

Tricycle Talks

“Writer Sandra Cisneros on Returning to Her Roots”

Episode #81 with Sandra Cisneros

December 21, 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*. This past fall, writer Sandra Cisneros published her first book of poetry in 28 years, *Woman Without Shame*. Cisneros, best known for her 1984 novel *The House on Mango Street*, is a poet, novelist, performer, and artist—and she’s also a Buddhist. In her new poetry collection, she offers insightful and characteristically blunt meditations on desire, memory, and how she has learned to love her aging body. In today’s episode of *Tricycle Talks*, I sit down with Sandra to discuss her writing process, how she combines Buddhist practice with the indigenous spirituality of her childhood, and what it means to be a woman without shame. Plus, at the end of the episode, Sandra reads two poems from her new collection.

James Shaheen: So I'm here with poet and novelist Sandra Cisneros. Hi, Sandra, it's great to be with you.

Sandra Cisneros: Good morning from Chicago.

James Shaheen: Oh, you're on book tour, right?

Sandra Cisneros: Almost at the end.

James Shaheen: So we're here to talk about your new collection of poems, *Woman Without Shame*. So what does it mean to be a woman without shame?

Sandra Cisneros: I think it means to be a woman to be able to speak in our society because so much of our society silences us. For me, it's been one of overcoming several shames in my



lifetime. That doesn't mean that I've eradicated all of them. I still have some. But I'm 67, and now I know what to do with that shame: I write about it in my poetry, and I transform it until it illuminates me and I'm able to speak. To publicly be in front of an audience reading is a different order and has demanded a lot of courage. But it's brought a lot of calm to me as well.

James Shaheen: So in the first poem of a collection, you distinguish between a woman without shame and a shameless woman. Can you share more about that distinction?

Sandra Cisneros: A shameless woman is being judged. A woman without shame isn't thinking about judgment. She's beyond that. I think that's the major difference for me: to be able to speak my thoughts without censoring myself, thoughts without thinking about the *qué dijeron*, what will they say, and dismissing evaluations from society.

James Shaheen: Yeah, it's interesting, we just interviewed Bob Waldinger, who heads up a longitudinal study of people through their lifetimes. They've been doing it since the 1940s. He was talking about regrets at the end of life, and he said one regret, particularly for women, was "I wish I hadn't cared so much about what other people think."

Sandra Cisneros: I think that's absolutely right. For me, I was so obsessed with trying to gain the approval of the men in my life: my father and then partners in my life, and when you're young, especially a teenager or in graduate school, your peers. There's a lot of that. I think I had to dismiss what society expected of a woman, having to consider getting married and having children, and I was able to go my own path, but it took some doing.

James Shaheen: You talk about your books as your children, and you describe writing like writing a poem is giving birth in a way. Can you say something about that?

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Sandra Cisneros: Poetry comes from such a private place. That's why I don't necessarily need to publish it. It's for me to understand myself and my life. I really feel as if I harbor these poetry embryos for several months or years before they are expelled and I write them, clean them up, swaddle them, and maybe I'll share them with someone else, but not necessarily. It's not necessary for me as a writer to do that. For me, it's more about reasons why we meditate, the reasons why we retreat and transform whatever is obsessing us to illumination. It's more about my own spiritual development. Poetry is very, very close to meditation for me. It's not about anyone else but myself.

James Shaheen: It's been 28 years since your last book of poetry. Can you tell us a bit about the book and what inspired you to write it, especially why now?

Sandra Cisneros: I think the question "why now" is really a question from people from the outside looking in. I've been writing poems since I was 11 years old. I've never stopped. For the last 28 years, I've been writing them, but I haven't published them. So I'm writing them even now this year while I'm on book tour. I just don't publish them because I'm never satisfied. I don't feel they're finished. And I think I need to put them down and revise, revise, revise. That's why you haven't seen them in a long time. I think there's a polar opposite about why we write and why we publish, and for me the necessity of publishing I fulfill with my prose. Poetry is a more private, inner dialogue with myself. It's a private conversation, and it's not necessary to publish it.

James Shaheen: So how do you know when it's finished?

Sandra Cisneros: I think I know when it's finished like Thich Nhat Hanh would say: after I compost all of the garbage and a little white flower blooms from that compost pile. That's how I know.



