

Life As It Is
“Listening Fearlessly”
Episode #20 with Meredith Monk
June 28, 2023



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James Shaheen: Hello and welcome to *Life As It Is*. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. For the past sixty years, composer and interdisciplinary artist Meredith Monk has been expanding the possibilities of the human voice. A pioneer of extended vocal technique and interdisciplinary performance, she has created collaborative performance pieces that stretch the limits of music, inspiring figures from Björk to Merce Cunningham. Her most recent work, *Indra's Net*, draws from her decades of Buddhist practice and explores themes of impermanence and interdependence against the backdrop of our ecological crisis. In today's episode of *Life As It Is*, my co-host Sharon Salzberg and I sit down with Meredith to discuss the relationship between her art and her meditation practice, the importance of listening fearlessly, and why she believes art is a bodhisattva activity.

James Shaheen: So I'm here with composer and singer Meredith Monk and my co-host, Sharon Salzberg. Hi, Meredith. Hi, Sharon. It's great to be with you both.

Meredith Monk: Hi, James. Hi, Sharon.

Sharon Salzberg: Hi there.

James Shaheen: So Meredith, you're celebrating your 80th birthday this year, and you've been performing since you were a child. Over the course of your career, you've composed and performed are figures ranging from your own teacher, Pema Chödrön, to His Holiness, the Dalai Lama. So how did you first come to music, and how did you first come to Buddhism?

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Meredith Monk: Well, my mother was a singer on the radio in the 1930s. She did solo performances in music shows like the *Prudential Hour* or the *Hit Parade*, but then she became a jingle singer, so she was recording commercials. My grandfather had been a bass-baritone who came from Russia and had a concert career in New York and also had a music conservatory. And then my great-grandfather apparently was a cantor in Russia. I'm a fourth-generation singer, so music was something that was just like breathing for me, very natural. I was singing at a very young age and reading music before I read words. But I had to find my own way in a family of all singers or artists. In a way, I could have followed that path. But I knew that I liked making things at a young age, and so I wanted to make my own.

James Shaheen: And how about Buddhism? How did you come to Buddhism?

Meredith Monk: Of course, through art, like everything goes into my life. I had heard Trungpa Rinpoche do a talk in New York. I was always seeking, even when I was in school. I was a Baha'i for a while. I went to a Quaker High School, which was, in a way, a marvelous way of understanding quiet. It was very natural to have Buddhism be part of my life because I love those meetings for worship. I come from an Eastern European Jewish background, but we were not practicing. So I was searching, and I heard a talk by Trungpa Rinpoche in New York. And then I was very interested. I was very skeptical about organized religion, so I hovered about, but then Barbara Dilley, who is an old friend of mine, who was teaching at Naropa Institute in 1975, said, "Would you come and teach voice and movement?" I taught, I think, for a few days, and I did one or two performances. I also heard his talks there, and I was really inspired by first of all my students that seemed to have such an open-hearted sense of expansion and imagination, and then his talks were wonderful. I think that as a young artist, I intuitively followed these principles in my aesthetic life, but I think I was quite behind as a person. So I started realizing little by little that those principles were very fundamental Buddhist ideas that I had developed as an artist but did not know how to get them into my life at all. So little by little, I just became more and more

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involved, even though again, I was quite skeptical about a scene. And it was a scene. And then there was a certain point in my life that was maybe even ten years later that I had really entangled myself in my own neurosis. And at that time, I was in my punk period, and a friend of mine said, "Well, why don't you read *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior*?" I was like, "Oh, I don't know that hippie stuff, I don't know." And then I read it, and I was literally in tears and felt that he was really speaking to me. And I started doing the Shambhala training.

James Shaheen: You know, you mentioned the tools that you use for your art were things that you were not able to really incorporate in your life. But I've heard people say, and I think Philip Glass has said, the very same tools that he applied in art were the tools that helped him and that he applied in his practice. Do you find that to be the case?

