

Tricycle Talks

“Becoming the New Saints”

Episode #94 with Lama Rod Owens

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Lama Rod Owens: Do I have agency to choose my relationship to sensation, to thoughts, to emotions? Can I hold space for what arises, and can I move from reactivity to responsiveness? And for me, that's inner freedom. And that's what meditation practice is cultivating is that inner agency to choose how to be in relationship to whatever arises.

James Shaheen: Hello, and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I'm James Shaheen, and you just heard Lama Rod Owens. Lama Rod is an author, activist, and authorized lama in the Karma Kagyu School of Tibetan Buddhism. In his new book, *The New Saints: From Broken Hearts to Spiritual Warriors*, he draws from the bodhisattva tradition to rethink the relationship between social liberation and ultimate freedom. In the process, he pulls from the wisdom of the Old Saints of Tibetan Buddhism and Black liberation movements. In my conversation with Lama Rod, we talk about why he believes that the apocalypse is an opportunity for awakening, the power of connecting with our ancestors and unseen beings, why the New Saint is not necessarily a good person, and how fierceness can be a form of awakened care. Plus, he reads a prayer from his new book. So here's my conversation with Lama Rod Owens.

James Shaheen: OK, so I'm here with Lama Rod Owens. Hi, Lama Rod. It's great to be with you.

Lama Rod Owens: Thank you. Thank you for inviting me on.

James Shaheen: We're happy to have you on. So we're here to talk about your new book, *The New Saints: From Broken Hearts to Spiritual Warriors*. So to start, I'll ask you what we always ask. Can you tell us a bit about the book and what inspired you to write it?



Lama Rod Owens: Right, yeah. I think the first thing that I feel compelled to say about the book is that it's a very different book than what you may be used to. And I think people will say, “Oh, this is a dharma book,” and then they get their hands on it and then after the first chapter or the prologue will say, “Oh, what did I get myself into? Can I return this book?”

But *The New Saints* really started coming to me right after my last book was published, which was *Love and Rage*. That came out right in the summer of the quarantine in 2020, of course, and afterwards, the murder of George Floyd. And then that's what made the book so popular, you know, it's just dealing with anger and activism.

But in that kind of renewed period of activism and organizing around Black lives, I really started asking myself these same questions that I ask myself when things happen collectively, like what is my role here? What am I supposed to do as a dharma teacher, as a person in this collective? And so this idea for a guide, a manual of sorts, started really coming through, and an articulation of the bodhisattva tradition was what I got really strongly.

I needed to talk about what it meant to be good, to do good things, to try to get free, and to try to help others get free, but I couldn't just tell the same old stories again about the bodhisattva. I couldn't go back into all that mythology that many people know from the tradition. So I said that there has to be something new. And so, of course, this phrase “the New Saints” really came afterwards. Like what does it mean to be a saint? And how can I take this ideal and really reinterpret it so it actually is about what's happening in the world right now? It's really about the contemporary experience of people in bodies, in the relative, in a world that seems to be really on the edge of something catastrophic. How can I write this in a way that helps people to not just manage what was coming up for them around fear and anxiety but really give people something that they can really work with in order to bring about a different future.



James Shaheen: Very well said. With these crises, it can be so easy to slip into apocalyptic thinking. But you suggest that we are not experiencing the end of the world, but rather, quote, the end of some provocative and desperately enduring lies we have told ourselves. Can you tell us more about how you've come to view the idea of apocalypse?

Lama Rod Owens: Yeah, absolutely. You know, I think we misinterpret the meaning of the word apocalypse. I think when people are talking about apocalypse, what they're actually talking about is Armageddon, like armed conflict, war, global war, destruction of communities, and so forth.

That's what people are really thinking about. But when we talk about apocalypse, apocalypse is rooted within the study of theology, and the root meaning of apocalypse, I think coming out of the Greek, is really about unveiling, awakening. It's the energy, the action of pulling back the curtains and letting the light shine in. And if you're so accustomed to the dark, the light will be a little hard to deal with. And I think that's what's happening. The truth is being revealed, and we've been living in a kind of dark delusion for a very long time. And so for me, having said all of that, I think the apocalypse is about coming back into balance. But that rebalancing feels really painful.

James Shaheen: It's an interesting take on apocalypse, and it's one that I think makes sense. You also talk of our present crisis as a time of spiritual warfare as much as it is one of political and social warfare. So can you tell us what you mean by spiritual warfare, and how is this a spiritual crisis?

Lama Rod Owens: That phrase, spiritual warfare, was something I really had a lot of anxiety around including in the text. And that's something that up until now I would never actually use publicly. But for me, I can get really wrapped up in the political and social aspect of struggle in terms of systems and institutions that create harm. But because of my practice and because of my ancestry and just my natural inclination, I've been very concerned with the unseen and the impact



that the unseen world is having on us and vice versa. And when I talk about the unseen world, I'm talking about this experience of ancestors and deities and spirits and formless beings who are still connected to this world and who I believe are impacting us in ways that we're not extremely conscious of, but there are those of us who are. And so for me, spiritual warfare is really about how do I use awareness and love and clarity to bring a situation back into balance? And how do I develop a sensitivity to understand that I have to work between both the form world, the world of phenomena, and as well as the formless world in order to create the change that I most wish to see in the world?

