Life As It Is
"Casting Indra's Net"
Episode #19 with Pamela Ayo Yetunde
May 24, 2023

Note: Transcripts are generated using a combination of speech recognition software and human transcribers. Please check the corresponding audio before quoting in print.

James Shaheen: Hello and welcome to *Life As It Is*. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Pamela Ayo Yetunde has worked as an activist, lay Buddhist leader, chaplain, pastoral counselor, practical theologian, and teacher. In each of these roles, she has witnessed how our humanity has been distorted and how distraction and delusion keep us from our true purpose of caring for one another. Drawing from Buddhist and Christian teachings on mutuality and liberation, Yetunde believes that we need a compassion revolution to counter the rising tides of oppression and exploitation. In her new book, *Casting Indra's Net: Fostering Spiritual Kinship and Community*, she explores how contemplative practices can help us adopt one another as kin. In today's episode of *Life As It Is*, my co-host Sharon Salzberg and I sit down with Ayo to talk about how we can become caregivers to our community, what she has learned from Martin Luther King Jr.'s vision of mutuality, and how rituals can support us in cultivating community and connection.

James Shaheen: So I'm here with activist and teacher Pamela Ayo Yetunde and my co-host, Sharon Salzberg. Hi, Ayo. Hi, Sharon.

Pamela Ayo Yetunde: Hi, James. Hi, Sharon.

James Shaheen: It's great to be here with you both. So Ayo, we're here to talk about your new book, *Casting Indra's Net: Fostering Spiritual Kinship and Community*. So to start, can you tell us a little bit about the book and what inspired you to write it?

Pamela Ayo Yetunde: Well, the book, in a way, is a pouring out of my heart. It comes out of observations that there's so much strife, hatred, and violence in our society, glorification of guns,

an unwillingness to do anything about it. And I also am feeling very optimistic that we have within ourselves the ability to turn it around. So this is just my little offering to encourage people to be their best selves, to tap into those aspects of themselves that want goodness, that is about goodness, and to live into that goodness.

James Shaheen: I was wondering, for our listeners who don't know, if you could tell us what Indra's net is.

Pamela Ayo Yetunde: It's my understanding that Indra's net is a concept that comes out of ancient Vedic teachings, where it was believed that Indra, the god, had a net that was used to capture his enemies and punish them in something that they could not escape from. Over time, in other places, Indra's net has become a way of understanding our interconnectedness and our interdependence, as well as our goodness and that we have the capacity to reflect one another's goodness back to each other and rely on one another to make it through the hardships. And so when I talk about casting Indra's net, I'm talking about each one of us pouring out the love from our hearts into the net for the benefit of all.

James Shaheen: So what was originally a weapon has been transformed into something demonstrating our interconnectedness.

Pamela Ayo Yetunde: Yes.

James Shaheen: You know, the name of the book is *Casting Indra's Net*, but you also talk about netcasting in a Christian context. Can you tell us about what netcasting means?

Pamela Ayo Yetunde: If there are folks who aren't familiar with the story of Jesus and his disciples in a boat, they're wondering, "How in the world are we going to capture the fish that we

need to feed all the people who we want to feed?" They have this little bitty net. Jesus tells them to cast the net to the right of the boat, "Throw it in the water, just throw it in, and let's see what happens." So because they were believers, they did what he asked for them to do. They threw the net to the right of the boat and captured so much fish that it was a miracle because the net was so small they should not have expected to catch as many fish as they did. So I interpret that story as a story about abundance. When I think about casting Indra's net, really what I'm thinking about is a practice, again, of lovingkindness in its abundance. So this lovingkindness is not limited by my one body, even imagining one person, a person I like or love, a person I don't know, a person I hate. It's at that level when in the practice, you imagine that you are in the field of lovingkindness and that all beings throughout space and time, throughout the universe, throughout the multiverses, that this field of lovingkindness is without bounds. So the practice of casting Indra's net is really about imagining everyone and everything is in the field, yourself included.

James Shaheen: When you talk about abundance, I also think of the fishes and loaves. The more that is given, the more abundant the supply.

