of factual belief. Nobody ever asks you, perhaps because in Tibetan culture or Buddhist cultures, it’s just assumed. The word faith, which is often what *dad pa* or *shraddha* is translated as, I think has so much resonance. You alluded to it earlier. Perhaps with a Catholic background, with a Protestant background, with a Jewish background and Muslim background, it has very specific meanings, and monotheistically related meanings. If you look at it phenomenologically, which I try to do when I am really stuck

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for a translation, like what is actually happening, there is some kind of relaxation of the heart, some kind of felt sense of really participating fully in the organism that you are of mind and body. So a kind of confidence, and the traditions speak a lot about the importance of confidence. But it's not a boisterous kind of confidence. It's not that I'm better than or as good as, that kind of confidence. It's like I'm here. This is what it is. And as famous texts like Words of My Perfect Teacher and many others, what is meant by this, there are four kinds. There is what's called the open-heartedness of sheer delight. That's one of the things that's meant by faith. It's just you just like it, the Buddha's words, the face of the Buddha, or the face of your teacher, you just like it. I don't think we would use the English word faith for that. But the same Tibetan word that's translated as faith is used for that. Dad pa, shraddha. And then there's "I want to be like that." So that's kind of, "Oh Tara, you are so wonderful, you're so tender, you're so beautiful." Why do I like this? I like it because I know it feels good to be in the presence of that. And I'm practicing, really, because I want to have those qualities for myself, to be honest. And also, I want to have them because I want to be able to offer them to others. So I like it. It's not like I have to get a PhD or I have to pass the bar exam or something like that. It's heartfelt. So when I translate this term now, I use "heartfelt wish to become," perhaps, and then "irreversible conviction." Confidence. I think it's interesting that confidence is so important. The more and more you go into Dzogchen, the more important it becomes. Just to feel sure that this is real and that it's real for you.

James Shaheen: You know, our producer Sarah Fleming says that perhaps it's a faith that doesn't require a literal belief or a faith where belief is irrelevant. I thought that was nice.

Anne Klein: Oh, wow.

James Shaheen: I thought that was nice.

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Anne Klein: I think that is nice. The continuum between a literal and metaphorical belief is a pretty interesting one. And some religion scholars have said something like how can you be so arrogant to assume that earlier peoples didn't understand metaphor? You know, maybe that's what they were talking about to begin with. It is true, I think that Sarah is onto something in that what does it mean to believe literally, anyway, in enlightenment? What would that mean? Or literally in the Buddha? We know there's a lot we don't know about the Buddha. And yet we also know if we are engaged in this tradition that something definitely emanates from the one that we know as Buddha in the way that we know the Buddha through the sutras, through lineage traditions of teaching. There's something there and it may or may not correspond exactly to a particular way we would imagine Shakyamuni walking across the northern plains of India. I think that the quality of an open heart, the quality of confidence in what is fundamentally being taught, which is that there is cause and effect, there is dependent arising, there is reality and love is essential. And these are things that have to be felt in the heart. And so that's what we have to “believe.”

James Shaheen: You know, it's interesting, you said, who are we to say that ancient peoples did not understand metaphor, but you can go back to the Middle Ages and look at the four Gospels and say, well, they never were consonant. They never agreed with each other, but nobody really cared because they all said something true. So they weren't too terribly worried about reconciling them or making them match up. It was just that there are four teachings.

Anne Klein: That's a great example. There are four teachings, and they're all great. And any one of them will bring you to a place that's far removed from some of the dust we're walking in right now.



James Shaheen: Right. I think part of what Sarah was saying by the use of the word “literal” is that it's a very modern kind of understanding of how we're supposed to read a text, I would think.

Anne Klein: That's a really important observation. I think this is true for many Buddhist metaphors, too. I mean, light, after all, means understanding. When your body lights up, so to speak, it's because you're aware. Your attention is throughout your body, and the light of your knowing is going there. And that's what's glowing. I think we probably understand that intuitively. But now that you bring the lens of literal versus some other kind of understanding, I think that's very significant. It also opens things up a whole lot.

