

Life As It Is
“Meeting Crisis with Compassion”
Episode #25 with Oren Jay Sofer
November 22, 2023



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Oren Jay Sofer: I think so much of the exploration that I'm doing in the book and inviting people to participate in is really this deep inquiry into our values, into what's most important and really who are we, who are we as individuals but also what are we as conscious creatures and the stories we've been told, the stories we've created about our limitations personally and as a species, to really push the edges and see that at the core, we all long to love and be loved and that when we are connected to our values, this whole beautiful array of human qualities from patience to courage to devotion to resolve flower inside and provide a robust foundation for us to engage and respond.

James Shaheen: Hello, I'm James Shaheen, and this is *Life As It Is*. I'm here with my co-host Sharon Salzberg, and you just heard Oren Jay Sofer. Oren is a meditation teacher and member of the Spirit Rock Teachers Council. His work focuses on the relationship between contemplative practice and nonviolent communication. In his new book, *Your Heart Was Made for This: Contemplative Practices for Meeting a World in Crisis with Courage, Integrity, and Love*, he lays out 26 qualities of the heart that can expand our capacity to respond to the challenges of oppression, overwhelm, burnout, and injustice. In our conversation with Oren, we talk about how spiritual practice can help us navigate personal and political crises, the power of everyday devotion, how we can reclaim our right to rest, and how curiosity can open the door to empathy and connection. Plus, Oren leads us in a guided meditation. So here's my conversation with Oren Jay Sofer.

James Shaheen: So I'm here with meditation teacher Oren Jay Sofer and my co-host Sharon Salzberg. Hi, Oren. Hi, Sharon. It's good to be with you both.

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Oren Jay Sofer: Thanks, James. Happy to be here.

Sharon Salzberg: It's good to see you both.

James Shaheen: So Oren, we're here to talk about your new book, *Your Heart Was Made for This: Contemplative Practices for Meeting a World in Crisis with Courage, Integrity, and Love*. 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?

Oren Jay Sofer: Sure. Absolutely. The book is really grappling with this question of what's the role of our spiritual practice, our meditation, and the broader world of contemplative practice in the particular historical moment we're living in. How did these skills that we develop in so many ways translate, do they translate into responding to the immense challenges that we're seeing on so many levels in our world today? And for me, I was reflecting on this and really realizing that there's been kind of a through line for me in my own practice with this book as kind of a natural development or most recent iteration in that development.

When I first started meditating when I was 19, not only was I trying to find my place in the world, but I was deeply troubled by the inequity in the world, the violence in our world, and so I was struggling with this question of how do I contribute? And the first thing that I explored and experimented with in a deep and serious way was meditation as a vehicle for understanding myself, doing some deep healing work, and positioning myself to contribute in a deeper way. Out of that came my exploration with nonviolent communication and looking at the gap between our meditation and our relationships. And so I pursued that for a decade or more and folded in trauma healing work as a way of expanding its relevance. This latest book and this particular phase of my life as a new parent, looking ahead to the future, is then really taking that next step

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from the relational to the social and the collective, saying how do we bring these qualities into our life and into our life as citizens?

James Shaheen: You open the book with a question: How do we reclaim our birthright to love while navigating a complex world in crisis? How do we make love our guide? So I'll turn the question back on you. What does it look like to take love as our guide? And what gets in the way?

Oren Jay Sofer: I think so much of the exploration that I'm doing in the book and inviting people to participate in is really this deep inquiry into our values, into what's most important and really who are we, who are we as individuals but also what are we as conscious creatures and the stories we've been told, the stories we've created about our limitations personally and as a species, to really push the edges and see that at the core, we all long to love and be loved and that when we are connected to our values, this whole beautiful array of human qualities from patience to courage to devotion to resolve flower inside and provide a robust foundation for us to engage and respond.

