

Life As It Is
“The Zen Way of Recovery”
Episode #27 with Laura Burges
January 24, 2024



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Laura Burges: You know, one of my favorite stories is I was sitting at my desk one day during silent sustained reading and Nathan walked by my desk and he did this little dance and I called him over. I said, “Nathan, what were you thinking about just then?” He said, “Laura, do you ever forget you're alive, and all of a sudden you remember?”

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 Laura Burges. Laura is a lay entrusted teacher in the Soto Zen tradition, and she has been leading retreats on recovery at the San Francisco Zen Center for over twenty years. In her new book, *The Zen Way of Recovery: An Illuminated Path Out of the Darkness of Addiction*, she brings together Buddhist wisdom and the teachings of recovery programs to lay out a sustainable path to sobriety and freedom. In our conversation with Laura, we talk about her own story of overcoming addiction, the central role of surrender in both Zen and recovery, how recovery has deepened her relationship to the bodhisattva vow, and why she believes humor is an essential component of Buddhist practice. Plus, Laura leads us in a guided meditation. So here's our conversation with Laura Burges.

James Shaheen: So I'm here with dharma teacher Laura Burges and my co-host Sharon Salzberg. Hi, Laura. Hi, Sharon. It's great to be with you both.

Laura Burges: Hi, good to be here.

James Shaheen: So, Laura, we're here to talk about your new book, *The Zen Way of Recovery: An Illuminated Path Out of the Darkness of Addiction*. To start, can you tell us a bit about the book and what inspired you to write it?

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Laura Burges: Well, I've been lecturing and leading retreats for people in recovery since the year 2000. And so over time I started to really want to reach a wider audience with these teachings. So over the years as I've talked, I found myself talking about Buddhist teachings that had supported me in my own recovery. And yet my own experience was that, as I say in the introduction of my book, the very first words of my book are Buddhism didn't cure my alcoholism. And so I wanted to weave together both the down-to-earth, grassroots teachings of recovery with the Buddhist teachings that had supported me.

I've been a member of both of these sanghas for many years, both the Zen Buddhist sangha and the fellowship of people in recovery, and I feel like these twin paths have been a wonderful safety net for me and for many others. I cofounded a Monday night group for people in recovery at the San Francisco Zen Center, and I think many people come to Zen Center because sometimes in the rooms of recovery, they're a little put off by the word God or what they may see as a religious orientation in recovery that they don't identify with. For myself, when I came into the rooms of recovery, I had so deeply proven to myself that I could not stop drinking on my own that I was really ready to do whatever I was told to do. And interestingly, that's when my Buddhist practice really began to blossom because I was no longer in the throttle of addiction or distracted by addiction.

James Shaheen: Well, how did you first come to Buddhism?

Laura Burges: You know, in the early seventies I was living up in Juneau, Alaska, and I had gone up there to see the wilderness and be a wild, independent woman. But I found myself spending a lot of time at the Red Dog Saloon drinking with my friends up there. Juneau, when I got there, it's the land of the midnight sun, so the sun was shining in May when I arrived on the ferry, but as the months went by and my drinking increased, I spiraled downward into what I call

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the heart of darkness, which is alcoholism. As my mind and my body descended into this darkness, Juneau descended into darkness, and by December, it was dark all the time.

What happened to me was, looking back, I realized that I was manifesting many of the symptoms of alcoholism from a very young age. I experienced a personality change when I drank. I was just painfully shy. And when I drank, I could talk to other people. I really felt that alcohol melted the painful boundaries between me and others. But like many people who drink, I descended into this very lonely isolation. And it got to be so that I really didn't want to go out and drink with other people because I didn't know what would happen.

And a very frightening thing happened to me, and this happens to people in, in the northern climates where people drink, was I came to out of a blackout crawling in the snow, and that really got my attention because I knew that people died that way. And so I decided that Juneau, Alaska was my problem and I came back to San Francisco. I found out later in recovery that that's called doing a geographic when you think, “I'll just go somewhere else and everything's going to be better.” But of course, when you get there, you're there too.