James Shaheen: You know, you've mentioned Thich Nhat Hanh and you just mentioned meditation and spiritual development. I think many listeners would be surprised to hear that you're a Buddhist. How did you first encounter Buddhism?

Sandra Cisneros: I first encountered Buddhism through a little book that Thich Nhat Hanh wrote called *Being Peace*. A friend of mine gave it to me just before the Bosnian war. She lives in Sarajevo, and she was lost, in a way, *incommunicada* during the war, and the book that she gave me gave me a path of how I could become active as opposed to passive about that war and about her safety and what I could do about not knowing whether my friend was alive. Without knowing it, she gave me a path to spiritual activism, and that began with that little book, *Being Peace*. The war in Bosnia affected me very deeply because I knew my friend and her family and her street and the citizens of Sarajevo. The book helped me in the same way that Thich Nhat Hanh has helped so many other people live through wars: to enlighten me of what I could do as a private citizen.

James Shaheen: So that's Buddhism. I'm wondering if you could also share a little bit about your childhood and how you first came to writing. You said you were writing from very early on.

Sandra Cisneros: Yeah, I come from a house with no books that aren't stamped "Property of." You know, we had books, but they were the property of the school or the Chicago Public Library because we didn't have the resources to buy books. I came to my writing by way of school textbooks that had poems in them, and they were very musical and beautiful to me. They gave me permission to explore elements of my own life that I felt overwhelmingly beautiful: trees and wind and sunset. I was in middle school, and I wrote in private without showing them to anyone. They were just things that allowed me to express myself the same way that drawing fulfilled a part of me. I was a visual artist. I still am. And poetry came from that same place, that same need to speak, speaking with words. But first I spoke with images.



James Shaheen: Did you grow up with any religious background at all?

Sandra Cisneros: You know, I grew up Mexican, so we have the cultural icon of the Virgen de Guadalupe in my home. But my parents were not strict Catholics per se. They were Mexican, but they were very fluid about our spiritual beliefs. We went to Catholic school because we had no choice living in the neighborhoods we lived in. There was a choice of going to the public school and having a dangerous time there. We always lived in racially tense neighborhoods. We couldn't really go to the public school because the Black students would see us as white. We were not white, but that's how we were viewed. You know, Chicago is a very segregated community, and we lived as Mexicans in the border between warring white and Black communities. We were the border. So we had to go to Catholic school, even though we didn't have any money to be there. So my father always had to get a tuition break, and that tuition break allowed us to go to Catholic school, but we really weren't devout. We were just going to Catholic school because of racial tension in Chicago and because we could get a better education. There was a lot of chaos in the public schools in the inner cities where I lived.

James Shaheen: You know, you mentioned Guadalupe, and I know that you call yourself a Buddhalupista, a term that honors the Buddha and Our Lady of Guadalupe. Can you share more about how you combine your Buddhist practice with the indigenous spirituality you grew up with?

Sandra Cisneros: Well, it was Thich Nhat Hanh who reminded us that we have to go back to our cultural roots. My father's family is from the neighborhood of the Basilica of the Virgen de Guadalupe, and that's where I used to play as a child. I made a trip to that Basilica as an adult, and it was the first time that I had a very profound connection with the energy and the community and the people and their faith. It wasn't necessarily a connection with the Catholic



Church. No, it was a connection with that spiritual site, with the land, and with the poorest of the poor, who were coming to put their energy there and hold that energy there. So I don't see myself as Catholic, and I don't see the Virgen de Guadalupe as the mother of Jesus. The Virgen de Guadalupe that I visualize is simply an energy for love. That's how I understand it: that I had to open my heart to the Virgen de Guadalupe because of her gender and her color, but I understand her as simply a vessel of love.

James Shaheen: I understand that you have a tattoo of the Virgin of Guadalupe in the lotus position.

Sandra Cisneros: I do. She's actually a merging of Guan Yin and the Indian goddesses and the Virgen de Guadalupe. It's just a fusion of the goddesses. But to me, you know, it's all just a metaphor for love, for love and compassion.

James Shaheen: So Sandra, you were born in Chicago, as you said, and later lived in San Antonio, but in 2013, you decided to move to Mexico. What made you decide to move to Mexico, and what has it been like living there? I understand you're in San Miguel de Allende?