James Shaheen: One thing I can say about the book is I often ask myself, what do I say I value and how do I actually live? And I think your book contains a lot of exercises about how to close that gap. You suggested if we do not shape our heart, the world will do it for us. That also resonated. So what do you mean by this? And how do we shape our hearts?

Oren Jay Sofer: Yeah. That's a paraphrase of a teaching from one of my teachers, Ajahn Sucitto, the British monastic. I think what he's pointing to and what I'm carrying forward is this understanding that there are so many strong forces in our world today from the media to technology to the education system to the economy that are attempting to mold us both inside and out. The entire education system in the modern industrial era is designed to produce obedient workers who are disconnected from their own power and needs and self-awareness. The

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persuasive design and technology, the attention economy, all of these are trying to make us docile consumers, and the systems that are destroying the foundations of life on our planet and that are wreaking havoc in communities around the world depend on us feeling disempowered and being obedient.

And so that quote is also coming from the Buddha. One of the epigraphs to the book is this teaching from the *Dhammapada* that irrigators channel water, fletchers shape an arrow, carpenters fashion wood, the wise train themselves. And there's this understanding embedded not just in Buddhism but I think in all spiritual traditions and contemplative practice that the heart and the mind are malleable and that we can shape and train them and realize our potential.

So that quote there that you pulled forward is really looking at the tension between this potential we have to really blossom as human beings and the reality that if we don't exert a force consciously and intentionally to train ourselves, then the larger forces of our world will inevitably shape us to fit into the mold that keeps the systems in our world going. And I think this is the promise of contemplative practice. This is the gift and the offer that's a quite empowering and hopeful invitation.

Sharon Salzberg: Well, speaking of invitations, you're quoting what I have long said is my favorite sutta, where the quote that you use “If it were not possible, I would not ask you to do it, but because it's possible, I say to you, cultivate the good, the beautiful, let it guide your life.” So when I was very young and beginning meditation, I would read, “Abandon that which is unskillful, cultivate the good. If it were not possible, I would not ask you to do it.” And I kept thinking, “The Buddha thinks I can do it.” And that was the part of it that just moved me so much. So I want to ask you what you mean by the beautiful. What do you think the Buddha meant by the beautiful?

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Oren Jay Sofer: Mmm. I love that question, Sharon. It actually touches someplace very deep in me because, the word in Pali for beautiful, as you know, is *kalyana*. It's two words, *kalyana* and *kusala*. These two words, skillful and beautiful. Our son is named after *kalyana*. So one of the things that's been so moving to me about having a child in this first year of his life is getting to witness the purity of the joy and the delight and the inquisitiveness, the utter vulnerability of an infant, how raw we are when we come into this world, how dependent, how completely and utterly dependent we are on our caregivers.

And for me, that has been an incredible affirmation of what I've held to be true for so long in my own values, which is the sense that, at our core, there's good and there's beauty in our hearts. So I think to answer your question more directly, the Buddha points to what's beautiful and good.

He takes a fairly pragmatic approach, as we know, of saying, Does it lead to the benefit, well-being, welfare of ourselves and others? Is it rooted in wisdom, compassion, generosity, and kindness, or does it lead to harm, confusion, ignorance? Is it rooted in, these qualities of not seeing, of greed and of hatred?

So cultivate the beautiful for me is saying turn toward that which has been there in our hearts all along that either has been covered over or hasn't been nourished by our society, by our upbringing, by the different forces that we've encountered and do what's actually going to nourish us and our communities and our worlds in the deepest way.

Sharon Salzberg: So you structure the book around twenty-six qualities of the heart, which you describe as distinct energy patterns that come into resonance with each other. Can you say more about these resonances and the harmonies that these qualities create?

Oren Jay Sofer: Absolutely. I feel very inspired by Thich Nhat Hanh's teaching and the way he really popularized this concept that the Buddha used of seeds in our consciousness, that they're

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all of these different potentials, these capacities that we have. I see these qualities as very potent seeds of transformation. Many of them draw directly from the Buddha's lists and the sort of pedagogical structures he uses, although some of them are ones that I think are there in the Buddha's teachings implicitly but don't show up in any of the lists, things like play or rest. Anyone who practices knows how essential these qualities are. I talk a little bit about how the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, and so maybe I can give two examples, one from the roots I'm drawing from in the Buddhist tradition and then another personal.