Pamela Ayo Yetunde: You know, James, you reminded me, when I was young, growing up in the church, I would often hear that it is more blessed to give than to receive, and I never believed that. I never believed that until I began practicing Buddhism.

James Shaheen: Yeah, I didn't really get the fishes and loaves until I started practicing the *paramis*, and generosity came up and I thought, "Oh, that's what the fishes and loaves meant."

Pamela Ayo Yetunde: Yes. Yes.

James Shaheen: You work as an activist, a lay Buddhist leader, chaplain, pastoral counselor, practical theologian, and teacher, and you write that in these roles, you witness both the ignorance and enlightenment that we're capable of. You say that what concerns you most is how our ignorance is exploited to a point that distorts our humanity. Can you say more about this?

Pamela Ayo Yetunde: Yes, I think we all have seen the embrace of lies, alternative truths, so to speak, alternative facts, and the danger of embracing those alternative realities on our very lives. Just think about the recent past when COVID hit the United States. Under the former president, there was an unwillingness to tell the truth about how dangerous this virus was. And so the embrace of ignorance, even in the fights we see amongst parents and school boards, parents and librarians, and the violence to have certain books removed is worrisome. And so I think what I'm trying to do also in this book is just help people stand up for truth.

James Shaheen: You say that our values are exploited, that our humanity can be distorted. Can you also say something about that?

Pamela Ayo Yetunde: Well, let's begin with what we think we're entitled to. Some people think that based on their heritage, their racial heritage, that they are entitled to this country, and that race-based entitlement then dictates how other people should be treated, typically, as less than human. And if we can, through the media largely, be convinced that people who don't look like other people are therefore less human, then they will be treated with disrespect, oppression, violence. And I think we know, those of us who have paid attention to how genocide goes down in various countries, oftentimes, it begins with othering. The press is used to convince people that that other group of people is about to attack, or they are scum, and therefore, those of us who aren't them need to be about the business of eradicating them from the planet. And I believe the United States, what we've seen, the United States is no different than any other country. Our beliefs can be distorted, and we can be turned against each other.

Sharon Salzberg: It's so compelling hearing you speak, and I was thinking my Jewish genes are shuddering in recognition. And yet you write that you believe that our true nature is to care for others, yet distraction and delusion keeps us from this natural impulse. I know sometimes it's so hard when we open to the suffering, which is so important to open to, to actually remember, if we, in fact, do believe that our true nature is something else. So can you say more about this true purpose and what leads us astray?

Pamela Ayo Yetunde: I just think maybe as a human being who was cared for by other human beings, who could only be who I am today but for the care of other human beings, and I don't know any other human being who has been raised in any different way, that this is just part of our nature, to care for each other. And then somewhere along the way, we forget. We forget that this is what we need. Or we think that only other people are responsible for providing that type of nurturance to others. The teachings on lovingkindness teach us to not discriminate against others, that all of us, human and nonhuman, are in need of this love and kindness.

Sharon Salzberg: You describe this book as a plea to humanity to see each other as kin, to create a world where we adopt one another as relatives. It's like the epitome of lovingkindness. Can you say more about what it means to adopt one another and to realize our kinship? Because we know it can't possibly mean that you like everybody or you're going to bring them home for dinner or even come into their presence.

Pamela Ayo Yetunde: Exactly. Well, we all come from families. Chances are we all have had an experience of having been hurt in the family, not being seen, not being heard, not being supported by family members. And yet they are still family. Some of us have had experiences in choosing our families, families of choice. And so we know that we can make commitments to one another, we can bond to one another, we can attach to one another. Regardless of our DNA,

we have that capacity. We have interspecies families. We have cats and dogs, some people have rats, others have ferrets, some have birds, and we treat them like we treat our human family. Some people would say maybe they treat their dogs better than they treat their cousins. Nevertheless, there are many experiences where we adopt, and we adopt because we feel a deep love, not necessarily a like, but a deep love. And we can expect that any entity we are in relationship with will cause us some distress along the way. We cause each other distress, and we experience distress. That is just part of the human condition. As we know, that's what Buddhism teaches, right? The Buddha didn't want the distress, did everything that he could to avoid it, realized that he couldn't, and then proclaimed the middle way. The middle way is not about being joyful all the time. It's about being able to abide with things that disturb us and things that don't disturb us. And so we have the capacity, it's been proven over and over, we have the capacity to adopt one another, regardless of the fact that Sharon, you are Jewish. It doesn't matter to me that you're Jewish. You can be my kinfolk. James, I don't know how you identify. It doesn't matter. It really doesn't matter to me. As someone who has adopted a child, I know that these things don't matter. What matters is love.