Meredith Monk: Definitely, absolutely, because I think that art has to do with being open to listening, and I think my art always had a lot of space in it and a lot of quiet and a lot of stillness. Also, I think the idea of each piece being another world that you are literally trying to say to it, "Make yourself known," and it's coming through you has a lot to do with the meditation process of just letting things come through and not starting with any expectations at all.

James Shaheen: Your most recent project is *Indra's Net*, which is an experiential performance work that focuses on the principle of interconnectedness. So can you tell us a bit about this project and what inspired you to create it?

Meredith Monk: Well, I think for the last fifteen or twenty years, I just became very aware of trying to make art that really provides an experience of sacred space and very direct experience. So I've made a piece called *Mercy*. How does one make a piece called *Mercy*, *Impermanence*, *Songs of Ascension*? It's really in a sense contemplating principles, and then somehow the piece evolves from that, but I realized that it was a beautiful integrative process with my ensemble as

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well, they're amazing people, to make pieces about something that you can't make a piece about. Because how do you make a piece about impermanence? It's an oxymoron. So the last series of pieces, and *Indra's Net* is the third of a trilogy, have to do and had to do with our relation to nature. The first one was called *On Behalf of Nature*, and it was very inspired by Gary Snyder's article that he wrote that was called "Artists and the War against Nature." I think it was in *Tricycle*. I was so inspired by that. One of the things that I thought was so beautiful was his notion of the ancient shamanic tradition, that there were two branches of it, and one was telling the truth, and the second one was evoking energies or beings that cannot speak for themselves, and he said through dance and music, and I was thinking, "This is amazing." Because in a way, every piece I've ever made has to do with nature in one way or another, but how does one center on that idea, and what do you do, really? Because I was thinking a lot about ecology, of course, at that time and our Earth, and the way that I work, I don't use a lot of words in my music, and actually, my work is very interdisciplinary, so there's a lot of movement. I use film a lot or video and staging and lighting and very visual kind of work. So I didn't think that my work would really be right, for example, to do a kind of tract about don't throw away your plastic or that kind of direct confrontation with our environmental challenge. With Gary Snyder, what really interested me and excited me was I just felt that I could evoke the processes of nature, and in a sense, it was a kind of a piece that was an elegy for what we're in danger of losing, a contemplative piece and very abstract in a way. But at the same time, I would want people to leave with just that sense that what we have is so precious. Our moments are so precious.

James Shaheen: Right, we recently had the novelist Ben Okri on the podcast to discuss the role of the artist in times of ecological crisis. So I'm curious, how do you think about the role of the artist in these times?

Meredith Monk: Well, as I said, I think each artist has got to find a way of being a benefit to sentient beings. What is the way that I as a person can evoke something that will be maybe

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inspiring to people or will be something that's very truthful? I go back to early culture where people were making ritual forms entreating nature, in a sense, you could say, with a relationship to something really happening during that ritual or that form. And so we don't quite have that in all of our Western European tradition. But I would like to have that deep sense of people, again, just really feeling appreciative of what we have and how precious that is. So the second piece in this trilogy was called *Cellular Songs*. I was going deeper into the fundamental unit of nature, which is a cell. I had started working on music for two other women and me, Katie Geissinger and Allison Sniffin, these very complicated little a capella pieces where you didn't know who was singing. And at the same time, I was reading a book by Siddhartha Mukherjee called *The Emperor of All Maladies*, which is a history of cancer starting from ancient times. What I was very inspired by was his description of the fundamental way that a cell works, which is very interconnected. It's very interdependent. It's cooperative. It's not competitive. It's very complex communication. And I thought, well, that is a wonderful metaphor of What a society could be. And then at that time, the political situation, Trump was coming up, and I was sensing a real patriarchal impulse coming back up in the society, and so I decided that I felt that it would be important to do the piece with five women as a society of care rather than conflict, of generosity rather than selfishness, of gentleness rather than violence. So it was a wonderful piece to work on, and now the third part of the trilogy, which is *Indra's Net*.