The Buddha talks about the five spiritual faculties, which compose most of the first part of the book: aspiration, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. And he says that these merge in the deathless. It's a very powerful quote, I think, from the *Anguttara Nikaya*, where he's pointing to when we cultivate these qualities to their fulfillment, they carry us beyond what we can know with our thinking mind and culminate in a kind of very deep transformative awakening.

On a more practical level, one of the things that I grappled with as I wrote the book was what's the place of the more afflictive emotions we experience, just in our individual personal lives, but also on a larger scale as we face deepening climate emergency and political gridlock. What about grief and anger and rage and fear and confusion? Where do these fit in? And so what I see in myself is that these different qualities work together to create a strong and powerful inner space to process the difficult emotions we have.

So compassion, courage, and patience all allow us to grieve in a deep way. I lost my father earlier this year. Just seeing how all of the different qualities of my own practice have allowed me to grieve in a deep way, to not be afraid of the pain, to have the patience to allow it to come and go, to have the tenderness for the deep hurt that's there and the loss.

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Another example would be the way mindfulness and kindness, when there's equanimity present, can transform fear or anger into a kind of generative power. So they work together, and I see them almost like ingredients in a recipe allowing us to digest and metabolize things and produce something much more useful than any one of them individually.

James Shaheen: Oren, the book focuses primarily on the internal cultivation of the qualities you mentioned, but you also discuss their external expression and how they can support societal transformation. So how can cultivating these qualities support social change?

Oren Jay Sofer: Thank you. I think there are multiple levels to this, many ways in which the cultivation of these qualities support social change. One, for those who are already engaged in some form of social change work, and I define and understand that quite broadly. I think that there's a tendency to conflate the work for social change with the kind of direct action. What I see and believe is that it's much, much broader and we need so much more.

It includes everything from building community to working on policy to doing art that inspires us and helps us see things in a new way. So for those who are doing social change work, I think that cultivating these qualities not only provides a tremendous amount of stability and fuel so that we don't burn out, but it also attends to the inner transformation so that we don't unintentionally reenact the dynamics of control and oppression and domination that we're seeking to transform. We just look back at history and see how many revolutions ended up unwittingly replacing one system of domination with another. And we see this in social change circles and in movement spaces a lot where the vision of what we're struggling for gets undermined by us-them mentalities or by cancel culture.

So it allows us to imbue the means with the end, to ensure that we're aligning how we're working for change with our vision of the kind of world that we want to live in. For those who, say, don't understand, see, or experience themselves as working toward social change, I think that these

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qualities and the practice of cultivating them opens us up to feel more agency and creativity, to have a vehicle for expressing our love and care in the world.

I think about the story I quote in the introduction of some of the origins of socially engaged Buddhism where Thich Nhat Hanh, one of the key figures in socially engaged dharma, talked about bombs going off in the villages and making the choice to go out into the streets with the monastics in his temple to help those who were hurt and suffering from the bombs. His quote from one of his books is that mindfulness has to be engaged. Once there's seeing, there must be acting. Otherwise, what's the use of seeing? And so I think that cultivating these qualities helps us to make that connection, to make that bridge from what we're seeing to actually having the skills, the means, the energy, the hope, the will to move into action.

Sharon Salzberg: So let's talk for a moment about aspiration, which you describe as an act that connects us with a sense of what is possible. And I'm sure you've heard me quote it a lot, where I say I think we live in a time of blunted aspiration. Aspiration is not greed. You know, aspiration is aspiration. So can you say more about that quality? And what do you mean by aspiration as a verb?