James Shaheen: You know, you anticipated my next question because you suggest there are beings in the unseen world who want us to be free. I really like that idea—it's a comfort too. So what does it look like to ally with our ancestors and unseen beings?

Lama Rod Owens: Yeah, interestingly enough, this idea came from my study of anti-slavery abolition and how abolition was very deeply connected to spiritualism, to the spiritualist movement that was really beginning to happen in the northeast in New York, Boston, New York, some in the Midwest, also in Europe, where particularly radical Quakers were getting involved in seances and talking to the dead and working with mediums, and that became a huge cultural phenomenon.

But what also began to reveal itself was that there were these beings in the unseen world, people who had passed on, who were actually really concerned with ending slavery. And they began to speak through these mediums and really began to inform the anti-slavery abolition work. From there, I was like, yeah, of course, freedom is really about working between these two realms. So when I talk about the unseen world, for me, I instantly think about my ancestors, these beings who are connected to me in some way, not necessarily by blood or genetics but beings who have chosen a kind of affinity with me based upon some shared characteristic. We're members of the same communities, identity locations, of course, actual blood familial beings as well. And they



choose us as partners to support us in doing the work of liberation because anything that we do to get free or to heal from trauma and from woundedness is also helping to free them because we share this kind of karmic, energetic relationship. And so when I connect consciously to my ancestors, I'm really connecting into a really powerful resource. And for me personally, that's transformed my practice and my work around the work of spiritual liberation.

James Shaheen: So with that help, you put forth the notion of the New Saint. So what is a New Saint?

Lama Rod Owens: The New Saint is just a rethinking of what it means to be a bodhisattva right now with a particular focus on relative justice and its relationship to ultimate liberation, with a focus on identity, so not bypassing the relative but working skillfully with the relative. It is phrased and wrapped in language that I wanted to appeal to young people. I wanted it to appeal to people who aren't necessarily Buddhist identified, but who care about the world and who are interested in spirituality but maybe have never felt like the spiritual paths that they've explored really offered a clear insight into the integration of social and ultimate liberation together.

James Shaheen: Yeah, I think you are reaching young people because it was the young people in the office who said, “James, you've really got to read this book, you've really got to read this book.” I have so many books to read. And I said, “OK, I'll read it.” And I'm glad they did. So in describing the New Saint, you draw not only from Buddhist understandings of the bodhisattva but also from the Old Saints who have influenced your path, among them the organizers and activists Fannie Lou Hamer and Audre Lorde. Can you tell us about how you draw together the lineages of Tibetan Buddhism and Black liberation movements in developing the New Saint?

Lama Rod Owens: I think for me, the social liberators and ultimate liberators are actually two sides of the same coin, and I think that, for instance, these great activists and organizers like Fannie Lou Hamer, I think they were deeply connected to an ultimate expression, to what they



consider the divine, and they were pointing people back to that experience through the work of organizing folks and bringing awareness to systemic injustice. And I think that's the same thing for Harriet Tubman, for instance, who I identify also as a bodhisattva who chose to incarnate as a Black enslaved woman in order to teach us what freedom actually really means and what it looks like and who was also just deeply connected to what we can call the ultimate source or the essence or to the divine or to the sacred. When I think about my teachers and my tradition and the people that I've studied in Tibetan Buddhism, the great saints from India and Tibet and so forth, I just feel like these beings in many ways were emanating as people like Harriet Tubman and Fannie Lou Hamer and Sojourner Truth or Malcolm X or Dr. King and Audre Lorde. At this point, I don't see any difference between the Tibetan saints and these social activist saints in Black liberation. They cared about people, and they wanted people to be free. That's it.

James Shaheen: You say something that at first sounds provocative, but really it makes sense: you suggest that the New Saint is not a good person. So what's the difference between being a good person and actually practicing goodness?

Lama Rod Owens: I think it's important just to get really clear about what goodness is because I think that goodness can become an identity location where people just kind of stick themselves, and if you stick yourself in a place of just being a good person, it becomes really difficult to see where you're not practicing goodness, where you're actually creating harm. And I think that goodness can be really quite performative, particularly now in the age of social media. You can create a social media page that makes you look really good and can lead people to think whatever you want about how you're showing up.

But for me, goodness is something that I'm choosing second to second. It's not something that I'm just at and planted in. When I talk about choosing goodness in the moment or in the second, I'm saying that I'm choosing the reduction of harm and violence for myself and against others moment to moment. And that has to be active, conscious engagement, and so it becomes more



like a process, a continuum, a verb. It's something that's always being negotiated. It's always being discerned. It's never a place that I just go to and say, “This is it.” Every second is different. So I'm making different choices and understanding how to reduce harm in the moment.

James Shaheen: You say the work of the new saint is the liberation of all beings and phenomena. So how do you understand freedom, and how does freedom differ from, say, justice?

Lama Rod Owens: You know, as I was writing the book, I really began to understand that I'm much more into freedom than justice. And for me, justice feels like a stopping place like happiness can feel like a stopping place in our practice. You can get right into these things, into happiness, into equity, into justice and say, “OK, this is it.” But we're still in this experience of delusion that we call samsara that in *The New Saints* I called the carceral state, which is this experience of delusion of not being clear about what's happening and who I am.