James Shaheen: I don't know where this question is going to go, and maybe you're going to have to help me understand it. But it's something that came to me a little bit later. We talked about ritual. As you know, we enter a space, the ritual is performed, and we exit that space. You go to see Othello. You enter the theater, you hiss at Iago, you leave the theater, and you see that actor who played Iago, you're not hissing at him anymore because you've emerged into the more mundane world. And so I think of something like Guru Yoga. I could take any number of rituals. But since you're a Nyingma practitioner, I'll ask about that. So we enter this world of Guru Yoga. There's a performative aspect to it. But we don't leave that because the teacher remains the Buddha. Likewise, you enter the church, if you're a Catholic, you take communion, and even after you leave, it still is the body of Christ. What about these things that we don't exit? Is that not ritual? Or how do we understand that?

Anne Klein: The ritual is a condensation of events, which then allows you to bring the fruition of those events, some kind of understanding or felt sense, into the whole vast world of your experience of your life. And it's kind of an inner space. It's like a sacred expanse that has contours, like how the performance of a ritual has contours, but the impact of the ritual of your



practice hopefully doesn't. Hopefully, more and more permeates and suffuses more and more of your whole organism, your whole being, and your interactions. And that's the threshold that we keep inquiring into, the famous integration, bringing it to actual life experience, “After Awakening, The Laundry,” Jack Kornfield's title. So it's very important to recognize that the world that is being revealed by the ritual doesn't actually have boundaries. In fact, more and more I think a major message that comes through through many forms of Buddhist literature is that we exist in an indescribable vastness of space, of time, of living beings. And our experience of that is extremely intimate. There is a kind of fusion, I think, in ritual, and ultimately, hopefully, in 24/7 experience of a vastness in which we are participating always and which also is bestowing various kinds of possibilities on us, when at the same time as we experience this in our own hearts or our heart minds, the most intimate experiences of all, perhaps, are some of the experiences that come through practice, and that conjunction of the intimate and the vast, I think, is part of the power of the whole diorama.

James Shaheen: That's a great answer. I just wanted to ask you quickly about spiritual as opposed to religious where ritual is associated with institutional religion and is sometimes even portrayed as a threat to individual freedom. What do you see as the dangers of dividing spirituality and religion? I know that Robert Bellah and others have written about this. How is this a distinctively Western division?

Anne Klein: When one of my colleagues, Bill Parsons, was giving some talks about this, I had a Tibetan class at the time. We were reading Tibetan texts, and I think pretty much everyone was more or less some kind of Tibetan Buddhist. And I said, “Is this a meaningful divide for you?” And they all said no. And I felt better. Personally, it's not meaningful to me. I think it's a very particular and important phenomenon of this time in monotheistic United States. I mean, I get why it's important here. The church, the institutions have become really powerful—and by the way, a lot of corruption that's coming out, and who wants to be part of that? People want their



own intimate experience. And I think that's the right thing to want. I mean, I know people who left particularly Jewish but actually all walks of religion in this country because there wasn't a kind of intimate, contemplative element, which I think is now being reinserted. I think that without what is called spiritual, religion is kind of dead. It's just another institution. And without some kind of form in the social world, spirituality also can dissipate and not be held in a careful way so that wisdom accumulates over generations and passes down, as we feel it does in, for example, the Buddhist lineages in which we are participating. It's not because people were spiritual, but they had a way to keep it going.

James Shaheen: One of the ways of keeping it going and passing it down is ritual, isn't it?

Anne Klein: Exactly. Absolutely. I think that's the purpose of the ritual because it's something that you can teach. I can show you or somebody how to do a ritual, I can tell you what to say, I can tell you some of what the words mean, I've translated them. This can be communicated. And then it only goes so far, and you have to discover it yourself. And then you can come back to your teacher and say, "Well, this is what occurred." And hopefully, if you have a teacher that you can have that kind of conversation with and who will know. And they'll say, "Yeah," or they'll say, "Not yet. A little too much this, a little too much that, the recipe isn't being fully filled out." And that's helpful information. You go back and you do it. So yes, I think that's one of the main purposes of ritual is to hold these things.

James Shaheen: Another function of ritual is community, and one of the themes we've been discussing on the podcast recently is the dangers of loneliness and isolation, which seem to plague us. According to recent studies, nearly 60% of adults in the US reported feeling lonely, and loneliness has been linked to increased rates of illness, depression, and even death. So in a time of so much isolation and alienation, how can ritual help us find a true sense of belonging? You yourself wrote about this sense of belonging that ritual can bring about in us.