James Shaheen: Could you just say quickly what Indra's net is so all of our listeners will know?

Meredith Monk: Indra's net is a legend in the Hindu-Buddhist tradition. I think that these stories are like teaching stories. They are legends that embody spiritual principles, and this one embodies the principle of impermanence. The story is there was an enlightened king, and I think in the Hindu tradition, he's a deity. He built a net that covered the whole universe. And within each intersection of the net is an infinitely faceted jewel that reflects all the other jewels. So you really feel that anything that you do affects everything else. And the thing that's also beautiful

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about it is I remember my original visualization was that all the jewels are the same, but actually not. Each jewel is unique, and yet we are all connected. So that was very inspiring to me on many levels: spatially, how could I work with this musically, and then just this idea in the world that we're living in now.

Sharon Salzberg: That's so beautiful. I'd never really thought about each jewel being a different cut, so to speak.

Meredith Monk: I learned that later, and that was so amazing. I started thinking about it ten years ago, how would I do this? I worked on music during the teens, and then I started rehearsing. I was teaching at Harvard in the spring of 2020, and they gave us This wonderful building that's an arts lab building, and I started working with my ensemble. And lo and behold, after one week, there we had a pandemic, and I was thinking, "Am I too late with this idea of interdependence, because we're all experiencing this?" Sometimes I think that an artist is a kind of antenna of the society, and you're sort of doing warnings, you know, "Wake up a little bit" kind of thing. But I thought, "Oh, my gosh, I'm too late." But then I realized, no, this piece hopefully is a kind of antidote to the pain that people are going through and then also a wake-up call that we're all going through the same thing, and this is a great opportunity to understand how we all are one and that all these conflicts and politics and everything are such a waste of time. I mean, it's just a waste of time.

Sharon Salzberg: Well said. Meredith, you've compared making art to jumping from the edge of a cliff, and you say that being an artist is learning to tolerate the fear of the unknown. Can you say more about the relationship between your art and the space of not knowing? How do you work with mystery and uncertainty?

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Meredith Monk: I'm terrified every time. You know, there are two different ways of thinking about making art. Some people make, in a sense, a more product-oriented way of doing things. There's nothing wrong with that, finding something and then refining it. But my way has been always to try to start from zero as much as possible and to try to learn to tolerate the unknown. And it's really hard every time. But I think one of the things that's very interesting about it, well, it's a beginner's mind idea. I think what's really interesting about it is that that's what the process is. It's tolerating being in the unknown. What happens with me is I feel incredible fear after all these years, sixty years of making work, and then I just start, and I say to myself, "Be playful, Meredith, remember playfulness," and I just start. And then a tiny little clue, it's all a bit like being a detective, a tiny little clue will come up, and then I get kind of interested in that, and little by little, the interest and curiosity takes over, and the fear is not there so much.

James Shaheen: Meredith, you've written that the process of creation is a process of uncovering, listening to what a given work of art wants and letting that unfold naturally. I found that interesting. Can you say more about your artistic process?

Meredith Monk: Well, I think every piece is very different. Pieces have different sources. Sometimes it will be more the music, and then I'll go into rehearsal and try to do staging and the piece doesn't want it, for example. Sometimes I have a visual idea, and then is there music that's part of this? So that's part of the unknown. I'm so grateful to be doing something that I love all these years and also to have mystery, to affirm mystery and magic in this world, because I feel that everything is so filled in for all of us. I mean, it's so addictive, and to remember that you can't see everything and you can hear everything and you can't label everything is a wonderful thing. What I find as I go along is there is a certain point, I mean, I can trace all the work, you know, the shoemaking, you know, I'm at the piano, and I can remember this particular material came up and I've worked very, very hard. But what I find is that at a certain point, the piece itself

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does make itself known and there's this magic, you could say birth of an entity, like the entity makes itself known. It just becomes so miraculous actually.

James Shaheen: You also write that your process involves long periods of waiting for curiosity to overtake the terror of the unknown. What is that waiting like, and how has this practice of waiting influenced how you pay attention to the world around you?