So freedom is like, let's disrupt, let's transcend all the roots, all the causes and conditions of suffering, and to return back to remembering who we are so we don't have to do this reality thing anymore, we don't get lost in this cyclical experience that we can relate to as *The Matrix* as a cultural phenomenon, but overall, this carceral state, which binds us through delusion, and we're policed by fear and doubt and so many other things as well. So to transcend everything is my understanding of freedom, to transcend duality and binaries, to return back to a simple state of being where we just are. We are.

James Shaheen: You just mentioned justice as a stopping point, and you wrote something that really resonated with me, but I don't want it to be misunderstood, so maybe you can explain it a little bit. It's not that we don't care about justice, but you write, “We must give up on the idea of justice and commit to liberation, as some of our ideas about justice are not about complete liberation but the illusion of universal comfort for all beings.” I thought that was very interesting.



Lama Rod Owens: Yeah, so again, my goal, my agenda, which I think is the same agenda of Buddhism, is to actually transcend all of this, this whole cycle, and if you go for that, if you go for the goal of ultimate liberation, all this stuff is going to happen regardless. Justice is going to happen. Happiness, joy, comfort will actually happen as well as we're moving towards ultimate freedom.

So don't just aim for that. Aim for the very top, for ultimate liberation, and you're going to get everything. So if you go for everything, you're going to get everything. But I know going for happiness feels a lot easier, or going for justice seems much more doable. But I'm asking people to think much more expansively about the nature of existence itself, which, again, is what Buddhism is always asking us to do.

James Shaheen: You know, you write that your first experiences of freedom came in church when you learned about Jesus and about the Exodus story. How did those experiences shape how you think about freedom and abolition and spiritual abolition in particular?

Lama Rod Owens: Well, these were the earliest examples of freedom that I had growing up. I'm a Black man who grew up in North Georgia in a small Black community, I grew up in the Black church. My mother is a United Methodist minister, so these stories were quite potent for me and for a lot of Black folks growing up in this country. These are the stories my ancestors were given and offered and were allowed to study and think about.

My ancestors deeply identified with Jewish people, with the ancient Hebrews who were being held by Egypt, and the Exodus, when God delivered the Jewish people from captivity into wandering for forty years until they found Canaan. My ancestors were praying to be delivered out of slavery, just like the Jews were. And that, for me, of course, is the foundation of liberation



theology, and that became so important for me in terms of really forming my understanding of spiritual freedom, spiritual abolition, that in that way, everyone who is not free will be set free.

And it takes work, it takes prayer, it takes this work of connecting to the unseen, it takes trust and devotion and the sacred or the divine. But if we can do that, then we will get free. And I still believe that. Even as a practicing Buddhist, this is a core belief: If I trust and have devotion in emptiness, which I often describe as God, or an expression of God, then I will get free. It just feels like an attunement to how things actually are.

James Shaheen: Right. You say the work of the New Saint happens on multiple levels: outer, inner, secret, and super secret. So what does freedom look like on each of these levels, and how do these levels inform and support each other?

Lama Rod Owens: This outer, inner, secret, and super secret comes right out of Tantric Buddhism or these levels of knowing and understanding. I wanted people to understand that there are layers here to this. Ultimately, yes, it is the experience of being beyond dualism. But in the body, in the relative, it's going to look different ways.

So outer freedom is like, what does it look like to live in a culture, in a society where I have agency to make choices about the resources that I need? Do I have agency to make choices about my body? Do I have access to the other resources that I need to be well, like food, clothing, medicine, and so forth? Do I have autonomy to choose my path that feels appropriate for me, or is that dictated by other people and communities? So outer freedom is this relative freedom where we have the agency to make choices about what we need.

And then you start talking about inner freedom, and that begins to move into our experience of body and mind. Do I have agency to choose my relationship to sensation, to thoughts, to emotions? Can I hold space for what arises, and can I move from reactivity to responsiveness?



And for me, that's inner freedom. And that's what meditation practice is cultivating is that inner agency to choose how to be in relationship to whatever arises in my experience.

And then you get into secret. Of course, that secret freedom is actually connecting to the state of freedom itself, which is emptiness and space and energy, connecting to that fundamental experience because that's where we arise from. That is the nature of our minds and consciousness.

And then, of course, the super secret experience is like yeah, then we return back completely to this experience. So the secret and super secret are really about remembering who we are. It's remembrance. I've gotten distracted through delusion, and I've gotten really attached to form, and now, I am actually letting go of form, letting form dissolve back into emptiness, and letting the sense of self dissolve back into this nature of mind itself, and I just abide. And that's what I'm trying to get to: that simple abiding in a state beyond duality.

James Shaheen: You know, if you ask somebody, “Do you want to be free?,” everybody will say “Yes, I want to be free,” but you describe what you call liberation pessimism. So why are we afraid of getting free?

Lama Rod Owens: I mean, when you start really wanting to get free, you start understanding that you're going to have to leave everything behind. And even in this moment, I think about Harriet Tubman, who escaped slavery, who left the plantation. And for me, that act of saying, “You know what, I'm going to be free regardless of if I die doing it or not,” I think that's what really scares people. It's like, what's beyond this choice of getting free?

Because I know what everything else is. I'm in the world, I have this identity, I'm a part of things, I have stuff I like, but when you tell me that freedom is really the real goal, are you asking me to give up all this? And what I am actually saying is that no, I'm not asking you to give up anything.



I'm asking you to transform your relationship to things, to actually remember that there is space and choice and agency in how I relate to everything. And if I can let go of the fixation, then I can reinvest energy and practice into this experience of who I really am, which is an expression of emptiness and space and energy.