Well, it so happened that when I came back to San Francisco, I had this glimmer of hope that there might be another way to live, and I started looking for a spiritual solution. I tried the Quakers, and I tried the yogis, and I ran into a woman, Deborah, who had been my best friend in fourth grade, and she was practicing at the San Francisco Zen Center. We stayed up all night talking about *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, Suzuki Roshi's classic in Zen, and I started practicing Buddhism. I just stopped drinking very abruptly. I did cry every time I sat down on a zafu. A friend of mine who's not an alcoholic said something so profound to me. He said that alcohol is like a credit card for pain—you pay it back later with interest.

As we say in Zen, I practiced as if to save my head from fire. I loved the rigor of Zen practice. I loved getting up at 4:30. Very soon I was living at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center, Zen Center's

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monastery in the Los Padres wilderness, getting up very early in the morning, practicing zazen many times a day, studying Buddhism, doing demanding physical work—we say chop wood, carry water. And I loved the clarity of monastic practice. I loved the clarity of not drinking. To me, monastic life was the opposite of the way I had lived in Juneau, Alaska.

But when I left the monastery, I didn't intend to start drinking again, but somebody offered me a drink and I took it. And very slowly, alcohol started insinuating itself into my life again. I drank off and on for five years. So I had those five years of practice without drinking, another five years of drinking secretly and surreptitiously because it was no longer acceptable for me to drink that way. And what happened for me was I went back to school to get a teaching credential, and I was sitting in a classroom at San Francisco state and I had a blinding moment of clarity.

I realized that now I was 35 years old. By this time, I had a beautiful daughter. My marriage had ended, but my daughter Nova was so important to me. And here I was shaking and sick from having been drinking the night before. And I conceded to my inmost self that I needed to change my life and that I couldn't do it by myself. I also realized in that moment that I knew I could, we can all name Buddhist teachers who've struggled with their addiction and have not been able to apprehend it and have harmed themselves and their sanghas and even died as a result of addictive behavior. So I got up out of that classroom and I went and made a phone call and I haven't had a drink since September 28, 1985. And you know what? I feel so fortunate that I was able to teach children for 35 years, with the clarity and the open heartedness that sobriety and Zen practice have offered to me.

James Shaheen: So the call you made was to a recovery program.

Laura Burges: That's right. Yeah.

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James Shaheen: So you describe a sudden call for help as a moment of awakening and being able to recognize one's own powerlessness as a central tenet of both recovery and of Zen practice. So can you say more about the role of surrender and acknowledging one's need for help?

Laura Burges: Well, that's a wonderful question. When I came to Zen Center, I was so broken and I was so vulnerable that the teachings just permeated me, and when I was acquainted with the notion of taking refuge in Buddha, dharma, and sangha, I felt like that was something I could completely give my life to. Later, when I came into recovery and recognized that I had to be completely honest with myself—you know, I had known for a long time that I was in trouble with alcohol, but I had to admit that even though I kept trying to stop on my own for various lengths of time, why not avail myself of the experience, strength, and hope of other people who knew how to stay sober one day at a time?

And that was in 1985, and by the year 2000 when I was shiso at Green Gulch Farm and when I started offering retreats and leading classes and and lecturing on the interface between Buddhism and recovery, this movement across the country and really around the world had begun where people were recognizing the congruence between the surrender that we experience to the depths of our being when we come to the end of our addiction and the surrender that we can give ourselves totally to in Buddhist practice. To me, they're deeply intertwined and inextricably bound together in my life.

Sharon Salzberg: Well, in addition to acknowledging our need to ask for help, you also focus on the fact that we all have something to offer, and you begin the book with the bodhisattva vow, “I vow to live and be lived for the benefit of all beings.” I'm curious, how has recovery changed your relationship to this vow?

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Laura Burges: It hasn't changed it, but it's deepened it and made it much more literal, really. You know, when I found out the Buddha's teachings on the four noble truths, his first teaching when he awakened himself, that in life there is suffering and that the suffering is caused by our desire and our craving, it was very interesting to me that that word craving in Sanskrit is *tanha* or thirst. So those of us in recovery, we have this very literal experience of insatiable thirst. And if we're going to recover and stop using alcohol as a kind of artificial spiritual awakening and live with the clarity of not using substances, if we're going to do that, we have to be completely honest about this insatiable thirst. And I feel like we have to put down our unwholesome behaviors, no matter what they are, whether they're addiction to screen time or work or other people, we need to put that down and live from the very heart of our being.