Sharon Salzberg: That's beautiful. You know, you're reminding me that you draw from Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail," where he describes us as living in the "inescapable network of our mutuality." I wonder if you could say more about what you've learned from that vision of mutuality and how does it relate to Indra's net?

Pamela Ayo Yetunde: I can say about mutuality that when I feel it, I feel whole, I feel connected, I feel appreciated. I feel like we can have an exchange of equals, and I already know we are equal. As equals, there are going to be times where I'm going to need to reach out because I'm vulnerable, and there are going to be times where you need to reach out because you are also vulnerable. I'm not saying that our relationships have to be tit for tat, reciprocating one act of kindness with another act of kindness as if we're tallying up our kind acts. But what I'm saying is

that I recognize you, I believe that you recognize me, and there are certain things that we are both going to experience, all three of us are going to experience, all human beings will experience, and then we also have the particular things that only a few of us will experience. This is the nature of being human. And again, if we just go back to the nature of being human is to care for one another, and there's no shame in that. Oftentimes, we don't get it right, and I always encourage people, try not to dwell in the fear of not doing it right, but err on the side of compassion and then apologize if you don't get it right.

Sharon Salzberg: That's great. You know, you say that our task is to reflect our mutuality with as little distortion as possible. So can you say something about what gets in the way?

Pamela Ayo Yetunde: What gets in the way…so many things. One is our self concept. That gets in the way. There's a part of us that is, some would say that has to be, a little narcissistic in order for us to get out of the bed in the morning and believe we can accomplish anything, which still kind of clouds our view of others. But when we become so self-absorbed, making sure we get everything we want when we want it, how we want it, then you can't see anybody else. You can't feel anyone else. It's not possible to feel the resonance of another, even when you're in the same space. So this is one of the beauties of Buddhism, the philosophy, the psychology, the practices, is to practice decentering yourself so that other people can have space. And when we decenter ourselves, then that creates the capacity to mirror one another better.

Sharon Salzberg: Beautiful.

James Shaheen: You know, I've discovered that one way of not seeing the other is by being really, really busy. And it's a kind of self-absorption that closes me to feeling anything for anyone else. One lesson you emphasize is the importance of being in dynamic relationship with those we believe to be our opposite. So often, it's difficult enough for those we consider to be our kin, but

those we consider to be our opposite. What does it look like to cultivate such a relationship, and how can contemplative practices support us in doing that?

Pamela Ayo Yetunde: Yeah, it's really interesting about opposites. Within the human species, is there really an opposite?

James Shaheen: Probably not.

Pamela Ayo Yetunde: I don't think so. So to think of it that way, to speak of it that way, which we do and have for generations, is a distortion. There are no opposites within the human species. We come in different forms, but there's not an opposite. So if we can think of ourselves as a continuum, I guess you can put it that way, of a species. And it does bother people that there aren't opposites, male and female, Black and white, young and old, these dualities that we tend to live in and become distorted by. If we could allow ourselves to get out of that busyness, James, that you're talking about, that busyness that distracts us from our very being and just sit with ourselves and sit with ourselves over and over again and especially bring meditation into the equation, I hope that what we find is that many of the things that we think about ourselves really are just constructions, constructions of our own minds, constructions created by society, and we have greater capacities for things that our personalities prevent us from imagining. Living in a more contemplative way I believe allows us to see other people beyond the social constructs we've created and have projected onto them.

James Shaheen: Yeah, I think the centrality of contemplative practice is everything. It used to be I had to find myself in extremis before I could open or I was just too tired to do anything but stop, and the contemplative practice for me seems like a choice to stop rather than being forced to stop. Right. So thank you.