Sandra Cisneros: Yes, that's correct. It's hard to explain this to people who haven't experienced it. A spiritual voice woke me up in the middle of the night when I was first visiting San Miguel de Allende. I was awake in the middle of the night, and a voice came into my head and said, "You are not your house." It was a mental voice. It wasn't in English. It wasn't in Spanish. At that time in my life, I was terribly involved with my foundations and with the legacy of my home and its properties. Since I'm single and don't have any children, I was involved in planning to leave that to the city of San Antonio and to my foundations, the Macondo Writers. That wake-up call made me understand that I was not my house, I wasn't my property, I wasn't my foundations, and that I needed to return to my writing and stop being a philanthropist and an arts administrator. It

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woke me up and made me realize maybe I needed to come back to San Miguel de Allende, which is 100 kilometers from where my ancestors emigrated during the Mexican Civil War, and finish my next book, *House of My Own*. So that's where I went, and it was because of this voice that entered my head. If it had come from me, I would have had a lot of doubts. But I've had other experiences like that in my past where sometimes a message comes to me. And I heeded that message and followed it as I have in the past. And it's always taken me on my spiritual path. I trusted that message. I think that being in Mexico has brought me in touch with a society that is deeply indigenous and deeply connected to the spiritual. And that has helped me on my spiritual path.

James Shaheen: San Miguel is interesting, because it brings a lot of different people together. It's very Mexican. At the same time, it's very international. There are people from everywhere there.

Sandra Cisneros: That's right.

James Shaheen: That must be nice.

Sandra Cisneros: Well, for someone like me, I'm kind of international, too. I'm from Chicago. So it seems a perfect fit.

James Shaheen: Many of the poems in the collection read like imagined rituals, I guess I would say: "Remedy for Social Overexposure," which I loved, "Instructions for My Funeral," and "Instructions for Vigiling the Dying." Can you speak to the role of ritual in your work? Are there any Buddhist rituals that have been important to you too?



Sandra Cisneros: I tend to create my own rituals. For myself and my writing and speaking, I like to have a meditation where I connect with my ancestors. It's very important for me to connect with my ancestors when I meditate. I just feel it puts me in a zone of love immediately. It puts me in a zone of intention and of dissolving my ego. It helps me to dissolve my ego if I can do work that honors my ancestors. I start specifically with ancestors I can name, and then I visualize their ancestors. That helps to make me feel secure and brave because my life is so easy compared to theirs. It puts things in perspective and gives me a sense of service and humility, which you need as a writer.

James Shaheen: Thank you. That's very nicely put. I've been thinking about another theme that runs through the collection, and it's the visceral experience of aging, particularly embracing your body as it ages over time. So anyone alive should be able to relate to that. One of the poems is titled "At 50 I Am Startled to Find I Am in My Splendor." Can you say more about your relationship to your body as it has changed over the years? I mean, many people want to turn away from the body as it ages and yet you're embracing it.

Sandra Cisneros: Well, I don't think we teach women especially to document and celebrate instead of just grieving. You know, all the creams and everything we see in society, all the cosmetics, all of the super celebrities are about fighting aging. But I like where I am, and my model for beauty is Maria Sabina, the Mexican shamana. She certainly had a face that looked like a map of origami. I like her. I like the Indigenous women and their older faces, and I'm waiting for my gray to come in. I only have a few strands. I can't wait. I love it because I feel, especially in Mexico, that we revere and honor our elders. And I know I honor and revere my elders because they're so smart and they've been around the block. So I want to be a model for younger women to embrace and celebrate everything they've earned with the years, I don't want to look like a young woman, and if I had the choice, I would never want to be in my 20s again. It was such a difficult time in my life, and I like who I am now.

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James Shaheen: You know, about waiting for gray hair, I didn't have to wait. It started when I was about 20 or 21. You have a lot of great black hair, so I'm jealous.

Sandra Cisneros: Well, I'm jealous of you.

James Shaheen: So back to the idea of shame, aging causes people shame of their changing, weakening bodies, and women in particular are conditioned to be hypercritical of their bodies, as you pointed out. What has working on this book taught you about shame? Because it's something that you work against in the poetry. But how did actually working on this help you to work through shame? Or had you already worked through it?