Meredith Monk: Well, I think the thing that was very interesting about the pandemic, I'm sure you'll agree, is that we were living every day in the unknown. And what's in the back of our experience, that we are living in the unknown moment to moment, became the foreground. There was a correspondence between working on an art piece, but the way we were all living was we did not know what was going to happen from one minute to the next. In a way, that was a great opportunity to be aware that we are living in the unknown. We do not know. The pandemic was a very interesting time for me. My creative energy was really flowing, and I was determined to somehow keep on working on *Indra's Net* and bring it to life in however way I could, and we did not know how long this pandemic was going to last. Maybe I would have to find a completely new form for this piece. Maybe it wasn't even going to be a performance piece. Maybe it was going to be a video piece or something like that. And that was very interesting. I found that it freed my mind a lot. And then of course, practice during that time became something that was so enriching and so healing. Practicing, really sitting, was so healing, and I found a wonderful community online that I'm still going to every day to sit. And that was very, very healing for me.

James Shaheen: Well, I suppose we really were living moment to moment in the unknown, but maybe it also highlighted that we in a certain way always are. Talking about *Indra's net*, as Sharon has often pointed out, just the intensity of the sense of interconnectedness. You know, this virus kind of connected us all. Sharon has often spoken about that. But you also say that when

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you're stuck on a piece, you'll say, "Please make yourself known"—I love that, sort of like abracadabra—and then try to stay out of its way. What is it like to stay out of the way?

Meredith Monk: Well, I think part of it is just knowing that it's not that important. I mean, it is and it isn't. The failure is OK. Because I think that's a lot of our fears about everything that we do in our lives. It's sort of like, really in a way, does that really make that much difference in the universe, and aren't we going to learn a lot from that? So it's trying to get through that and just know that you can have certain kinds of trust, one way or the other. I think being an artist involves faith, as does being a human being. We were talking about that the other day in the meditation group about the faith that there is Buddha nature, the faith that underlying everything, there's Buddha nature or basic goodness, That's a kind of faith, particularly in this dark world.

James Shaheen: Talking of faith, in an interview with *Tricycle* several years ago, you spoke about fearless listening, I imagine that takes faith too, or listening with all of your being. What have you learned from listening fearlessly?

Meredith Monk: I think that applies to both making a work and also performing. I always say performing is a prototype of the possibility of human behavior because we're so in tune with each other. If one person's having a hard night, everybody's pulling, you can tell by just the first note that comes out of someone's mouth or their face. I mean, we know each other so well, and it's really such a generous and vulnerable situation. I think live performance is such a beautiful, beautiful experiential situation in life because we are that vulnerable. We could fall on our faces or anything could happen. And I think being in the same room with an audience and the energy is going back and forth between us and the audience and their energy is coming back is something that I really want to affirm in my life because the live situation is very different than the screen, very different from the media. Something is really happening. I mean, that's the same when you are in the room with a teacher giving a talk where energy is real. I don't think that the screen will

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ever be able to replace that, and I hope that in the future that people will really know the power and the beauty of that.

James Shaheen: I'm so glad to hear that.

Sharon Salzberg: I'd like to pick up on a couple of phrases that you use, which I found kind of stunning, the first being "The piece doesn't want that." In a funny way, it reminds me that I had an acupuncture treatment the other day, and the acupuncturist put three needles in my ear, and they kept falling out. And then she'd try again, and they'd fall out. She finally said something like "Those points don't want it." I didn't know they had a say! It's just kind of the aliveness of everything and the aliveness of the created piece, which is also creating at the same time.

Meredith Monk: Well, what's really interesting is sometimes it also involves throwing away the thing that you love the most, which is so hard. "Oh, I love that section," and then the piece doesn't want that, and so then you have to throw it away, and then everything falls into place. So pain is part of the process, and I think that that's OK. I just feel like you're really making a commitment to go through that, and you do come out the other side. That's part of our lives.