Anne Klein: There's two kinds of belonging. There's belonging vertically. So through my ritual, I belong to the forebears of this ritual and the founder of the whole system, in this case, Buddha, Christ, Muhammad. There's that kind of belonging, and I think that's very important. There's also horizontal belonging to a community of other human beings, animals too, a community where there are shared values and shared rituals. I mean, in laying out ritual protocols in the Tibetan tradition, they clearly marked out that there's two ways of doing it, there's doing it by yourself, and there's doing it with others. And even people in long-term or lifelong retreat will often get together on feast days to do ritual. So ritual is definitely part of community life. And a further maybe modern way of accentuating community is the importance of sharing one's experience in the ritual. This is something that traditional communities don't do. I think they feel enough just being together and singing together. That's already a sense of community. Every religious tradition on the planet knows that. I mean, something that we do is take a little time to actually give space for people who wish to reflect a bit on maybe something they learned in a practice. This is very distinct from revealing secret, big, major things that you're not supposed to talk about, and it's not about pride. Communicating something about what a practice has meant to you, I have discovered, we have discovered in our community, is very precious. People really do discover things that are in one way small, in other ways very significant for them. And it's very moving. It's very touching. And we learn from each other. I feel that in our super isolated culture, the horizontal is very important. There are three jewels, and Victor Hori said in an article in *Tricycle* many, many years ago that the Western sanghas, they got the Buddha, they got the Dharma, but they forget the Sangha. Harvey and I, we teach together—

James Shaheen: You mean Harvey Aronson, your husband.

Anne Klein: Harvey Aronson, Lama Namgyal Dorje, who was cluttering his dishes a moment ago. In the transmission of the geese, there's this great line that the geese give transmission to



each other with the flapping of their wings. I love that. And we need to flap our wings together, which, for us, means sharing a little bit, not too much, and in confidence. Nothing goes out of the room. But we have found this to be a tremendous gift that sangha members give to each other. So it's not just about the horizontal thing, which as you know, in the Tibetan tradition is particularly strong. And you'd have all these people staring at the teacher, and they don't even see each other. So this seems something quite important that you've touched on. We think about it a lot in terms of how to bring about this community, especially now that we've been online for years since COVID. So that's another difficulty of isolation. And we've really discovered that this kind of sharing really feels intimate. It doesn't feel invasive. Nobody has to talk. Mostly, people find it quite rewarding.

James Shaheen: The loneliness that I mentioned, I was listening to Anne Applebaum, a journalist. She writes for the *Atlantic*, among other places. She was interviewed, I think, by Ezra Klein, and she was saying that loneliness served as a primary motivation for especially men in the culture joining these cults, whether it's QAnon or proto-fascist organizations like Proud Boys. They do this by tapping into a sense of shared identity that can often be the basis for destructive and manipulative social movements as well. So they're offered an ideology, they're offered a way of dress, they're offered an identity, a sense of purpose and, I have to say, a kind of ritual. It seems to me that in the absence of healthy ritual, people fall prey to these substitutes that lead them to the darkest of places. Have you ever thought about that?

Anne Klein: No, but I'm going bingo. That's really, really important. What you're saying is ritual is extremely powerful, and like anything powerful, it can go sideways. Definitely. I think it's true. I mean, I have thought—Harvey's a therapist, and we think about the mindset of these people who get involved in these, and I hadn't thought so much about loneliness, but they're lost. You know, they probably weren't treated well when they were children. There's some kind of

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trauma at the root of it, some kind of deep need to be in denial about things and make up other things, in order to kind of deal with the world.

James Shaheen: There's also the sociological aspect of having the rug pulled out from underneath them or a disconnection from the broader culture, or any way the culture that is successful, I guess, we would say, but thinking about it in that way makes me have a kind of compassion that I otherwise might not. There's a need, and sadly, people are misled. I mean, it could be any of us really.

Anne Klein: It could be any of us. There is indeed a need.

James Shaheen: I think it's a very human need. I mean, that's why I think dismissing ritual is not even a possibility. It'd be like saying, “Well, the economy failed. Let's get rid of the economy.”