Sandra Cisneros: You know, I wasn't even aware because I don't see my poems as a book. I write as if I can't publish them in my lifetime, so it's more like a journal and it helps me to explore things that I'm a little frightened about, to overcome fear. A lot of the poems about aging, I didn't realize they were about shame. They were more about fear, like, Oh my God, what's that? What happened to my eye? Why didn't anyone tell me? You know, this conspiracy of not warning me about what was around the bend. So I feel as if I'm documenting it for myself, but I'm also documenting it for others because if we don't document something, it never happened. And I want other people to know, OK, don't invest in fancy shoes, because guess what, your feet size is going to change. I wish someone had told me before I bought so many shoes.

James Shaheen: That's really funny because I sometimes feel that way too. Why didn't somebody tell me that this would happen? But in fact, it's all around us. All the evidence is there. We just don't want to see that. Is that right?

Sandra Cisneros: I guess we're not listening, right?



James Shaheen: Yeah, old age can feel so abstract when you're 20.

Sandra Cisneros: Yes, I think that that's true. I think when you're 20, you're not listening to anyone over 30, especially the Boomers.

James Shaheen: In one poem, "Year of My Near Death," you write that you "marvel at the body's power to speak, mend, resurrect. Forgive." I was struck by the word "forgive." Can you say more about the body's power to forgive? Mine doesn't feel very forgiving this morning.

Sandra Cisneros: For me as a daughter, it was very difficult to have my mother as my mother. I think daughters and mothers have difficult relationships the way sons have that difficulty with their fathers. For me, that line was about my mom and coming into older age, understanding her, being at her deathbed, and witnessing her spirit leave her body, which I was able to perceive, made me see and recognize her in a way I never had in all the years she had been alive. In all the years that I had been alongside her I never saw her. When her spirit left the body, I had this physical sensation of her energy. That was a gift she gave me. I actually could feel her energy floating around and dissipating and departing, and it was so filled with tenderness and love that at first I didn't recognize it was my mother because she was kind of a tough cookie and to suddenly understand, oh my God, that's my mom without all the bravado, all the disappointments, the shell that she had to create to protect this tender core. It made me start crying because I had never met her until she was departing. I asked forgiveness for making her life difficult, and I was able to forgive her because she was my guru in a sense of her patience, among other things, and I realized, wow, what a gift to be able to perceive someone's light leave their body. I'm still in awe and filled with gratitude because my brother was in the room too, and he did not perceive it. But maybe because I'm an artist or an empath or my radar disc is bigger. I don't know why, but I was able to experience that. It was quite memorable.



James Shaheen: Yeah, that doesn't sound so far off to me. My experience of something similar was that at that moment of passing, that something changed, something was different, something had passed this distinct almost visceral, not participation but perception of a momentous change, a life has passed.

Sandra Cisneros: For me, it was visceral. It wasn't metaphorical. I'm speaking very lucidly and clearly about an experience that you would feel. And you could perceive in a way that one can perceive when there's a moth in the room fluttering against the light bulb, how you can perceive that it was like that, right? I felt other spirits leave their bodies, but it wasn't like that. And they were each distinct, which makes me conclude that everyone's energy is quite unique, and distinct. And I just feel lucky that I was able to perceive it.

James Shaheen: You say that you write poetry because you push truth out from your womb. Can you say a little bit more about the writing process?

Sandra Cisneros: Yeah, I write prose, I write essays and novels and short stories, and I'm working on a libretto right now for *The House on Mango Street*, the opera. But writing poetry is very different. Writing poetry is more embryonic. It's as if you experience things in the day that are like a tiny little embryo that maybe nest in a very profound place. For me, I use the idea of the uterus. It seems to be precise for something that grows there and that I have to expel. It can be something wonderful. It doesn't necessarily have to be a negative experience. But I feel that I nurture emotions inside my uterus, and I keep them there for a while until it's impossible for me to bypass it. It's gotten too large, and I've got to expel it. That's giving birth to a poem. It's very small and imprecise when it begins and terribly hard to hold in my body if it grows and comes to fruition. A lot of poems are stillborn. If I don't nourish them, they don't finish their gestation. So



it matters that I nourish my poems and that I take care of my spirit so that these poems can see the light.