Sharon Salzberg: So throughout the book, you describe the ways that our society is trapped in the rising tide of white supremacy, which you refer to as white existential angst or white existential paranoia. What do you mean by white existential angst, and why do you prefer to use that term instead of white supremacy?

Pamela Ayo Yetunde: Well, I don't believe in the concept of white supremacy. That's the first part. I do believe that some people believe that they are better than others, but I don't believe it. I never have. So my question is, as a Buddhist practitioner, as a spiritual practitioner, what's beneath that? What's beneath all this bravado that is so destructive? And I think finally, we're getting to some truth. When you can get white nationalists to march without hoods on, now we're getting to some truth because we can see their faces. And when we can go from white supremacy language to replacement theory language, now we're getting somewhere. You fear you're going to be replaced. That is an existential fear. And it is a fear that actually transcends race. Many people believe that they are going to be replaced one way or another. So I would like us, because we do share this planet and we do share resources, we share neighborhoods, let's be in conversation about what really matters. What really matters is our fear. And what if we could say to one another in a way that wasn't so hyped up, where our nervous systems weren't so hyped up that we can't hear each other, what if we could relax and say, "Ah, I get it now, you feel insignificant, I can support that, I can support your significance because I see you. You are in the field of lovingkindness." I get it. I know what it's like to feel insignificant. As a matter of fact, as a Black person, it is a constant stream that we have to counter in order to live lives of significance. So I get it. And that's why I prefer to use this terminology rather than white supremacy, because the use of that term I don't feel is really getting us to the root of the issue.

Sharon Salzberg: You link it to the concept of *dukkha* or suffering in Pali language, the language of Buddhist texts, and you write that the suffering of insignificance and the clinging to entitlement, which I think is a brilliant phrase, the suffering and significance and the clinging to

entitlement create a toxic mix of emotions that can pit us against one another. Can you say more about how white existential angst is a form of dukkha? I mean, you said it so well, and I think it's so hard to realize in the moment and so important.

Pamela Ayo Yetunde: I can't talk about it from a lived experience because I'm not white. I can't speak of it in that way. But I can just say that you know the suffering when you see it. To be enraged against a whole group of people or groups of people who have nothing to do with your life, don't even know that you exist, but you are enraged because of their very existence, you think that you're owed something, by whom? Who owes that to you? How are you going to go about getting that? What are you going to take in order to get it? And as Buddhist practitioners, we know, however you get it, the happiness or having it is not everlasting, so It's going to be a temporary experience. The violence that comes out of this mindset is tremendous. Scores of people die because of this mentality. So I am heartened by the fact that people can enter into this mindset and can also exit from it. We've seen that in our lifetimes. So I hope that all those causes and conditions for helping people exit from race-based entitlement and the suffering of insignificance, that people find their way out, and when they come out, that we are there to forgive them and, as Buddhist practitioners, help them find refuge in goodness.

Sharon Salzberg: It reminds me of this time I was on the stage speaking in Berkeley, and there was a large number of speakers in this particular event. The stage was really packed with people, some from the US, some from Tibet, and somebody asked a question. He raised his hand, and he said, "I know from looking within myself that when I act recklessly, I cause more harm. It's coming from a place of pain. But I look at some of these people like politicians, and they seem so self-satisfied. They don't look like they're in pain. They just look like they're having a fine time." And he said, "I just can't get there and have some compassion." It was so interesting to me because all of these people on the stage, no one said a word. But you just suggested something that can be really quite hard to do, like looking underneath the violence, underneath the action,

underneath the hatred and sensing the pain that is there, which is the only way to have compassion.

Pamela Ayo Yetunde: And the lack of purpose. I mean, I think one of the things, unfortunately, that the previous administration provided for some people is now they have purpose. They feel like they are patriots. They feel like they are standing up for their president, their former president. They are willing to go to war, willing to enact a coup, an insurrection, and go to prison. What bothers me the most and what led me to write this book is that I think every day, well-meaning people like us have been swept up into something that we never wanted to do, we're never prepared to do, we're not raised to do. And that concerns me.