James Shaheen: Yeah, you know, another challenge in getting free is the loneliness of the work. So how have you learned to work with loneliness, and what does it mean to you to choose aloneness?

Lama Rod Owens: Yeah, absolutely. I think when you choose freedom, it's a choice that a lot of people aren't making, and that really has come out of my personal experience, where I feel like I've been really misunderstood by people who care for me because I've chosen to work towards ultimate freedom, and that seems really foreign to people. Of course, one of those earlier decisions around getting free was entering a three-year retreat, which everyone thought I was like completely out of it. You know, my family thought I was joining a cult.

James Shaheen: I like your take on cults.

Lama Rod Owens: Yeah, well, in a way I was actually joining a cult. But people just didn't get it, like why would you do something like that? And I would say because I want to get free. So that's the loneliness of a lot of spiritual practice, because you're doing something a lot of people aren't doing. Even if you're in community, even if you're in sangha and so forth, there's still a level of loneliness. Because yeah, we're working together, we're practicing together, we're supporting each other, but we still have individual experiences that can feel really isolating, and we are asked to hold that and in these moments of isolation to still understand that we're still connected, we're still part of things, but this has to be a personal experience because we individually have to consent to the work of liberation.



It's not a collective thing. It's not just like getting a bunch of people together and saying, “OK, raise your hand if you're ready to get free,” and you're like, “I'm not going to raise my hand. I'll just let them assume my hand is raised.” That's not, that's not how this works, you know, like we all have to say yes. And then those of us who say yes can form community together to support one another. But if some people are saying “Yes, or,” and if some people are saying, “Well, I don't know,” then that's going to create a kind of conflict that I think we see so much in our spiritual communities. But we haven't been able to name that this is the core of the conflict, that people actually have different agendas being here.

James Shaheen: Right, you invoke Dorothy Day's concept of spiritual loneliness as the long loneliness. So what are the particular challenges of spiritual loneliness, as well as its opportunities? I mean, I know sangha is a great thing, but even so, within sangha in the effort to get free, it can still be lonely.

Lama Rod Owens: Yeah, absolutely. And of course, Dorothy Day has been an extremely important impact person who has deeply influenced my work as a former member of the Catholic Worker Movement. Being in the movement shapes so much of this work. But it really moved me when she wrote about the long loneliness, which was the name of one of her books, and she talked about this often, this solitariness, this aloneness. And so much of that for her was about doubt, like am I actually doing the right thing? Is this what God is calling me to do? But for me, when I work with the long loneliness in my practice, for me, it's like, yeah, this is a path of developing a deep intimacy with my own experience, and that gets real isolating because I'm trying to figure out exactly what this experience is, sometimes out of the context of groups and communities. I have to know myself, and that means I have to sit with myself. And in meditation, I'm sitting with everything that arises, and that can be really exhausting and really isolating.



But more and more, if we really commit to this kind of work, then we feel the same way I have, that you begin to experience a really profound, intimate connection with all beings. I would go further and say a connection to all phenomena. And so at this point, yes, I can feel the loneliness, I can feel the aloneness that I choose, but I have never felt so connected to all beings at the same time, and both of those experiences I think happen and will continue to happen up until we reach the threshold of ultimate enlightenment. And then of course you cross the threshold, and you just let go of this illusion that you are separate to begin with.

James Shaheen: Right, you say that spiritual loneliness means that you're touching into the formless expression of love, which takes you out of a linear timeline. Can you say more about this? What does it look like to be taken out of linear time? I just interviewed Jenny Odell, the artist and writer who wrote *Saving Time: Discovering a Life Beyond the Clock*, and she very much responds to this notion of linear time.

Lama Rod Owens: Yeah, well, time is just a concept. I know we hear that all the time, but for me, when I touch into this nonlinear nature of time, it's really this continuum is dissolved, and the boundaries between the past and the present and the future all just kind of get dissolved, which is really our consciousness. Once we let go of this kind of fixation to the sense of self, then we expand back into the boundless consciousness, which knows no limits, no time zones, no time limits or anything, and you're experiencing everything at once. Time is something that we're creating, and when we get really in tune into emptiness, it all dissolves. The sense of self that we're still clinging to is disrupted.

James Shaheen: Right. We think of time as this incremental sort of commodified quantity that can be bought and sold, says Jenny Odell, and I think you're along those same lines. One of the things I really liked is you refer to the New Saint's magic, which depends on two practices, the

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expression of awakened care and the development of our capacity to disrupt habitual reactivity.

So to start, can you walk us through what you mean by awakened care?

Lama Rod Owens: Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. Awakened care is my experience of bodhicitta. I would say bodhicitta is the magic of the bodhisattva, but we would traditionally define bodhicitta as the awakened heart-mind. So it's this view of deep connectedness, deep empathy, that we're doing the work of liberation not just for ourselves but for all beings. When I am attempting to get free, that labor is also helping others to get free. For me, that's the expression of bodhicitta.

But when I began to think about this in terms of the New Saint and this kind of reinterpretation of the whole tradition, I began asking myself, what is my actual felt experience of bodhicitta, more than just awakened mind, more than this altruism that we're told to cultivate. And so the first thing I felt was love, this deep acceptance, this deep holding space for everything but also this wish for everyone and everything to be free. So that's the first thing I felt.