James Shaheen: So I'm curious also about what your spiritual practice looks like now and how it relates to your work, or are they one and the same?

Sandra Cisneros: They're the one and the same. I like to meditate in the morning, and if I have time, like I've been on a book tour, so it's been necessary to take time in the middle of the day, in the middle of the chaos, in the middle of the overdose of stimulus and just be quiet, even if it's on a plane, and then in the evening, before I go to sleep, and it really has helped me to process all the people I've been meeting on this book tour. I've been on a book tour since September 10, and I'm in bed 21 of a 22-bed trip. You can imagine all the cities, all the people, all the hotels, all the stories that people have shared with me and that I've shared with others. It's been a tour of gratitude and astonishment, and it doesn't surprise me that I'm ending the tour in my hometown, Chicago. I'm sitting here looking out the window at my old neighborhood where I had my last apartment where I wrote *House on Mango Street*. I can see St. Mary's Church here in Bucktown, and I can see downtown. It's been a beautiful spiritual journey, traveling with this book and coming to terms with who I am now and how lovely to make this route back to my beginnings.

James Shaheen: In your interview in the November issue of *Tricycle*, you said that you think of poems as being like the bells that summon monks to prayer. What do you mean by that?

Sandra Cisneros: I mean that every day there are mindfulness bells that ring in a metaphoric sense. Someone will say something to me, or I will see something as I'm walking or writing or talking with readers or witnessing a speaker at a book fair that I'm attending. There's just so many things that happen on one day. I know when something's the possibility of a poem. It resonates like a mindfulness bell, and I don't have time during the book tour to sit with it more



than a second, maybe note down a potential poem. I have a little yellow notebook that I carry with me or I might put it in my iPhone, although I don't like doing that. I like writing longhand. And I'll say, OK, someone said this, or a possible poem about this, and I'll come back later. Those are the little mindfulness bells that remind me: take your time, come back to this idea when you're alone, and sit with this and see if a poem doesn't rise from this note.

James Shaheen: You share that poetry made you wake up to the gurus that were around you: the ants in your shower, the maguey trees, the chihuahuas. Can you share more about how poetry has helped you pay attention to the world around you?

Sandra Cisneros: Yeah, I feel as if my whole life I was looking for love in all the wrong places. It sounds like a country western song. I think there is a song like that. I always thought that love was going to be a person, and I didn't realize that love was all around me. The world was showering me with love. But I didn't know how to listen or to look and to sense it. Now, especially with the pandemic on lockdown, I've been in my convent of one, really paying attention to the flora and fauna around me, the experiences of being by myself without interruption and being very quiet and being very amused and enlightened by small things, sometimes the color of a spider contrasted with the rose that it lives in, or sometimes it's just the light at a certain time of day or the clouds crossing over my terrace or my animals because I live with four little dogs. Each of them has taught me so much and continues to teach me. So I feel fortunate that I did a spiritual retreat during the pandemic. I feel a little shame sometimes that I savored lockdown so much when so many people were suffering. I found that I needed to wake up to my own company and to the gurus that were all around me sending me love.

James Shaheen: So much about writing is solitude, so you were taking that opportunity to experience solitude, is that correct?



Sandra Cisneros: I like being alone, actually. If I was allowed to, I would go live in a cave and put a rock in front of it. But my agent and society compel me to be the author, which is the opposite of being the writer.

James Shaheen: Well, it's very nice of you to do the podcast with us. So in the final sentence of the acknowledgments you write, "I have winnowed poems from three decades, two countries, and too many houses. In 17 days, I will be 67. It is time I let them go." What does it look like to let go?

Sandra Cisneros: Isn't all of life about letting go? I think in a couple of weeks, I'll be 68. So it's been some time since I lifted my pen, but I think it's practicing letting go and accepting and being where you are. I think that's where I'm supposed to be. I don't know because I'm only 67, but I hope to learn more in the years that come before I transform into a maguey, I really hope, because I feel like I'm just scratching the surface, James. I feel like I've got a long way to go. I'm just a baby Buddhist. I don't know. I don't feel like I've mastered anything except what my writing has taught me, and I'm trying to serve my apprenticeship. And I'm dazzled by what I'm learning at 67. I look forward to the next chapter of my life because I feel everything in my life has brought me to this apprenticeship: the Buddhism, the travels, the writing, the move to Mexico where I'm in a community that's so spiritually aware, living in the country of Mexico so close to nature. All of it is about serving my apprenticeship, and I'm so grateful and excited to be almost 68, very young, and a long way to go before I call myself master of anything.