Oren Jay Sofer: Yeah, well, there's a certain irony in having you ask me that question. And for all of the listeners who don't know why we're laughing, Sharon's book, *Faith*, is just such a gem of exploration, a whole book on this one quality.

Sharon Salzberg: Thank you.

Oren Jay Sofer: Yeah, so I've learned a tremendous amount about it from you. And I think I'm really drawing a lot from your teachings in this. And as you say, aspiration is a verb. It's something that we do. It's not something that we have. It's to aspire. It's to connect with the energy of our life, that spirit inside that moves us. What I love about aspiration, and of course

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we're translating here from the Pali from the term *saddha*, which you translate as faith, some translate as conviction or confidence. I really think about it as this stirring inside of our heart that yearns for something better and that longs for a trust that there's something meaningful about being alive, that there's something fulfilling, just, or good in this remarkable, mysterious experience of being conscious. And the deeply inspiring placement of aspiration at the beginning is to me so brilliant in the Buddha's teachings because he makes that connection if we don't have a sense of what's possible, we won't try.

And the story I always tell is a quite mundane one. When I was in college, I love Bob Marley. I always have. I love his music. I was at a party and I saw a friend strumming a very simple two-chord reggae song, a Bob Marley song. And I looked at her playing the guitar and I thought, “That doesn't look so hard. I could probably learn how to do that.” And I picked up a guitar, got a Bob Marley songbook, and taught myself to play. There's aspiration there. There's that sense that I could do that. There's something there for me. Had I never had that aspiration, I wouldn't have ever learned to play. And so Munindraji, who you studied with many, many decades ago and who I had the good fortune of meeting at the end of his life, he was fond of saying any aspiration can be accomplished if you're wholehearted and you know the way.

That stayed with me all of these years as this invitation to really look deeply and say, well, what is my aspiration? What is it that I'm here on this planet to do? And I think that this is something that if we all were able to really listen deeply and ask ourselves that question, we could change this world so profoundly because I think that what all of these crises and emergencies are calling for is not for all of us to do one thing or the same thing but for each of us to do what we're here to do to find our vocation and to contribute in the way that only we can, whether that's through parenting or teaching or artwork or social change, direct social change work, all of these different avenues.

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I think we see how the articulation of an aspiration on a collective level can move entire populations and how in movements for social change, holding fast to that vision powers movements in the face of tremendous resistance and odds.

James Shaheen: Oren, you mentioned aspiration, and you also say that it can help provide us with the energy for change, which is a big deal because another major theme of the book is energy, and sometimes we think of energy in terms of all or nothing, and it can be very easy to get burnt out. So how have you come to view energy in a more sustainable way?

Oren Jay Sofer: Yeah, I love exploring and talking about this because it's present in our lives at all levels. I like to make the connection between the societal approach to energy. In Western society, there's this kind of all-or-nothing model that comes from the fossil fuel industry, this extractive model of getting as much as possible as fast as possible for the most productivity accumulation, and I think we see the connections between that and how many of us are conditioned to live our personal lives with this sense of pressure to strive, this willpower, being over caffeinated, pushing past limits.

So there are many different ways, I think, to reclaim a more balanced relationship with energy for the kind of sustainable power you're referring to. We can look at nature and the natural kind cycles of the seasons, the day and night, our very breath. All religious, spiritual, indigenous traditions honor cycles of activity and rest. This is a very potent investigation, I think, in each of our lives to explore how do we relate to our energy, how do we use our energy, and how can we start to reclaim our energy to see the degree to which we become disconnected from our bodies, from the rhythms of the planet and the earth and to start to reclaim that.

James Shaheen: Do you think that disconnection is what leads to burnout?

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Oren Jay Sofer: Absolutely. I think it's one of the main factors. When we're disconnected, we either are unaware of the signals that our body is sending us for our needs for rest, or we're aware of them and we override them. And that's one of the key things that leads to burnout.