Sharon Salzberg: Well, it's also very connected to the other phrase, which is this idea of getting out of the way, which reminded me of when I was writing a book called *Faith* and I was many times very stuck. It was quite hard. I was talking to the writer Susan Griffin, and she was kind of coaching me, and she said, "You've got to stop thinking of yourself as the person writing this book and think of yourself as the first person who gets to read this book." Best piece of advice.

Meredith Monk: That's wonderful. What I always say to my students or young people is it's actually not about me at all. It's not about us. It's about what's coming through us, our inspiration, and it's what we have to give.

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Sharon Salzberg: And especially I found writing about topics like love and faith. If it were me, I would get very kind of highfalutin, you know, too puffed up, and it would just be all wrong and be terrible, actually.

Meredith Monk: How do you do that, Sharon? How do you write about love?

Sharon Salzberg: I try to get out of the way and stay grounded.

Meredith Monk: Wonderful. Your work has meant a lot to me and many, many people. And very helpful.

Sharon Salzberg: Thank you so much. So you've written that the experience of creating is as close to meditation as anything you can think of, particularly given the combination of focused attention and open relaxation to whatever arises. So can you say more about that connection between your meditative practice and your creative practice?

Meredith Monk: Well, the creative practice takes longer. It's not as heightened a consciousness of that. You almost have to think back over the process of making something to realize that you've kept on staying open at the same time you're focused. But performing really is that. I guess in our lifetimes, we have a handful of performances that you remember where you are truly one with your material. There's no you. It's like you are truly one with your material. You're absolutely pinpoint focused and at the same time very, very relaxed and open to what's going on in the moment. And I think that is the beautiful thing about performing is it's so present. You're in nowness. And in those performances, the judge, the observer, the guy or gal in your mind that's going "You're flat" or "You're slow" or whatever is not there. It's kind of a miracle. There is a little voice going "Wow" in the best sense of the word. But in some of my pieces, there's one

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piece called "Hocket," which is a duet, and it's really fast. A hocket in music is that each person has one note, and then you throw those notes back and forth, and it makes a melody. So you're just going one person, the other person, one person. It's like a moving meditation. If you have one thought that comes into your mind, you're off. You're out. It's like musical chairs. That's another example of how now you have to be, how present, because you're just in your body. You're just one with your body and the material.

Sharon Salzberg: There are so many things that you're saying that really do describe making art as a kind of spiritual practice, including in writing they say, "Kill your darlings," like the phrase you're so proud of and you love more than anything, and then your editor says—

James Shaheen: The best is always cut off the first three paragraphs.

Meredith Monk: Oh, torture.

Sharon Salzberg: There's a lot of letting go. When you talk about performing, you know, I would think one of the most interesting things must be when you've kind of flubbed it or you've made a mistake, having to just continue on or come back.

Meredith Monk: You have to forgive yourself. That's the first thing. You have to forgive yourself. Something again, in that "Hocket" piece, wow, you know, so here's the thing. You're going, note, note, note note, note. It's going really fast. And then you're looking at this person like a deer in the headlights because one person's made the mistake, then you've got to figure out with your eyes, "Are we going on or are we going back?" You know, after doing it a thousand times, it's still deer in the headlights. So the mistakes are very interesting. And if I'm doing solos, I think it was Thelonius Monk who said, "Make something out of your mistakes." So my ensemble also knows that if I make a mistake, I'll repeat it a few times. That's another strategy.

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But it's also again helping that other person, just moving on. Actually, in the last performance that I did in New York, I was struggling. I went off stage, and I said to two of my wonderful colleagues, "Ugh, I had such a hard time." They said, "Delete that. It was incredible." And then people came up to me and said, "That was so incredible. You were on fire. You're a rock star." And then I realized, you know what, we are the last person in the world to judge what happened. How dare we even think that we're a judge of the experience? Because sometimes you can have a performance where you thought, "Oh, that was so wonderful." And then when you listen to it, it's like, "Oh, my goodness, what was that?" So I think that's a great lesson for us in our lives that we just have to just do, give, be.