I think of it as living from the inside out. My first Buddhist teacher, Richard Baker Roshi, stopped me outside the zendo one morning. I don't know why he said this to me, but he said, “You have everything you need. Just stop looking for answers outside yourself.” But there's a paradox in that, because I had to find answers outside myself in order to recover. And I had to find answers outside of myself in order to deeply experience Buddhist teachings. But I think it's easy for us to forget that these teachings aren't lists of things that we have to believe in if we want to call ourselves a Buddhist. They're rather experiences that are offered to us to live deeply from the inside out.

You know, Sharon, recently a friend of mine who was reading my book. She cited the bodhisattva vow, and she said, “What does that mean to live and be lived for the benefit of all beings?” That was such a wonderful question, and I loved being asked that so I could ponder what that really means to me. And I think it speaks of a kind of permeability in our practice, where we offer ourselves to life, but we also allow life to come to us. You know, we open ourselves up to experience. In my recovery work, I open myself up to other people in recovery. It's by sharing my story with them that they can identify and think, “Maybe this recovery thing would be valuable for me as well.” That bodhisattva vow to me in recovery, it's such a vital and

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dynamic way to live that vow by coming to terms with my own addiction, offering help to other people and accepting help from other people.

You know, Sharon, it really occurred to me in recovery that accepting help from others is a kind of generosity, because it allows their life force to blossom. It gives them the confidence that they have something to offer others. It's very much a two way street, and what a beautiful, beautiful metaphor for our interconnection with all beings.

Sharon Salzberg: Yeah, it's a beautiful teaching, and something I ponder a lot, that receiving is also a form of generosity. But I want to ask you, what does it mean to live from the inside out?

Laura Burges: Well, I think when we grow up in our culture, in any culture, we have received wisdom that we see all around us. And especially in our home of origin, our original family, we think that the way we're being brought up is just normal. We don't question it. And for those of us who grew up with alcoholism, it just seemed like a way of life.

The reason I love the story of Buddha is that I feel like his story is our story, that each of us have to leave home and each of us have to find our own way. Each of us will experiment with a lot of excess and a lot of self-denial before we find the middle way. And I love that the Buddha offered his teachings as a kind of medicine or a kind of experiment that we have to live ourselves.

So, for me, this is rather than just accepting what I've been told or even accepting the teachings of Buddhism without question or especially accepting a teacher without criticism or without critical thinking is a mistake for me, that I have to understand where I'm coming from within myself and then offer that to the world.

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Sharon Salzberg: That's beautiful. You also say that getting sober helped you come to Buddhism more fully, as you actually found out who you were. Can you say some more about that?

Laura Burges: Well, addiction is automatically a double life. Those people who struggle with addiction have a very deep understanding of how to be one person in one setting and another person in another setting. So, for example, I could be in a social situation and not drink at all because I didn't want to drink the way I tended to drink in that particular group of people. But I could drink with abandon with other people that drank that the way that I tended to drink, which was alcoholically. Living that double life where you're presenting one face to society, but I knew in my heart that I was struggling with this addiction that I couldn't seem to let go of.

There's no way to practice Buddhism with clarity and integrity if you're living that double life. The precepts for me are the opposite of alcoholism. And one of the precepts is not to intoxicate the mind or body of self or others. Of course, the word “intoxicate” means to bring poison in, and we can do that with alcohol, we can do it with doctrines, we can do it with all kinds of things.

And so I remember Katagiri Roshi, who came to Zen Center when Suzuki Roshi died and practiced with us for a while, and he used to say, “Let the flower of your life force bloom.” When our life force is obstructed by the craving of addiction, it's impossible to let the flower of our life force bloom. And so what I found was when I really stopped drinking for good many years ago, I had a new kind of insurgence of energy and integrity and openness, both to the teachings of practice and to other people in recovery. There's a wonderful humility that comes to us in recovery because we can learn from anybody, no matter what their life is like, and I've been exposed to a wide variety of human beings through the practice of recovery.

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When I walk into a recovery meeting, I'm nothing special. I'm just another alcoholic in a group of people who want to stay sober one day at a time. I know some people have felt the need to translate the language of recovery into Buddhist language, but millions of people all over the world of all kinds of religions and from many different cultures have been able to recover with the simple language that was offered to us many, many years ago. So I like to adhere to the traditions of that language.