I quote Angela Davis in the book saying anyone who's interested in making change in the world also has to learn to take care of herself, himself, themselves. And I think that the conversation about energy is deeply connected to the conversation about rest. And in order to have sustainable energy, we need to learn how to rest and reclaim our right to rest. And so once we start to examine that, we begin to see that self-care and rest and developing a more sustainable relationship with energy is actually a radical act.

James Shaheen: So learning to rest, now that you mentioned it, requires another quality, and that's patience. And it can be particularly hard to practice when we feel stressed or under pressure. But you distinguish patience from passivity, which I think is an important distinction. So how have you come to understand patience, and how can practicing patience actually support us in responding deliberately?

Oren Jay Sofer: Yeah. Thank you. That was one of the most enjoyable and interesting chapters for me to write because a number of colleagues of mine offered feedback on the chapter on patience and just this very sense that you're speaking to have teasing out the difference between patients and passivity.

And there's that powerful quote from Dr. King from his “Letter to Birmingham Jail,” where he says, “Those who say ‘Wait,’ that ‘wait’ has almost always meant never.” And so there's this way in which when we look at social transformation, sometimes patience can mean passivity and there's a certain kind of healthy impatience with oppressive conditions that urges us to act, and yet at the same time there's a need for the long view with patience and social change.

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Coming from the lens of meditation and contemplative practice, one of the ways that I've come to understand patience is on the moment-to-moment level in relation to our resistance to whatever's happening and learning to bear with the internal tension of resisting pain and unpleasant experience, whether that's unpleasant sensation or the pain and rage related to oppression or the destruction of the earth. So there's a patience on this moment-to-moment level that allows us to have more breathing room inside to tolerate the discomfort we experience, when we disagree with or dislike what's happening when it goes against our values and that capacity to bear with the discomfort on a moment-to-moment level starts to open up more space inside to draw on other resources and to make a more wise and empowered response so we're not reacting based on that discomfort and that resistance.

James Shaheen: You also mentioned the etymology of the word patience. Why don't you say something about that?

Oren Jay Sofer: Yeah, absolutely. So it comes from to to suffer. To be a patient in a hospital and medicine is to be one who suffers, and so the sense that patience includes the willingness to bear with discomfort consciously as connected to the meaning of the word. And I think for many of us who are troubled about what's happening in the world, one of the things that I see us being called to is also to be patient with not knowing. And there's a sense that the more we're able to be patient with not having an answer, with not being able to see the outcome, the more sustainable our energy can be because the more we are needing that certainty, the more strained our internal resources become, the less resilience we have to stay engaged.

Sharon Salzberg: You know, you use language in such an interesting way, like the association of aspiration and faith, the association of patience and rest, and I'm wondering if you could say a little bit more about rest. I mean, you're a new parent. You're not getting any rest. Many of us

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have quite a lot of responsibility or we're just very busy. Rest is not the fundamental attribute of our day.

Oren Jay Sofer: Yeah, we are starting to get more rest. He's sleeping through the night after a whole year. I've gotten my first few nights, a full night of rest. I think there's a few things that are important to me in examining our need for rest and how to honor it. And the first is expanding our definition of rest. I love Tricia Hersey's definition of rest in her book *Rest Is Resistance* and her social media platform, the Nap Ministry. She defines rest as anything that connects the body and mind. And I love that because it really broadens the sense of what it means to rest.

And I think if we take an evolutionary perspective, we can see that our ancestors engaged in activities that were a certain kind of downtime that was very regulating for our nervous system, whether it was threshing or weaving or toolmaking or engaging in chit-chat conversations. So any kind of downtime can be recharging.

I think it's also important to be very real about the barriers that are there to rest. I think rest is a human need. It's a right. It's not a luxury. And yet the structures of our society often make it one where those who have access to rest are those who have resources. I think as a society we're over caffeinated and underresourced because we don't get enough rest.