Sharon Salzberg: Well, you've talked about trusting the emptiness, both in meditation and in music, and the practice of coming back again and again. So is this tied together to what we were just talking about?

Meredith Monk: Definitely. The processes are so similar. It's just a matter of how much time each of those processes take. But basically, I think the process is the same, very much the same.

Sharon Salzberg: You described making art as a bodhisattva activity where the inner transformation and growth that result from dharma practice flow into the work, and the work in turn becomes an offering. Can you say something more about that transformative process?

Meredith Monk: I feel in these late years of my life, I've been more aware in a very conscious way of how much my practice has gone into the work. I would say that as a young artist, I didn't think of them in such an integrated way. That gave me pain because I felt that I have my art practices over here and my dharma practice is over there. My teacher is Ani Pema Chödrön, and she said, "I never knew that you were struggling with that, Meredith." Little by little, I feel that I really see how the dharma practice is like a ground or a foundation, that the spirit of that

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underlies every piece, in a sense, and that I'm very aware of the time I have left on earth that I really want to make art that has a healing aspect to it and that really gives people some sense of affirming life. I really want that. So there was a funny story that was related to Pema saying that to me, because we had had dinner and it was one of her teachings that Omega. The next day, there was a young woman who asked a question. She said, "Well, I'm a painter, and I'm afraid if I meditate, then my art is not going to be good anymore because my art comes from my pain and my neurosis, and I'm expressing myself," and Pema said, "Well, I know somebody that could answer that, Meredith." And I was like, "Oh, no, help." There were 600 people there. I said, "Well, you know, to tell you the truth, I've really found that my practice has just made my art grow more." I think that that's a myth, also, that we have in the Western European tradition that you have to cut off your ear or you have to be a person that's suffering. We all suffer, but I mean that the neurosis is what feeds the artwork. And I really don't believe that.

Sharon Salzberg: Well, I've heard that in one form or another from many, many vocations and livelihoods. People in some competitive field of business will say, "I'm afraid of losing my edge, I'll get complacent." Certainly, I've heard it from artists and creative people over and over again, like, "I've got to be in turmoil, that it's only from enormous pain that great art can come." And so I've really thought about that a lot, because it's such a prevalent question. First of all, it is extremely Western, so it's very parochial in a certain way, it's just a certain point of view. And it also has limitations because many artists will talk about love and connection and so many things.

Meredith Monk: Exactly. There's a difference between committing to pain that, of course, is going to exist in the creative process. But there's a different kind of awareness, I think, when you practice because I think that chaos and turmoil is actually kind of unconscious, whereas I think when you practice, of course, there's going to be the pain of something not coming up easily. You're going to have to work hard. I mean, you're committing to work really hard. The other part of that is also that I feel that they'll always be dark aspects of my work, too. I feel like It's very

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important that work also has sadness as well as joy, that it has some sense of a reflection of this world that we're living in and not some kind of tweet, tweet, heaven, heaven, everything is great. I don't think that is good art, really. So it has all those qualities within it. And I've also always felt that even calling something a comedy or tragedy, like, for example, I use humor a lot in my work. I love comedy. I feel like you can do a very deep piece. Years ago, I made a piece about World War Two, but there was a very comic section in that. If you go to Shakespeare, in the middle of a tragedy, there will always be one moment where there's kind of the release and universality that comedy has. So I think that's the thing is that a work of art can have that richness of the different centers of our being. It can have a full range of emotion. It can have the spiritual awareness. It can use our intellect. It can be physical. It can deal with perceptual modalities. In art, we're dealing with the senses. So it can be that rich as a kind of affirmation of not only the artist but of all of us as human beings, our possibilities of the richness of our experience. Hopefully, it's a prototype for that.

Sharon Salzberg: Actually, you've described the paramitas, or different qualities like love or wisdom or patience, or these qualities known as perfections in Buddhist teaching, influence the different stages of your artistic process. I'm wondering if you can say some more about how you work with these qualities and how they inform your art.