I also experienced compassion, which is like tuning into the suffering of both ourselves and the world and actually committing to freeing ourselves and others from suffering. For me, compassion is the action. I am doing this to get free from the causes and conditions of suffering because everyone's suffering and no one wants to suffer.

And of course, the other piece of this is joy. I feel deep joy for having the capacity to choose benefiting beings through my practice. I'm overwhelmed by that, and there's deep gratitude in that joy as well. And of course, everything is based in emptiness, so we have the capacity for all of this to happen because of the profound potential of emptiness in space.



And so when all of this is streamed together or braided together, it begins to awaken care, a deep, profound care, the kind of care that says, “Yeah, I’m going to do everything that I can to get free because I care that much for myself and for others.”

An important point here too is that I have to care for myself enough to want to get free to begin with. And a lot of us aren't there either. Some of us really don't believe that we deserve to be free from suffering.

James Shaheen: I think that's pretty common.

Lama Rod Owens: Yeah, and I know I had to get clear about that, too. Not only did I have to choose freedom, I had to understand that I deserve to be free. But that's the first magic, this awakened care, which is an expression of bodhicitta. Of course, the second magic is moving from reactivity to responsiveness, which is what we're trying to do in our meditation practice: to name and notice what arises and then choose how to be in relationship to what arises, to accept and then to respond not just habitually react.

James Shaheen: You know, Lama Rod, I have to say that when people pick up a dharma book, they're not going to expect to read about *Paris Is Burning* or the television series *Pose*, although one of the actors in *Pose*, she is a dharma practitioner.

Lama Rod Owens: Angelica Ross, yeah, Angelica is definitely a practitioner. Well, there may be others who are practicing from that show that we're not aware of.

James Shaheen: Oh really? Well, I wasn't aware of that. But they also don't expect to hear about fierceness, but you liken it to the wrathful expressions of Tantric Buddhism. It's very playful and



fun but also meaningful. And these are the most powerful forms of compassion. So how do you practice fierceness as a form of care?

Lama Rod Owens: Well, fierceness is an expression of wrath from Tibetan Buddhism. Wrath is an expression of profound, direct compassion. It has nothing to do with anger. I think that's the misinterpretation of wrath outside of the tradition. Wrath is saying “This is what needs to be done, and this is what I'm going to do regardless of the impact,” but not necessarily the impact because practicing compassion in this really clear way will free people, but wrath means that there are consequences in terms of my relationship to other folks. And that's what you're risking.

If you say something that you know needs to be said to someone, then the risk is that that person may hate you. And that's coming from personal experience as someone who's been the recipient of wrath. You know, I have really struggled with feeling like I have survived some type of harm because it's something that I am desperately trying to hide but needs to be revealed in order for me to experience some freedom.

And of course, that's going to be met with resentment: How dare you name this? But of course, my experience has been so much more freedom and openness from having that named without my consent, but in a way, if you're in a relationship with a teacher, then you're consenting to that kind of dharma transmission. I work with teachers because they tell me the truth about who I am, and they point me in the direction I need to be going. And so I consent to truth being revealed about where I'm stuck even though it hurts like hell.

James Shaheen: Yeah, I've been nailed by my teachers plenty of times.



Lama Rod Owens: Oh, yeah, a good teacher has to do that. A good teacher isn't there to make you feel comfortable. Again, the teacher is supposed to be helping you get free. That doesn't mean I like it. But it means that I consent to it because I know that this is the only way.

Of course, you know, I feel that in my community. In the Black, gay, queer, gender-expansive community, there's a fierceness, and that fierceness is really about surviving. It's wanting individuals to survive, it's wanting us as a collective to survive, so we go directly to the work that needs to be done. We say what we need to say, we do what we need to do, because that's what we have to work with in order to disrupt the impact of really systemic violence and transhistorical trauma. We have to get clear and cut through it, even though it hurts.

James Shaheen: Again, that fierceness is evident in *Paris Is Burning* and in *Pose*, and I was happy that you brought those into it because as silly as it might sound when you look at it, that's precisely what it is, fierceness. But you write that awakened care can cause us to lose a sense of agency so that we're swept up in the agenda of the liberation of all beings and things. Can you say more about the loss of agency at play? How is it that we surrender to the agenda of liberation?

Lama Rod Owens: Yeah, you know, I talk about Toni Cade Bambara in that section. It's a kind of profound awakening of something really avodic* and profound, and that's how I understand care. It's avodic*, it's profound, it's dynamic, and what I'm trying to do is really, when I say lose myself, I'm trying to dissolve the sense of self in this awakened care, and that's going to get me into a quicker, more direct relationship with the essence or with emptiness itself. And I think in a way, we can describe that as the cultivation of virtue.

So we practice goodness, and that becomes a kind of pattern where we're choosing how to reduce harm moment to moment, and that becomes a habit. We're just attuned to choosing what's reducing harm, and that for me is another way that we get swept up. We're reprogramming



ourselves to choose what is conducive to liberation. And I want to get lost in that so that everything I do becomes an expression of goodness and therefore an expression of virtue.

James Shaheen: I think the phrase you were looking for is I think wanting to make revolution irresistible.

Lama Rod Owens: Irresistible. Yes. Irresistible revolution. That’s what Toni Cade Bambara was always doing was to make this irresistible liberation like it's the sweetest, most important thing that we could ever be doing, and it just becomes what we do and who we are. And over time, I think that's what happens.