James Shaheen: Laura, in the book you explore different meanings of freedom, and to quote you, you write, “We may have once believed that freedom meant doing whatever we wanted, without a thought for the consequences. But the principles of recovery teach us that to experience true freedom, we need to cultivate an ethical life so we aren't undermined and distracted by guilt, shame, and remorse.” You talk about these different layers of freedom, and you mentioned earlier the rigors of monastic life. How can discipline and restraint actually open us to a truer sense of freedom?

Laura Burges: Thank you for that question. I came of age in the '60s and the '70s, and I think a lot of people in my generation were suffering from traumatic stress from the assassinations that happened in the '60s, from the war in Vietnam, from what we saw on television and what we experienced in the civil rights movement. And so for us to discover this initially spiritual experience of using drugs or alcohol to open our minds and our beings to new experiences, that was a revelation, but for me, I came to find that it started taking that expansiveness and that sense of freedom and openness, it started taking those things away.

My life became very, very narrow. So I was really ripe for Buddhist practice when I came in 1975 to the San Francisco Zen Center. I love the teachings of Dogen. He says “to settle the self on the self.” So to settle our small, grasping, selfish, frightened self on a bigger self, on a big mind, on a bigger ground of being, there's a wonderful freedom in that. And for me to open myself up to the teachings of the Buddha and the demands of living in a sangha as well, you

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know. For those of us in Buddhist sanghas, of course, conflict comes up, disagreements arise, and to learn how to meet one another heart to heart on the path, we put our hands in gassho and we bow to meet one another with tenderness and vulnerability.

I found this within Zen practice. Now, I can't explain why that wasn't sufficient for me to stop drinking forever, but what I found in recovery, I felt like when I came to Buddhist practice, I could drop my story. I could put on a black robe, I could chant in Japanese and become somebody else, or a better version of myself, you might say. What I learned in recovery is that I had to go back and look at some of the roots of my addiction, and I needed to make amends to people that I'd harmed. And in doing that, I found a freedom in that. I found a freedom in taking responsibility for my life, in making amends to my daughter by living a very different life and offering her a different life than she would have had had I continued to drink. This was a whole new kind of freedom. We used to say that freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose, or the freedom of the beat poets, the freedom of the road, but there's something very freeing, especially in monastic life, to just follow the schedule. When the wake-up bell rings, you get out of bed and you wash your face and you put on your robe and you go to the zendo. And that was a way for me to settle the self on the self in the way that Dogen Zenji so beautifully articulates.

I want to say something else, which is that very early in my Zen practice, I came across this wonderful quote by Dogen Zenji, and he said, “To have faith means to believe that one is already inherently in the way.” And what those words came to mean for me was that none of my unskillful behavior before I came to Buddhism was lost or diluted. It was all part of the path. You know, those painful experiments with drugs and alcohol and other unwholesome behaviors, all of those things were like a kind of compost for the rest of my life. And to be able to tell other people the story of how I was able to finally come into recovery and get sober and stay sober redeemed all those things, so I dropped my story when I came into Zen practice, but I retrieved it in recovery so that other people could identify and learn from what I had learned about not only in Zen practice but from other people in recovery to find out that I wasn't lost, diluted, or upside

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down. I was finding my way as a human being in a human body, and looking back, it makes a lot more sense than it made when I was going through it.

James Shaheen: You know, one of the themes of the book is the power of sharing our story and community. And you cite the story of Kisa Gotami as an example of how shared loss can be an invitation to wake up and to recognize that we have something to offer. So how can loss be an opportunity for awakening?

Laura Burges: Well, the story of Kisa Gotami, the young woman whose child had died, and she took that child's body from teacher to teacher trying to find a way to bring that child back to life and someone told her you should go talk to the Buddha and the Buddha told her, “I can help you, but first I'd like you to go to every house in the village and bring me a mustard seed from a house that has not been touched by death,” and Kisa Gotami went from house to house, and of course she found out that none of these households had not had some experience of loss and death.

She went back to the Buddha, and he encouraged her to lay her child on a funeral pyre, and then she became one of his disciples. Well, that was a very early story that I heard in my Buddhist practice, a very touching story. But I came to feel that there was something missing from that story. And I thought, perhaps the Buddha knew that as Kisa Gotami went from house to house, she would be invited in, she would be offered a cup of tea, and she would sit with one family after another, and they would share stories of the loved ones they had lost, and they would laugh and they would cry.