Meredith Monk: I don't even know how to get it because I'm still working on that. But I can tell you, patience, for example, is one. I feel like basically, I've been quite an impatient person in the short run, but in the long run, I'm very, very patient. So I'm working more on the impatience in the short run, trying to remember the long-run patience because I'll work on something for a long time. I'm very slow. And yet, in the moment, sometimes I'm maybe sometimes too quick. Again, that has a lot of aspects to it. Generosity is the sense that what you're doing is an offering. I saw a beautiful video of a friend, Babette von Low, who was the head of the Buddhist channel in Holland, which no longer exists, but she's a remarkable person. She gave me a video that she did

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of Dilgo Khyentse's wife, who was an herbalist, a Tibetan herbalist. She went through paramita by paramita, how the paramitas helped her in her process of making herbs, like patience of finding the exact plant, the generosity of making those herbs. Each paramita had a specific function in her process of making herbs and being a doctor. I thought that was just so beautiful.

James Shaheen: Meredith, it's interesting that you describe performance as an act of renunciation, where a performer gives up the visual modes of seeking attention and love in favor of immersing themselves in the material and becoming, to use your words, "a conduit of fundamental energies and impulses that are beyond discursive thought." This might seem counterintuitive since we might view a performer as seeking attention, and this seems very far away from renunciation. Can you say more about that?

Meredith Monk: There are certain modes of performance where you're doing that kind of mode to get that instant love, like Broadway shows, for example. I mean, that's kind of part of it. It has a more instant gratification aspect to it. But with my group, and we've worked on it so much, and it's just a remarkable group of people, each person unique, great creative minds, and very interested in their own ways. They're not all Buddhist practitioners but really evolved people. A lot of our work is very ensemble oriented, and there is something when you give up, it does have this renunciative aspect. I can't tell you the deep joy that that brings. A more quiet, deep joy. It's just the most extraordinary thing to be part of something like that where we're all in the same place at the same time sharing and together.

James Shaheen: It seems also related to getting out of your own way. It's renouncing self in a way.

Meredith Monk: It really is. It's a very quiet performance style. It's definitely not a show off kind of style at all. It's really more, as I said, becoming one with the material and then trusting

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the material and trusting that that material, that music or the movement or whatever the means is, is being received by these human beings that are in the same space at the same time, and then we are also receiving energy from them. So it's like a figure eight or an infinity sign of energy.

James Shaheen: Yeah, as I was telling you before we started, I had just seen the concert version of *Indra's Net*, and that definitely comes through in that.

Meredith Monk: *Indra's Net* is a particularly ensemble piece. The amazing thing with that "Hocket" piece that I talked about or *Indra's Net* or any piece that we're working on, energy wise, there's a kind of sense of leaning in the best sense of the word. It's sort of like passing, leaning, sharing. How many experiences do we have in our lives like that?

Sharon Salzberg: Well, I would think that *Indra's Net* of all pieces should have to display the interdependence.

Meredith Monk: Exactly.

Sharon Salzberg: I mean, if that was not doing that would be really odd.

Meredith Monk: That would be kind of odd. And yet, at the same time, it's a group of human beings, it's a community. But as we talked about the jewels, each person is so unique. I've always wanted to have people feel that they also have that space to shine, hopefully every person in that piece, including the orchestra, which is an orchestra of young people, and they also had such an amazing experience, because usually in the classical music world, they're just sitting in the pit, and they're given a score, and that's it. But they were so much part of creating the piece as well. They got their voices in there. That's the same with my ensemble. I come in with the material, but I'm very open to what they have to say about it. So I think that all of us as human beings are

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creative in one way or another. I was saying during the pandemic when I had these doubts about "Is art really that valuable," which I really believed even more and more that it is during the pandemic. But those moments of doubt came up, and I realized I would be a really bad nurse. So I think that we give how we can. And if it's given in love, it doesn't matter how it manifests if it's given in love.