James Shaheen: You know, I think of the loss of agency in this sense too as if we're losing ourselves or getting out of our own way in a very positive way. One stream of awakened care is love, and you describe love as a form of surrender and profound acceptance. Can you say more about love as a loss of agency?

Lama Rod Owens: Well, love is this kind of radical acceptance, as Tara Brach talks about in her work. For me, I realized that it's hard to change when you haven't really told the truth about what's actually happening. And so this first expression of love is actually allowing ourselves to hold space for everything that's arising. It's just like this is it. This is how it is. I don't have to like this. I just have to name it and notice it.

I think what keeps us from doing that really profound radical loving is heartbreak. When I start telling the truth about how things really are, then my heart is going to break because I have been so concerned with telling myself narratives about how I want things to be in order to feel good about what's happening. So you let go of that and say, “This is it. This is what's happening,” and my heart breaks, which is just the experience of having to touch into this deep disappointment. Once I start doing that, then there's an honesty that awakens, and that profound holding becomes



a love. This is what's happening, and therefore, I can make a choice to change what needs to change now because I'm not lost in these delusions and narratives about how I think things are. I know how things are now. It creates a deeper intimacy with all phenomena, all beings, because you're with the truth now, and you know that the truth is that everything and everyone deserves to be free.

James Shaheen: I mentioned love, but another stream is joy, and you write that for a long time you didn't believe you had a right to joy, just like you didn't have a right to beauty. So how have you reclaimed your capacity for joy, and how do you see it as essential to liberation work?

Lama Rod Owens: I think joy is a natural expression of our minds. I think joy is an experience that can connect us to this ultimate experience of bliss. I don't think that we can actually experience bliss in the body, but I think that is the state of our minds. When we've transcended all dualities, bliss is the state, but joy points me back as an experience that I can feel.

And we need to connect to joy to hold the difficulty of the work of getting free. I tell stories in that section too just about how joy is used as a tool to help people do really intense social change work. We talked about agency, and the agency here, too, is that once you get connected to how things really are, it's really hard to go back. You know, it's hard to choose delusion once you have done the work to get clear.

James Shaheen: Yeah, delusion is wrecked for you.

Lama Rod Owens: Yeah, it's just like, no. It's like you've been driving a Hyundai your whole life and then you find yourself in a Mercedes and you're like, why would I go back to a Hyundai? This is not to badmouth Hyundai but just to use as an example. It's like you upgrade. You're like, OK, I get this.



James Shaheen: So you also say that you never felt like you had a right to beauty, so part of the work of the New Saint is reclaiming beauty while also disrupting capitalism and overconsumption. So can you tell us a bit about what you call the Four Sweet Liberations?

Lama Rod Owens: That's one of my favorite chapters. That chapter really came out of my deep love for André Leon Talley, who was a fashion editor and journalist, for many years one of the most recognized Black gay men in the fashion world, the only Black man in the fashion world for many years. And he's someone that I deeply loved. But he passed away about two years ago, and I wanted to help people to understand what he offered me as a dharma practitioner. I considered him a teacher. I never met him in life, but he was teaching me about beauty, and this is where it gets confusing. He wasn't teaching me to buy expensive things, but he was actually teaching me that beauty was always accessible as an experience, that I didn't need to accumulate something. I needed to allow myself to surrender to being moved and opened by experiences, and that's what I mean about connecting to beauty. I didn't believe I had a right to experience the energy of beauty.

But in this whole chapter, beauty becomes one of these sweet liberations, along with leisure, opulence, and pleasure, these things that traditionally in Buddhist circles, we're pushing away. We're saying, “Oh, these are poisons, we're not going to deal with these.”

But when we start talking about more tantric treatment of these energies, these are energies that are happening inside of me, so I want to be in relationship to these energies, and I want to embody these energies in order to open up these doors to emptiness itself through the practice of sympathetic joy, which is experiencing something pleasurable and then wishing that everyone was experiencing this. So it's not just about me accumulating and holding on to really great experiences. It's about me giving away the good stuff every time I get it, thinking about the



collective, and that more and more decenters the sense of self and opens up the experience of space and emptiness. This is what the Sweet Liberations are trying to do.

They're grounded in Black queer and gender-expansive life and culture. I talk about *Pose* and, of course, *Paris Is Burning* quite a bit. I wanted to write this chapter for people like me from my community, who feel like there's no space for them in contemporary convert Buddhist spaces right now. This is for me a way that I've opened the door. This is a practice that comes, I think, directly out of Tantric Buddhism, working with energy and embodying this energy to connect to emptiness itself. And we can use our culture to do that. Our culture is full of wisdom that we can use to experience these higher states of freedom.

James Shaheen: Yeah, you talk about using the language of the people you're speaking with, and I think that's very much what you did. After all, the Buddha spoke in the idiom of the day. Back to beauty for a second, like love, you also describe it as an act of surrender, letting your guard down and expanding into the experience of the sublime. So how can beauty help us access the sublime or transcendent?

Lama Rod Owens: Yeah, I think it's the way that we're surrendering. We're letting go of—well, I'll just speak for myself. I'm letting go of the ways in which I'm protecting myself and guarding myself. I'm allowing myself to expand. And when I say allowing myself to expand, I'm actually letting go of the sense of who I think I am and then beginning to experience and touch into the actual expression of spaciousness. And when I do that, things get more fluid and more inviting. The world becomes less antagonistic, less rigid, less sharp. It becomes more translucent for me when I'm surrendering and opening.