There are very real economic pressures, particularly here in the U. S. where the social safety net has been stripped away, just to meet basic needs like housing and health care, and then there are all the internal barriers to rest, the way our sense of self-worth and belonging gets tied to how much we accomplish, how well we perform. There's this experience of the busier we are, somehow the more important we are, so people feel proud of being busy and not resting. I've found that it takes a very deliberate effort to learn how to rest. It involves learning to honor our limits. What can we let go of and say no to? A lot of that rides on cultivating self-compassion,

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seeing the suffering of being tired and strained and stressed and actually being willing to not only do something about it but feel it.

And I think that's one of the reasons why many of us don't rest is that as soon as we slow down, we have to feel the level of deep exhaustion or the things that we've been avoiding. Other deep questions to investigate are how much of my activity is necessary and how much of it is self-imposed? Can I relinquish my need to please others to take care of myself? Can I lower my standards in order to get more downtime? What would it be like to not always be productive? And even though the rigors of parenting are intensely demanding, it's also taught me a tremendous amount about letting go of being productive and just being in the moment because so much of the time that's all I can do. I think that we can find rest in small ways in short moments if we're willing to look for it and break from our habits.

Sharon Salzberg: Including our habit of speed and instant gratification.

Oren Jay Sofer: Absolutely

Sharon Salzberg: Right, in the light of not getting instant gratification, we may set out to be committed to the beautiful and some very unbeautiful things may arise. That's just reality. And that has to be OK. We have to have a degree of compassion and understanding toward that. Otherwise our journey is actually kind of incomplete.

Oren Jay Sofer: Absolutely. I talk about that throughout the book really, but I think one of the places that I really try to make that point is in the chapter on mindfulness, because the commodification of mindfulness by the wellness industry I think is very dangerous.

The narrative there that mindfulness is about feeling good, which robs us of this potential for real healing and transformation and for a more integrated sense of being that allows us to respond and

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engage in a more whole and full way to recognize that the fear, the anger, the confusion, the doubt, all of the painful and uncomfortable experiences that come up in our lives and in our practice are not a problem or a failure but are actually part of the work.

And I think there's a very direct parallel here to anti-oppression work and antiracism work and recognizing that the fear and the rage and the pain and the discomfort of looking at issues of privilege and power are a core and essential part of the work. As we accept that and shift the narrative of what does it mean to practice, what does it mean to be aware, to be mindful, it's incredibly empowering.

I remember one of the most shocking moments for me in my early practice when I went back to India in my mid-twenties to practice with Munindraji before he passed. I had a really incredibly difficult time, and many of those suppressed emotions broke through to the surface in a kind of violent way, just untethered rage and violent images and voices inside of anger on the cushion. I got really destabilized, in the end deciding to return back home. And I talk about this in the book a little bit, actually, when I talk about energy and the need for balanced energy rather than pushing really hard with this all or nothing approach.

When I went to see Munindraji and broke down crying and told him how overwhelmed I was and how much anger and fear and rage I was experiencing, he looked at me from across the couch and he smiled. And he said, “When you tell me you're suffering, I feel so happy for you. You're making progress. You have to enjoy your suffering.” And he said, “You came here seeking enlightenment, and you think that means you're going to feel peaceful and happy and good, but it's quite the opposite. You need to encounter and feel all of the places that are preventing you from being at peace in order to find something deeper and more enduring.” And it was this total shift in my perspective to see, oh, I've been avoiding all of these things. And this is actually the way through.

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Sharon Salzberg: Well, in the light of this conversation about integrated emotion and sort of quality of attention and almost like the holding environment we are creating, which can encompass the joy and the sorrow and the painful and the pleasant, I want to talk about the quality of devotion. Because it's a tricky word in Buddhist contexts, as so many people tend to associate it with blind faith. Even when you referred back to my book, *Faith*, I thought, oh yeah, I got a lot of flack about that one. So I'm wondering about your own relationship to the word devotion, the concept of devotion, the practice of devotion, and how that's changed as your practice has deepened and has also included these very difficult experiences.