James Shaheen: In response to this, you suggest that we need a compassion revolution, and part of the compassion revolution is learning to face the reality of death. Can you tell us more about your own journey to working as a hospice volunteer and, later, a chaplain?

Pamela Ayo Yetunde: I never heard of hospice until I had a cousin who died in hospice. And I was in law school, so I was preparing for a completely different path. So in my last year of law school, my cousin's dying. He died in hospice. Before he did, I got a chance to spend four days with him. And I was surprised that I was able to do that. Nothing in my life that I was aware of prepared me to do that. And I wanted to be the kind of person who could be a hospice volunteer, to be able to sit with people who I didn't know, because they were alone and they were dying. So that was actually ten years before I actually became a hospice volunteer, because I kept telling myself, "Ah, I can't do that, I'm not ready." I was living in San Francisco at the time and through a series of events finally said, "OK, the time has come. I am going to volunteer with hospice." I didn't know anything about Buddhism. I didn't know anything about Zen. But in San Francisco, there's a place called the Zen Hospice Project, which is now called the Zen Caregiving Project. But at that time, it was the Zen Hospice Project. This was back in the olden days where we had

phone books. So I took out the phone book. I went down the list of hospice organizations and called each one of them. And Zen Hospice Project was the only one that offered a year-long training program. and I knew I would need as much training as possible. That's how I came to do hospice work: through the Zen Hospice Project. Eric Poché was the incredible volunteer coordinator. And then one thing led to another. So I use those teachings, that experience, in my work as a pastoral counselor. As a Zen practitioner, we are often reminded that this life is precious, and it's short and not to be squandered. So I try to remember that in my life and in my work.

James Shaheen: It's interesting that when we do contemplate our own deaths and the brevity of our lives, we're more likely to feel compassion for others. Do you think that's fair to say?

Pamela Ayo Yetunde: Yes. What about for ourselves, though? Is that where you are going?

James Shaheen: Yeah, that's the hard one.

Pamela Ayo Yetunde: We know our stories oh so well. We have so many regrets: oh, if we had done it this way, or we should have known better, or this or that unresolved issues. But it's worth it. Even if we were to practice self-compassion not for ourselves but for the possibility of improving our relationships with others. That's a good enough motivation.

Sharon Salzberg: So you suggest that we broaden our understanding of caregiving to a communal and national level, learning to become caregivers to our community so that we can move, in your words, from brutality to mutuality. Can you say more about what it looks like to apply a spiritual care approach to society as a whole. And I'm also curious, because of this last conversation, how one deals with burnout in such a vast kind of vision.

Pamela Ayo Yetunde: Well, as someone who has burned out, I had a significant burnout over twenty years ago. I can say from that experience, I just got on autopilot, and I would just say "yes" to everything. I was moving at a very fast pace. I lost contact with my actual experiences, my actual emotions, my actual feelings. Going back to what James was talking about being busy, it was just being so busy but also, I would say, fulfilling a situation that I set up for myself. I had set it up, and it was working. And so I had to show up for what I had set up until I couldn't anymore. So I have vowed to never burn out again because the recovery was so long. I understand, Sharon, the concern about having such a vision for caring for the world, knowing that actually living that day by day by day could wear us out. So I'm not talking about being like a chaplain in a hospital that is populated by the world. But what I do mean is, as a chaplain, one of the things that I've learned is that when we are working in public, pluralistic settings, which our world is, we are to treat people not based on our own proclivities but based on the fact that each person has their own story, has their own history, has their own culture, has their own commitments, and has their own causes and conditions that has led them to being ill. They are in a state of vulnerability, and so are we. But from chaplain to patient, it is understood that it is the patient who has chosen not to be in the situation, and the chaplain has chosen to be in the situation. Therefore, the chaplain has more power, if you will.