And that is the experience of the sublime. That translucent fluidity really is about connecting to this ultimate experience of emptiness itself. But again, it's not about materialism. You know, I talk about wanting a BMW. That's something I've struggled with for years, and I'm like, well, I'm



not trying to look good, I'm not trying to portray a certain image, and I realized I'm just trying to feel valued. Luxury things function to make us feel valued and seen and appreciated. And so instead of accumulating this stuff, which I can't afford, I just connect to the energetic expression so that energetic expression begins to feed the sense of deep self-worth. And of course that self-worth is about me wanting not to suffer and wanting to actually experience ultimate liberation.

James Shaheen: OK, so let's go a step further and talk about desire and pleasure. You say that yearning is the first step in touching the divine. So how have you learned to work with and channel yearning?

Lama Rod Owens: You have to want something. You have to want to get free. Desire or yearning is the last thing we give up before ultimate enlightenment. That yearning for enlightenment is going to take us to the threshold. And to go beyond that threshold, we let go of wanting to get free, which I think will be a really hard choice to make. But I am learning and training myself to yearn for what is about freedom and liberation and fluidity and movement, not to continue yearning for the things that are about creating rigidity and separateness or aloneness necessarily in a way that feels like suffering.

But I am yearning for the benefits of freedom. And I can yearn more for that because the more I yearn and the more I practice, the more I begin to experience what freedom is, and so I know that this is what I should be focusing on: not the rigidity, not all this other stuff, but this experience of getting open and clear and translucent and fluid. That's it. And so I just start yearning for it. In the same way that we yearn for our bad habits, we can start yearning for these experiences of liberation.

James Shaheen: Yeah, you say one important practice of yearning is prayer. So first, can you tell us a little bit about the experiences of prayer you encountered growing up in church? How



did these experiences shape you, and how have you returned to them? Because I found it very interesting that Buddhism allowed you to return to this.

Lama Rod Owens: Yes. Buddhism gave me permission to embrace the value and the importance of my ancestry, primarily because I was trained by Tibetans, not necessarily by Westerners. So my teachers were Tibetan, and I saw how they incorporated their ancestry and culture into the practice of dharma, which has given rise to Tibetan Buddhism. And I said, “I want to do the same for my ancestry,” because for much of my life I felt a little ashamed of having descended from enslaved people.

I felt a lot of shame around that, and I think Tibetans gave me permission to understand that I am only here because of the practice, particularly the prayers, the spiritual practices of my ancestors, and that transformed my relationship to ancestry.

I grew up in a culture of prayer in the Black church, and that prayer was rooted in the reality that we were not free, that there was a lot more to do before we experienced real freedom in this culture. That yearning to be free was on the one hand beautiful, but over time, it just felt too heavy. I was tired of yearning. I wanted to do. I wanted to actually do the things to get free, which led me into the study and embodiment of really quite radical social movements like the Catholic Worker Movement and Black Power Movement.

So the yearning for me turned into a yearning for social liberation. When I came into dharma and started practicing dharma in my 20s, that yearning was returned back to this yearning of just ultimately wanting everything to be free, not just Black people, not just queer people, but everyone, including the people who created harm and violence for us. Everyone needs to be free from suffering and delusion.



And so that yearning is what I begin to channel into my prayers and my praying with deities and rituals and ceremonies and so forth. My primary goal in doing everything is wanting people to be free, and my primary prayer is that everyone get free.

James Shaheen: You know, it was interesting, you talked about at one point, with all this praying, we're still not free. So it left a bad taste in your mouth and you walked away from prayer. I thought it was a really beautiful thing that through Buddhism, you were able to come back to it. That was really moving to me. But listeners may be surprised to hear a lama talk of God so much. So how do you understand and relate to God?

Lama Rod Owens: You know what, one of my agendas in writing the book, like a sub-agenda, was really speaking to Christians because Christianity is one of my root practices as well. Being here in the South, I'm in Atlanta, and there's this culture of people really trying to integrate Christianity and Buddhism, and I've come to a place where I understand this integration a lot more than I did as a younger person. And so I wanted to really offer this tool of integration for people. And it's been done before. Thich Nhat Hanh did it. But I wanted to again offer this more contemporary integration.

But my other agenda too was to really give context to the rise of Christian nationalism that's really impacting our country right now. And I wanted people to understand that it's not the theology itself, it's people. I wanted people to really have a clearer understanding of what God was from my perspective, which is that God is the expression of emptiness, space, and energy, and that Jesus was an embodiment of emptiness, just like our tulkus and rinpoches in Tibetan Buddhism. There's no difference for me.

I wanted to offer something that could help heal many of us who were leaving the church with a lot of trauma, that God is actually this expression of liberation, not this expression of criticism and hate and exclusion, that God is always present as this experience of emptiness and space,



which we can experience as deep acceptance or love. But I think it's important for me as a teacher to really disclose how I've been deeply influenced by multiple spiritual and religious paths, not just dharma or Buddhism, and I think when I talk about young people, which is whom I wrote the text to, I think a lot of young people are really interested in integration of multiple paths.