Oren Jay Sofer: Thank you, Sharon. I love to talk about devotion because it has been such a rich part of my practice. My very rational Western sensibilities and my Jewish upbringing of bristling at the idea of bowing before a Buddha shrine or offering incense to shaving my head and taking robes and spending nearly three years living as a renunciate at the monastery. So I think one of the ways that I enjoy just highlighting the difference, and you pointed to this when you mentioned the title of your book *Faith* and how people bristle or react to that, is to just offer a few synonyms for the word devotion and to notice the different resonances inside with a word like sincerity, or wholeheartedness, or enthusiasm, or even reverence, or respect.

So to play with words again and talk about etymology, devotion contains the word vote. It comes from the Latin, which means that we commit. We commit fully. And to me, that's what devotion is about. It's a way of relating to anything with this quality of deep love and loyalty and generosity. When we're devoted to something, we give a lot. We give our time, we give our energy, we give our attention. So we can be devoted to a life partner. We can be devoted to an instrument, to a craft. What I love about this is the understanding that devotion isn't defined by the object but by the quality of our attention and the love that we bring to it.

And as you point out I think very appropriately, devotion without reason can be dangerous. So we see this throughout history. And at the same time, devotion can include the intellect without

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depending on it. I think we really need to look at the results of our devotion and see what is it leading to? Is it leading to good? Is it benefiting ourselves and others? And if so, then we can trust that what we're devoting ourselves to is worthy. I think it's a deep human need. And one of the things I talk about in the chapter is that particular passage in the Pali Canon that I had to reread the first time I came across it, where there's this recounting of the Buddha's reflections and thoughts after his awakening. And he essentially thinks, “Who or what am I going to be devoted to? Now that I'm awakened and I've sort of surpassed all of my teachers, what can I be devoted to?” It's painful to live without devotion. And then he ultimately says, “Well, I'll be devoted to this truth, to this way of being and living that I've discovered.”

I think that so much of the pain on a spiritual level in our world today comes from a lack of devotion, from an absence of the sacred, a kind of spiritual hunger, the sense of something missing without even knowing what it is. And then our need for devotion, our need to give ourselves to something larger than ourselves in a wholehearted way gets misplaced onto work, onto substances, onto entertainment, and even into sort of twisted ways it gets misplaced onto self-judgment or being critical or feeling inadequate. In the book I'm really reaching to make this invitation to say what is it for each of us to be devoted? Where do we find that sense of wholehearted connection? Is it through relationship, art, music? Is it through our family? Is it through justice?

Parenting our son has given me new perspectives on devotion. When I was younger and practicing, I sat a few retreats with Thich Nhat Hanh and I felt so inspired by the mindfulness gathas he offered on washing the dishes like you're bathing the baby Buddha. And I think as much as I integrated that into my practice, parenting has given me a new appreciation for it in two ways. One, there's something different about bringing mindfulness and care and attention to the small acts when we have a lot of time to do formal practice. And it takes on a different quality when there's no time to sit in meditation. Those moments of, say, washing a dish or brushing one's teeth become imbued with a different quality of meaning and importance when

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that becomes our practice. It's not like an extra thing. And then on the other hand, seeing how these small acts of changing a diaper or rocking my son to sleep can be imbued with so much love and can be a kind of act of devotion.

James Shaheen: So, Oren, you said so many nice things about so many nice qualities. I'm going to ask about one that's a little bit more challenging. You write that we can never fulfill craving, but we can release it. Can you say something about how we release it, and how does renunciation, a word that also is a trigger for a lot of people, come into play here?

Oren Jay Sofer: Absolutely. Yeah, it was a very conscious choice to name the chapter renunciation rather than simplicity or letting go or these more palatable words for Western audience and popular world today.

Craving can be released is the understanding that it's temporary. The Buddha likened craving to a fire that consumes everything in its path or to a bucket with a hole in it. No matter how much you put in, it's always empty. If we study our experience, we start to learn the nature of craving and the nature of particularly sensory pleasure is that there's this pattern of excitement and anticipation.