In order to reduce the chance of abusing that power, we bracket the power, if you will. We bracket the power. We recognize that we are vulnerable. Hopefully that leads us to be humble and therefore open to all these people who have come to this place through their own journey. We are not able to care for everyone all the time. But we can adopt a posture of nonharming toward almost everyone. And that's what I'm suggesting we begin with: all of us adopt the posture of nonharming, recognizing that most of the people who are ill are not actually in the hospital. That's for acute situations. Most of the people who are ill are in the world. And so why not treat the world as a place of healing and ourselves as an agent of healing? And the communal part is that we don't do it by ourselves. We're not superpeople, right? We're not superheroes. We are people just like everyone else. And the more we can create communities of care where we

share the responsibility of caring with each other, the greater chance we have of living our best lives, our most connected lives. And that is another way of casting Indra's net.

Sharon Salzberg: And I think what's also important coming from this conversation is just the reminder that we've got to be in the net too, you know. It's not to the exclusion of ourselves because that is such a strong temptation. I've seen so many caring people who are doing the work taking care of people in society, and it's so hard to think of oneself and restoring and repair and resilience, like I just need a break, or I need to breathe, o4 I need to have some compassion for myself for a moment.

Pamela Ayo Yetunde: That's what I love about organizations like CaringBridge, for example, making it easier for us to care for and about each other and build communities of care where we can share the responsibilities.

James Shaheen: Ayo, you were speaking earlier of feeling insignificant, but you also write about the fear of vulnerability, which I see as related, and you write, "rather than meet the needs of vulnerable people, we are increasingly blaming them for being vulnerable," sometimes even believing their vulnerability to be contagious. I don't want to be around this person, I may end up this way too. Can you say something more about our fear of vulnerability and how it closes us off from others and ourselves?

Pamela Ayo Yetunde: James, I'm thinking about the things that were said, especially in the previous administration about immigrants, that they were coming here to take stuff from us, again, that entitlement thing. No discussion about the conditions that they were leaving. Now, I know, personally, I don't like moving, and I can't imagine that I would like being forced to move because the conditions are such that it's too dangerous to live where I live. I was an asylum officer out of law school. In that role, I interviewed people from all over the world who had fled

their countries of origin because they were either being politically persecuted or they had a reasonable fear that they would be politically persecuted if they stayed or if they were returned to their country. So people come to the United States for a variety of reasons. But many people come to the United States with nothing, only the clothes on their back, their children on their hips, walking miles through forests and dangerous places to find themselves here, then put on a bus and take into some other part of the country as a political message to others. So back to vulnerability, people come in very vulnerable places. We have been invited by some to close our hearts, and our borders and other things to prevent people from coming in and quote unquote taking our things. When they do come, it is a reminder, though, of our own vulnerability. Situations can change rapidly, and we could very Well be on the receiving end of needing to leave this country. I know that's not how we have lived in the past. But given the rise in violence in this country right now, given the threats to different groups of people, at what point will we say it's too dangerous to live here?

James Shaheen: On the theme of vulnerability, which we've been discussing, you draw from the Christian parable of the Good Samaritan, where Jesus defines our neighbors as those in need. Can you say more about what this parable has taught you about our mutual vulnerability?

Pamela Ayo Yetunde: Yeah, so I grew up in the United Methodist Church, and this is a very powerful story to me and one that resonates in Buddhism, this radical generosity. I was also taught, though, that you should never question the minister. The minister somehow is an anointed person who knows more than anyone else in the church knows and has been chosen by God to deliver God's word and therefore should never be questioned. So this parable of the Good Samaritan is a lesson also on who's actually doing the good work here. Just because a person is a minister or religious leader, it doesn't mean that they're going to do what is necessary to take care of someone who is basically on the road dying. The lawyer asked Jesus, "How do I inherit eternal life?" And Jesus goes on to tell a story about the Samaritan. So it's my understanding that

Samaritans were mixed-race Jewish people but who were ostracized by other Jews. So they were a very distinct group. Why did Jesus choose to tell a story about a Samaritan and then shift the consciousness of this lawyer, this person asking the question, from valuing the religious leaders to valuing a person on the quote unquote margins of life? So that's the shift. By centering the person on the margin, the one who expresses compassion, the one who tends to the wounds of this person and then takes the person to an inn for them to be taken care of by the innkeeper, leaving a little bit of money in order to help the innkeeper take care of this person and then promising the innkeeper that they will come back and check on this person. To me, that is a great story about how we engage in communal care for one another and that it is everyone's responsibility to do it. And because there is this thing called a bystander effect, that we try to get out of the paralysis of being a bystander, regardless of who we are, regardless of whether we have the status, the power, the privilege of a leader, or we are on the margins, we can care for one another. Now, whether there's eternal life afterwards, I can't speak to that. But I can say this: that the life that we have would be best served by acting in compassion in that way.