James Shaheen: Well, certainly you do that. I mean, your core seems to be Buddhist, but yet it is shaped and informed by the other traditions that you come from. You know, you mentioned Christian nationalism, and in contrast to the emphasis on masculinity in really any form of nationalism, you describe sacred masculinity as an awakened state of masculinity freed from patriarchy. So what does this look like, and how have you come to work with the dualities of what you call the sacred mother and the sacred father?

Lama Rod Owens: That was so important for me to do in this work was to unbind masculinity from patriarchy, because for me, again, this is about balance. When I talk about sacred duality, for me, it's rooted within the *Heart Sutra* of form and emptiness. It's form and emptiness, that balance. And when I talk about the mother or the feminine, the mother or the feminine cannot exist without a balance of the masculine or the father.

Of course, systemic patriarchy has really informed or repainted the masculine as this expression of dominance. And so I am attempting to actually extract masculinity and reclaim it as a sacred masculinity that's not about dominance. This is about balance. You can get deeper into these kinds of energetic expressions of the masculine. For me, the masculine is how am I connected into the sacred balance with the feminine, with the mother, not to dominate, but to balance, to hold, to see myself as the mother, as I'm embodying this kind of energy as the masculine or as the expression of the father.



And so for me, masculinity is about fluidity and movement and openness. It's about structure as well. I equate sacred masculinity with form and emptiness with the sacred feminine or the mother. It's easy to get confused about form. Form can get rigid without relationship with the feminine or with emptiness itself.

James Shaheen: We're running out of time, so I want to ask one more question because there's a whole chapter on it in which you discuss the complexities of devotion practices, particularly in the context of abuses of power within your own lineage. So can you tell us about your relationship with the Karmapa and how it has changed over time?

Lama Rod Owens: Yeah, of course, my relationship to the Karmapa is that he's the head of my school of Tibetan Buddhism, the Karma Kamtsang, or the Karma Kagyu school in Tibetan Buddhism. I've been with the Karmapa quite a bit over the years, both in India and here in the United States. The Karmapa was the first teacher that I felt devotion toward. That's the first time I felt devotion, and I couldn't explain it. I just felt it as a deep falling in love with, a deep recognition that this person is the most important person in my life, an old relationship, really, that was starting over again. It was so familiar.

I wrote about my relationship to my root teacher, Lama Norlha Rinpoche, in my last book, *Love and Rage*, really trying to get at the conflict or the tension between devotion and calling out harmful behavior. But I don't think I went deep enough in that work. And so coming back to the Karmapa, I was like, OK, I have to break through into this layer of helping people, particularly people outside of devotional traditions, to really understand the tension that arises when we are committed to someone as a source of liberation and someone who we consider enlightened but also who has done things that created harm for people and how this kind of enlightened nature can live alongside acts of harm and really trying to unpack that and really getting into some psychotherapy work, thinking about the shadow, thinking about one's relationship to ego and how the ego, the sense of self, is important even for an enlightened being to stay close to because



the ego is how we communicate. There's no teaching and transmission that could happen if ego was completely erased. In a teacher's experience, there would be no interaction. I couldn't even register this person. So we choose to stay in a relationship to the ego, which is a risk.

James Shaheen: Actually, one of the things that came through in that chapter for me was not so much an idealization. It was more that you were getting at his humanity.

Lama Rod Owens: Which is a risk.

James Shaheen: Yeah. To close, I wonder if you'd be willing to read a prayer from the book.

Lama Rod Owens: Let me just pull that up on my screen.

I evoke all those beings and sources of refuge who have ever loved me to come sit with me because it is now that I feel most alone. I evoke the Blessed Mother, the Sacred Father, the Spirits of Light, the essence of wisdom, my teachers and elders, the communities who have always caught me when I have fallen, the ancestors who have never stopped holding me, all the elements including the sacred earth who helped me to stand, and silence that wraps me in a space to be with my heart, and I call upon my own innate compassion.

To all those I have evoked, I offer my grief and what seems like my perpetual mourning in this body. I offer my fear, my numbness, and my inability to dream beyond shutting down. Most of all, I offer my fatigue. I am tired.

Today, precious earth, let me lie upon you and be reminded of my body and my heart. I want many things, but I need only one thing now: to give up to you what I cannot hold. I pray that I evolve past my belief that my pain is mine alone to carry. To my sources of refuge who have been evoked, you have taught me repeatedly that this is not the truth.

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You have taught me that it is not my pain but our pain. You remind me that my worship of isolation is not conducive to my liberation. I want to be free, and so I offer to you what I struggle to hold right now knowing that you are only here to share this heaviness with me and to love me.

I am afraid of the world. I am afraid of people. I am afraid of what I must do to survive in the world. Even these fears, I offer to my sources of refuge. Today, my precious sources of refuge, in your love, offer me rest. In your love, never abandon me. In your love, haunt all others who feel lonely and tired. Please continue to haunt me in this life, in death, and into all my lives to come until one day I become a source of refuge for other beings. Yet it is also my prayer to become a source of refuge for beings right now in this life. May I and all others in this realm and beyond be blessed forever. I dedicate this labor to my descendants who will one day lead me into my ancestorhood.

James Shaheen: Lama Rod, thanks so much for joining. It's been a great pleasure. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *The New Saints*, available now. Thanks again.

Lama Rod Owens: Thank you.

James Shaheen: You've been listening to *Tricycle Talks* with Michael Imperioli. 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 by Sarah Fleming and The Podglomerate. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!