Then there's this moment of a rush of pleasure and intensity, and then it fades, and we want another. We want another one. And if we can muster the patience, the mindfulness, the determination, the resolve to bear with the discomfort of craving, we see that it passes, that it's not who we are, that there's something larger within us than the craving, whatever it's for, whether it's for the ice cream or the relationship or the job. Not all desire leads to suffering, not all resistance is reactive.

So we hold on to a vision for equity, or a world in which we can breathe the air and drink the water and the food isn't poisoned, where everyone has dignity and access to education and

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healthcare. We hold fast to that vision, but the craving is when there's a contraction around it that limits our capacity to respond and to engage in a flexible way. And that's what we study, and that's what can be released is the sense of contraction around it, which narrows us inside.

James Shaheen: OK, I said that was the last question, but actually I have one more. The way you just spoke of that, you did some investigatory work. And the interesting thing to me is the power of curiosity. Curiosity, like what is this craving and looking at it? It's interesting in that way. And I really began thinking about this when U Tejaniya talked about his series of depressions, and at one point he realized he couldn't fight it, but then he became curious: What is this? And he began to investigate, and sort of as an ancillary effect, it lifted. Not because he wanted it to, but he became curious and began to investigate it. So I wonder if, to close, you can say something about curiosity and its power to break through, say, craving or many other afflictive emotions.

Oren Jay Sofer: Well, we can't transform anything if we don't understand it. In order to understand it, we need to get curious. Curiosity, as you're pointing to in that story, doesn't have an end or a goal. It's just this openness to understand and to receive and absorb and learn. And there's a certain kind of radical curiosity that we cultivate in contemplative practice that I think has a direct connection and support for social change, which is that we get interested in all of our experience, including what repels us.

It's one thing to be curious about a beautiful sunset or a fascinating connection we have with a person in our life. And it's another thing to be curious about someone who annoys us or about our back pain, our depression, or about a social condition that troubles us and keeps us up at night. So curiosity brings us into the experience of something to start to understand how it's functioning so that we can engage with it in a more clear and skillful way.

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It plays a direct role in nonviolent approaches to social transformation. King and Gandhi were both huge proponents of the initial stage of developing any strategy around a noncooperation campaign began with being curious and gathering information.

A strategic, principled nonviolent approach to any social change work includes curiosity and openness to one's opponent and really understanding what their needs and values are, not creating an enemy in our mind's eye, but seeing a potential partner to join us in beloved community. And so curiosity has that power to open the door to empathy and to deep connection.

James Shaheen: Oren, well, thanks so much for joining us. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of Oren's new book, *Your Heart Was Made for This*. And to close, Oren, would you be willing to lead us in a short guided meditation?

Oren Jay Sofer: Oh, of course. Absolutely. So for anyone who's listening, just invite you to let your body become still, sitting in a comfortable position where you can also feel alert. Your eyes can be closed or just softly gazing down at the ground in front of you. See what it's like to just feel the weight of your body resting on the earth.

You might notice your breathing or the sounds around you. Just feeling the steady contact with the places your body touches the ground and letting all of the many words that we've shared today fade, feeling this earth that supports us, that sustains our life, that offers us air and water, food, and shelter, this earth that our body comes from and will return to.

And just noticing what it's like to reflect on and appreciate our intimate connection with the planet, this vast source of strength and energy, this deep source of quiet, steadiness, and rest. And perhaps considering how this can be a source of inspiration and guidance for you in your life. And whenever you're ready, you can let your eyes gently open.

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Thanks so much for having me on the show. Sharon, James, it was a pleasure to be here.

James Shaheen: It's great to have you, Oren. Good to see you again.

Oren Jay Sofer: You too.

James Shaheen: You've been listening to *Life As It Is* with Oren Jay Sofer. 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 Sarah Fleming and The Podglomerate. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!