I felt like this is the redemption of sharing our grief and our loss with one another. This is the gift we have when we open up to our own vulnerability and share that vulnerability and loss and grief and guilt with other people. When I had been sitting in recovery meetings and doing the work of recovery for three years, someone mentioned the word shame, and I had this another moment of clarity. I thought, “I don't feel ashamed anymore,” because I understood that I was in

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the grip of a life-threatening disease, which goes back in my family back to my Irish ancestors, and that I'm not guilty for having this disease, but I'm responsible for doing something about it.

And to me, the heart of recovery is this sense of sharing. We say Buddhism is passed from warm hand to warm hand, and recovery is passed from warm hand to warm hand as well. I think that addiction can be a family disease. There are certainly genetic components. But when we hang out with other people who want what we want, our collective intention to stay sober, and that's based on telling our stories to one another and sharing our successes with one another. This is the heart of recovery. When someone reaches a certain milestone in recovery, we clap for them and cheer for them. This is sympathetic joy. This is metta for me to share those milestones with one another.

James Shaheen: With Kisa Gotami, I also think of just loss in general, and you write that losing things can be a rehearsal for the letting go that is at the heart of practice and recovery. Can you say more about that?

Laura Burges: Well, I came across this wonderful quote, “All that you love will be carried away.” And I'd love to say I saw that in the sutras, but it's a line of graffiti in a Stephen King novel. It's in a phone booth in a Stephen King novel. All that you love will be carried away. And that can be a kind of grim prognosis, but what a wonderful invitation to live fully in this moment and to tell the people we love that we love them. And to experience life in all its beauty and in all its impermanence, to live fully every single day against a background of impermanence.

So to have a profound understanding that all that we love will be carried away, and that we can love everything more fiercely and more deeply because of that, is a wonderful invitation, I think.

James Shaheen: There are also some very profound words you see in a store window before it closes. It says, “Everything must go.” But recovery itself can be a process of grieving, you say,

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as it is in an act of dying to one's old self. Can you say more about this process? You know, it's interesting, sometimes a person enters into recovery and people might even say, “I like the old you better.”

Laura Burges: Oh, that's right.

James Shaheen: In a way, one dies to one's own self. Can you say something about that?

Laura Burges: Well, it can be very destabilizing in a relationship that's based on alcohol for one person to get sober. Because all their unspoken agreements with one another is based on one person being the sick one and the other person being the long-suffering codependent.

In my book, I cite those five stages of grief that Elizabeth Kübler-Ross offered us: denial, anger, bargaining. I went through all of those within recovery: Why do I have to stop drinking? I know a lot of other people that drink more than I do. So I think it's really important to turn towards that grief and turn towards that loss and recognize and honor that we're letting go of something that has really helped us.

Most of us feel that when we drank, it helped us survive. It helped us survive in terms of self-medicating. Of course, in the end, it stopped working. But to honor that this gave me something and now I'm letting go of it, and at the end of every chapter of my book, I offer some practices or reflections for people.

And this is something that is offered often in recovery programs, to write a letter to your addiction and recognize what your addiction gave you. Under the influence of alcohol, I could sing. I could sing at the top of my lungs in front of large groups of people. And by the way, I can still do that in recovery. But to write a letter saying what did my addiction give me? What kind of freedoms, what kind of experiences? I had some wonderful wild experiences behind alcohol, but

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what recovery has given me is a much quieter kind of joy, a quieter kind of satisfaction. The satisfaction of being true to my word of being able to look at myself in a mirror and feel good about what I see and to offer a hand to somebody who needs it.

We give up that self that acts out, and yet, this is so important to me, James, that the person that I was as an active alcoholic, she's right here next to me, you know? I think I say in the book, this feeling I have that my life runs along two tracks, and one track, Is this wholesome track of practice and recovery of my inner relationship to all beings, especially to people in recovery, that I have something to offer them.

And running along right next to me is that alcoholic self. And I have great compassion for that young woman who was staggering around the streets of Juneau, Alaska. And I look over there and I say, Hi, you know, I see you there. I know you're here. You're here with me. I also want to give a shout out to the 700 third graders that I taught in my 35 years of teaching.