Sharon Salzberg: That's very beautiful. I loved during that time seeing clips of nurses and doctors singing and dancing in the corridor. Art is what we reach for for a vision of a bigger picture and a sense of way.

Meredith Monk: I was hoping that what I was doing was helping people. I did a lot of classes during that time, which was very moving, where people from all over the world could take the workshop, and I did a lot of lectures to young people in colleges and I did a lot of interviews because I felt as an older artist that I wanted to inspire the young people to not give up. At that time, we had no idea where it was going, and some of the young people were like, "Well, we don't have a future." And I was so fortunate to come up at the time that I did when there was a community and art was really valued, so I wanted to do the best I could with that. I think that we don't know how it has impacted our lives, and all the more reason to really keep practicing and practicing, really trying to have as wide a view as possible and realize how precious life is.

Sharon Salzberg: You also discuss how very early in human history, the voice brought people together and formed communities and social bonds. How do you see your art today in terms of fostering community and connection? I want to say I resonated so much with your description of your life during the height of the pandemic because mine was so similar. I counted on and found so many riches in my own meditation practice. I was teaching an enormous amount online, and I was so struck by asking people in the chat to say where they're signing in from, Germany, Abu

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Dhabi, Australia. Oh my god, what time is it there? It was such a strong sense of community. So I'm wondering if you would like to say something about fostering community and connection.

Meredith Monk: I was continuing with a deep commitment to teaching. I teach at Garrison every year. We do a workshop called "Voice as Practice" and it was wonderful that everybody was able to come. We did do one live again last December. It was really touching. I love being there. It's a beautiful place. I feel very committed to somehow sharing the joy of making music together and doing movement, affirming the body together in groups. We're doing something called the lineage project, which is more like how does this music get passed on or the movement get passed on to younger generations, not so much legacy, but more what is our lineage? It's not only the music itself but the way we think about making art, and it seems like very young people have a lot of longing for this way of thinking about things. Everything's commodified in this world, and everything's filled in, and we're all addicted to these devices and the distraction. How can we make a counterbalance to that? I sense that the young ones, there's a real longing. So that's something I'm thinking about a lot now. People in my ensemble are fantastic teachers, and each one of them is very unique. Some of them are more movement oriented, some of them are more vocally oriented and musically oriented. How can we work on a way that this energy gets passed on and this way of thinking about things gets passed on?

James Shaheen: Well, I really do wish we had more time, but Meredith Monk, it's been a pleasure. We like to close these podcasts with a short guided meditation, so I'm going to turn it over to Sharon.

Meredith Monk: Thank you so much. It has been an enormous pleasure.

Sharon Salzberg: Thank you, both of you, so much. It's a real joy to be with you. So why don't we sit together for a few minutes. You can sit comfortably. Feel the energy in your body,

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whatever it might be, eyes open or closed, however you feel most of these. Let's start by listening to sound, which is so prevalent. Maybe loud, maybe very subtle. Notice the difference between receiving what is happening and holding onto something or pushing it away. See if you can have the sounds, unless you are responsible for responding to them, wash through you.

Bring your attention to the feeling of your body sitting, whatever sensations you discover. See if you can feel the earth supporting you and space touching you. Usually when we think about touching space, we think about picking up a finger and poking it in the air. But space is already touching us. It's always touching us. Here, too, we just need to receive it. The same with the feeling of the breath, just the normal natural breath wherever you feel it most distinctly, nostrils, chest, or abdomen. Find that place. Bring your attention there and just rest.

I remember those times in my early practice, I was so hypervigilant that I would say to myself, "You're breathing anyway. All you need to do is feel it." Let the breath come to you. Just this one breath. You don't have to be concerned about anything that's gone before or even the very next breath. Just this one. So thank you.

James Shaheen: Thank you, Sharon, and thank you, Meredith.

Meredith Monk: Thank you so much.

James Shaheen: You've been listening to *Life As It Is* with Meredith Monk. 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!