James Shaheen: You mentioned community, and it plays a central role in your view of healing. And you draw from the Book of Job in describing how humility and forgiveness can help restore a deeper sense of community and kinship. What can the Book of Job teach us about how to be in community with each other?

Pamela Ayo Yetunde: Well, I'm pausing because I love the Book of Job, and I could go on and on. And I also know that a lot of people have read only parts of the Book of Job and rely on other people to tell them the juice in the story so they don't have to read it because by reading it, then you have to read all the lamentations from Job, all the complaining, the pain, the suffering. You have to even practice patience just to read the Book of Job. But how about this, let's just say that even the practice of patience in reading the Book of Job can serve the reader in a very beneficial way because what we often want from people who are suffering is for them to not suffer. If

they're not suffering, then I don't have to hear it. I'm not called to attend to it. I don't suffer myself. I hope through our practices, through our conversations with one another like we're having right now, that we grow in our capacity to abide with each other in our most difficult moments. It's our ability to do that that gives us faith and hope in humanity, which I think is waning these days. I want to be able to call out in my suffering and believe that someone will hear me and attend to me. And so in the Book of Job, one of the lessons that one can learn is that the release and relief from suffering comes from in part the community reordering itself to make that relief and release possible.

James Shaheen: One thing I wanted to add about Job is that you talk about his healing not coming through community only but his surrender to stillness, and his contemplation helped repair his relationships with his friends and his community. So how can surrender and contemplation support the process of communal repair and healing?

Pamela Ayo Yetunde: Oh, that is so good. If I think about the Book of Job, I think that maybe, we're just interpreting a story, but at a certain point, someone from the community said, "You're not going to get what you want this way. You need to be still." And I'm guessing that in my interpretation of the story, Job knew that was true. Sometimes when we complain, this is not a judgment about the reason for the complaint. But when we complain over and over and over, the complaints also start escalating, and it's just spilling over. We're consumed with our pain. At a certain point, we might recognize, OK, this is not really healing. I'm not resolving anything, I'm just caught up in an obsessive compulsive cycle of complaining. So maybe I should just be quiet. So I'm just going to sit down, I'm going to sit down, I'm going to be quiet and try to get a handle on myself, try to get a grip. I want to get a grip on myself. And there's nothing wrong with getting a grip on ourselves. I mean, frankly, the only person who can get a grip on us is ourselves. And it is an act of self-compassion to bring ourselves into some modicum of self-control, When we do that, when we still our minds and still our bodies, and people might

say, "I can never be still, I've got too many thoughts," it's OK. Still your body and let the rest follow in time. It's through stilling the body and stilling the mind and closing our mouths that a different understanding of our situation can arise because now we're no longer blaming anyone. We're recognizing and we are feeling into the responsibility we have to care for ourselves. And I think that when we use stillness in that way for that purpose, ideas will come. Wisdom will come. And when we stop blaming other people, people can relax around us. And when they relax around us, the dynamic tends to be we can relax around them. And when we are relaxed with each other, we can imagine a different future and cocreate that together.

James Shaheen: So you draw from the Christian practice of communion, which you see as a ritual in cosmic belonging and place, and you write, "When we are invited without conditions, without discrimination, to gather together in humility to honor the sacred and that which is greater than us, the interpenetration of our collective vibrations can give us the physical sensation of oneness, kinship, or communitas." So how can rituals support us in cultivating a sense of community and connection?