James Shaheen: You know, it's interesting when you said “it is time I let them go,” I was thinking of letting the work itself go. I mean, letting the poems themselves go, is that correct? Is that what you meant?

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Sandra Cisneros: I mean letting the poems go, yes, but I also think that's a good mantra for the years that are ahead of me. I think it's both now that you mentioned it. When I wrote that line, I meant I'm going to share these poems finally. They're mine, and I'm ready to share my most private thoughts. But I think it's a good mantra for the apprenticeship on serving.

James Shaheen: I thought of Ocean Vuong. We interviewed him some time ago, and he talked about how once it is written, he puts it on the river and lets it float downstream. He sees too many writers floating downstream with it and eventually sinking, so he needed at a certain point to let the work go.

Sandra Cisneros: That's a beautiful visualization. I need to hang onto that about other things that I got to let go of too, so thank you for that lesson today.

James Shaheen: Well, thank you so much, Sandra, it's really wonderful to be talking with you. To close, would you mind reading a poem or two?

Sandra Cisneros: Sure. This is a poem I wrote, of course, without ever realizing anyone was going to see it when I was 50. But I need to write another one when I turn 68 in a couple of weeks.

At Fifty I Am Startled to Find I Am in My Splendor.

These days I admit

I am wide as a tule tree.

My underwear protests.

And yet,

I like myself best

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without clothes when

I can admire myself

as God made me, still

divine as a maja.

Wide as a fertile goddess,

though infertile. I am,

as they say,

in decline. Teeth

worn down, eyes burning

yellow. Of belly

bountiful and flesh

beneficent I am. I am

silvering in crags

of crotch and brow.

Amusing.

I am a spectator at my own sport.

I am Venetian, decaying splendidly.

Am magnificent beyond measure.

Lady Pompadour roses exploding

before death. Not old.

Correction, aged.

Passé? I am but vintage.

I am a woman of a delightful season.

El Cantarito, little brown jug of la Lotería.

Solid, stout, bottom planted

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firmly and without a doubt,

filled to the brim I am.

I said the brim.

Remedy for Social Overexposure

Seek a *pirul* tree and sit

beneath immediately.

Remove from

ears and tongue,

words.

Fast from same.

Soak in a tub of seclusion.

Rinse face with wind.

In extreme cases, douse

oneself with sky. Then,

swab gently with clouds.

Dress in clean, pressed pajamas.

Preferably white.

Hold close to the heart,

chihuahuas. Kiss and

be kissed by same.

Consume a cool glass of night.

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Read poetry that inspires poetry.

Write until temperament

returns to calm.

Place moonlight in a bowl.

Sleep beside and

dream of white flowers.

James Shaheen: That's wonderful. So Sandra Cisneros, thank you so much.

Sandra Cisneros: Thank you. I've had so much fun talking to you, James. It's not often I get to talk to other Buddhists, so this has been a treat.

James Shaheen: It's a great treat for me too. I don't get to talk to Buddhist poets that often. So for our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of Sandra's new book, *Woman Without Shame*, available now. You can also check out an interview with Sandra in the November issue of *Tricycle*. So Sandra, great pleasure again.

Sandra Cisneros: *À ustedes.* Thank you. *Muchas gracias.*

James Shaheen: You've been listening to *Tricycle Talks* with Sandra Cisneros. To read an interview with Sandra in the November issue of *Tricycle*, visit tricycle.org/magazine. Others featured in the issue include Pema Chödrön, Tsoknyi Rinpoche, and Daniel Goleman, along with teachings on anger, aging, and an antidote to self-criticism. We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at feedback@tricycle.org to let us know what you think. If you enjoyed this episode, please consider leaving a review on Apple Podcasts. To keep up with the show, you can follow *Tricycle Talks* wherever you listen to podcasts. *Tricycle Talks* is produced

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