Anne Klein: Yeah, I mean, life is full of rituals. I think I say in that piece. There are baseball games, there are tailgate parties. I mean, it's ritual. Going to dinner at somebody's house is a ritual. There will be a meal, there may be drink, dessert, conversation, you have to leave before it gets too late but not too soon to be rude. All our lives are full of rituals, and it's important to recognize that this is, as you were saying, just a fundamental way for human beings that we organize space, time, and community, those three aspects that are so vast and at the same time so intimate.

James Shaheen: I think Robert Bellah said that everything we do is ritual, but it's a question of which ones we choose to engage in. I guess that makes sense. So you connect Buddhist ritual practices to love, and you write, “In Buddhism, love is the ultimate solvent of what obstructs and also the culminating fruition of what evolves. In a real sense, every gesture of ritual has the



potential to express and give rise to it.” So can you share more about how ritual practices can help us express and give rise to this deep sense of love in the context of our everyday lives? Because actually, that’s where we have to be most of the time.

Anne Klein: If we start from the premise that every part of the ritual is actually somehow animated toward a fruitional state of love, then perhaps if we start with just the act of sitting in a certain posture, there’s a certain attention to this frail and physical body. That’s already a beginning of love, a seed of love. There is placing attention somewhere, usually on the breath to start with. Attention is the start of love. There can be no love without attention. Cultivating attention, we’re cultivating a possibility for intention and a possibility for connection. Connection is all about love. So then we go on to perhaps take refuge, and in Tibetan traditions, we imagine that the whole universe is taking refuge with us, all of us. We recognize our common need for support, for help, for refuge, for protection. It’s a very genuine, poignant recognition. Actually, it’s not OK. I can drop my mannerisms of being good enough and smart enough and all of that. I need something larger. And with one gesture, you’re recognizing that honestly for yourself and that everyone else is in the same situation. We all need refuge, however we understand that. We need protection, we need help, we can’t do it ourselves. That’s an opening to love. And then to recognize, well, yes, this is a delicate situation we find ourselves in. We’re all going to die, and if the Buddhists are right, we’ve been being born and dying for infinite time, and even if they’re not exactly right, metaphorically, it feels like that, so it has power, I think, even as metaphor. And in light of the vastness of space time and individual project in this cosmos, what proper response could there be other than a kind of compassion for oneself and for all beings? Nothing else really meets the situation. And then we go forward with that, and maybe we send out light, we give rise to a wish that we could actually transform everything into an awakened state because that’s the only place where really we can be free of suffering. We have that aspiration, and whether we believe it’s literally possible or not, we allow ourselves to bathe in that aspiration. What culminates? Well, everything of suffering vanishes in our imaginaire,

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which is of that time of the whole cosmos. Everything is filled with light, which means knowing, which means awareness and wisdom. And then what? And then it all dissolves back into some groundless ground that's perfect, that is itself what Dzogchen calls bodhicitta, the awakened mind. The tender, wise, loving mind is most subtly expressed in that reality itself. It's not something that you make up out of wanting to be good. It's actually nakedly there in reality just as it is, and that's considered a fruitional recognition. And so that's one way in which everything is opening to that. Everything is either love or a distortion of it in the end.

James Shaheen: Before we wrap up, would you mind reading a passage from the article?

Anne Klein: I've never been asked to read something I wrote on a podcast. “Finally, after many repetitions, ritual becomes a performance of our deepest knowing of self and world. Like rehearsing artists, we hone our expressive skills until our practice of compassion, wisdom, and wholeness becomes the real thing. We revisit the gestures of ritual again and again until we gain the force of habit to carry our seeing and being with full-hearted and loving generosity into the hurly-burly of everyday life. Modern life. For our release, like our rituals, happens nowhere other than right in this time and in this precise place.”

James Shaheen: Thank you so much for joining, Anne. It's been a great pleasure.

Anne Klein: Thank you, James. It's wonderful to see you again. You're looking well and I hope you are.

James Shaheen: You too. I am indeed, thank you. You've been listening to *Tricycle Talks* with Anne Klein. We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at feedback@tricycle.org to let us know what you think. *Tricycle Talks* is produced by As It Should

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Be Productions and Sarah Fleming. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!