Pamela Ayo Yetunde: Ritual, for me, is a way of touching into an aspect of myself that is beyond words and beyond my conventional ways of conceptualizing things. It's full of symbols, objects, sometimes music, maybe dance, and it's with others. We have an understanding. Based on previous experiences with this ritual, we have an understanding. And so I've engaged in a variety of rituals throughout my life in different traditions. Communion is one of my favorite rituals. One of the most transforming rituals I've ever experienced was at a people of color retreat led by Thich Nhat Hanh at Deer Park Monastery. Four or five hundred of us were taking the precepts together, and it was full of pageantry and a love beyond description, a devotion beyond description. So I have rituals that I do at home, when I'm by myself, rituals that I engage in when I'm at sangha, and I really advise people to start a morning practice with a ritual that opens them up to the world that they are going to enter into. They can begin imagining their colleagues, if

they work with others, especially their most troublesome colleague, and send them some lovingkindness. I'm going to enter my workplace today with lovingkindness. Ritual means a lot to me. It helps center what is important to me to start my day.

James Shaheen: You know, it's interesting you pick communion because when I was growing up, that was the one ritual that made me feel light and connected and whole. Growing up, I lost that. But I found that again in Buddhism. Chanting is always something I enjoy doing in the meditation hall when I'm at IMS. Everybody chanting together with one voice, it's quite beautiful.

Pamela Ayo Yetunde: Right, and when we are in the prayer position, the meditation position, there's something about that submission that has an ego-altering effect.

Sharon Salzberg: One of my favorite sayings these days is that it's hard to be a human being because It's hard to be a human being. And you write that as human beings, we're continually in the process of becoming human. What does it mean to be perpetually becoming human?

Pamela Ayo Yetunde: I'm thinking about relationships, mostly. That's what I'm referring to. The more we relate with one another across our differences, real and perceived, and do it well, and by well, I mean, "Oh, I learned something in that, or I made a friend in that, or I have a new neighbor I can reach out to, or when they reach out to me, I'll be willing to lend a hand," whatever. That's what I mean. When we grow in our capacity for diversity, we are open to including people who we didn't include in the past, then we are becoming more human. We know we are beings, but we're growing in this capacity to be human, humane, kind, nurturing, parental, grandmotherly, grandfatherly, all of that. That's what I mean.

James Shaheen: Ayo Yetunde, it's been a great pleasure. Thanks so much for joining. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *Casting Indra's Net*, available now. We like to close these podcasts with a short guided meditation. So which of you two will take us out with a short guided meditation?

Sharon Salzberg: I vote for Ayo.

James Shaheen: So Ayo, would you mind taking us out with a short guided meditation?

Pamela Ayo Yetunde: I invite you to allow yourself, your body to be comfortable and well supported right where you are. Together, let's take a few deep breaths in and out. In and out, in and out. Bringing a sense of gratitude just for the ability to breathe, and to be still.

Now, bring a feeling of lovingkindness to yourself, and see if you can allow that feeling of lovingkindness to envelope your entire body. Head to toe, toe to head, throughout your entire body, immersed in the feeling of lovingkindness. And in that feeling of lovingkindness, allow yourself also to bring the feeling of compassion. Allowing this compassion to be mixed in this field of lovingkindness throughout your entire body, fingertips to fingertips, chest, pelvis, legs, loving kindness, compassion throughout your entire body. Gratitude for love, kindness, and compassion. Now bring sympathetic joy into your energetic field with a slight smile on your face, feeling joy, celebration for all the successes. Maybe it's a new birth. Maybe it's a good death. Maybe it's a graduation, an anniversary, a good act. Sympathetic joy mixed in there with the compassion and lovingkindness. And as we bring our meditation to a close, let's take a deep breath in and out and allow ourselves to feel equanimous on all sides of our bodies, top, down, left, right, middle in balance and at peace with all that is.

James Shaheen: Thank you, Ayo, and thank you, Sharon. It was great to be here with you both.

Sharon Salzberg: Thank you.

Pamela Ayo Yetunde: Thank you both. What an honor.

James Shaheen: You’ve been listening to *Life As It Is* with Pamela Ayo Yetunde. 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* and *Life As It Is* are produced by As It Should Be Productions and Sarah Fleming. I’m James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!