You know, Suzuki Roshi said, “Shine one corner of the world.” And I think what he meant by that was we can't take on the whole world. We say we vow to save all beings. He said, “Shine one corner of the world.” Find something that you can do and do it well. And my corner of the world was my third grade classroom. And that was a huge part of my spiritual life. I loved laughing and teaching children. And I did that because I was sober and I think I was a very different teacher than I could have been because I was a Zen practitioner. You know, when I run into these wonderful adults that I taught as eight-year-olds, and I carry them in my heart, who they were when they were eight. When they come back and visit me, or I hear from them, it's a wonderful messenger from the past about this great gift of recovery and Zen practice that I was able to shine that corner of the world because these teachings were there to support me and enrich my life.

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I had a mindfulness bell in my classroom that I would ring, and we'd take three deep breaths. It's very gratifying to me that mindfulness in the classroom is a big movement across the country now. My daughter, Nova, is a preschool teacher, and to see her little ones sitting cross legged and following their breath, they're three and four years old, I think their lives will be different because they're being taught to pause and breathe and feel that they're alive and be glad they're alive.

Sharon Salzberg: It's so wonderful. I was looking at Instagram the other day and this little boy, I don't know, four, was saying to his mother, “When you get angry, you should take a deep breath,” and I thought, “Wow, look at that.”

Laura Burges: You know, one of my favorite stories is I was sitting at my desk one day during silent sustained reading and Nathan walked by my desk and he did this little dance and I called him over. I said, “Nathan, what were you thinking about just then?” He said, “Laura, do you ever forget you're alive, and all of a sudden you remember?”

Sharon Salzberg: Oh my goodness. That's so great.

Laura Burges: I was there for his Kencho experience.

Sharon Salzberg: Indeed. Now I feel I've gotten it too. Wow.

Laura Burges: Now Nathan is a labor organizer for teachers in New York. So I love hearing these stories about my former third graders.

Sharon Salzberg: So one of the things I really appreciate about your book is that it's full of humor, especially funny stories from your many years as a teacher. Can you say more about how you feel humor can support the paths of practice and recovery?

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Laura Burges: Well, humor has always been a big part of my life and my family. Sitting around the dinner table, we would vie to get a laugh from one another. My father in particular was a very open-hearted and funny, funny man. I feel like humor has saved me often in my life just to be able to laugh at the absurdity of life and the ironies of life. I feel that recovery and practice give us this opportunity to pause and we can either react with irritation and anger, or we could make a joke about something. That stood me in good stead in my third grade classroom where having many, many interactions with kids all day long could be quite demanding, but I had a lot of fun joking around with my third graders, and they would make me laugh too.

I think humor is something that's just so important for all of us as human beings. There's a wonderful Coyote tale I would tell my third graders where Coyote creates human beings. But his grandson, Chicken Hawk, said there's something wrong with these human beings. They don't laugh. And so Coyote went to the moon and got some laughter and put it in a big bag and came back and spread it over the human beings, and they started laughing. I think laughter is just so central to being human. We laugh a lot in recovery, and if we didn't, I don't know that I would have stuck around as long as I have.

James Shaheen: You know, I'm a bit of a prude, but I'll go ahead. This is Samuel Beckett, whom you quote: “When you're up to your neck in shit, there's nothing left to do but sing.”

Laura Burges: Don't you think that's quite Zen? I think so. Yeah, we have a choice. We can submerge or we can sing. We can sing. We can sing on the way down too.

Sharon Salzberg: Yeah, you know, I was thinking about first listening to you talk about kind of going beyond shame or going through shame, coming to the other side and also even talking about humor, I'm thinking about forgiveness and letting go of resentment and how essential it is

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and how complicated it can be or difficult to understand. And so I wonder if you could say more about forgiveness and how it can free us.

Laura Burges: Thank you, Sharon. I know this is at the heart of your work as well and your teaching, so I appreciate that question. You know, we say in recovery that resentment is the number one offender, and one of the hallmarks of addiction is self-pity and corrosive resentment, and so to let go of that resentment, and I think the opposite of resentment might be forgiveness.

It's a recognition that we've all erred, we've all made mistakes. Can we find it in our heart to forgive others? One thing I've come to in my understanding of forgiveness is it's not really necessarily about the other person. It's kind of an inside job. In a Buddhist ceremony that my daughter participated in, she asked me, “How can I learn to forgive?” And I found myself saying that forgiveness is not allowing ourselves to be limited or defined by the ways in which we've been hurt. I can cling to my stories of resentment and tell anybody who'll listen about the things that I'm resentful about. I can recount these stories of ways in which other people have harmed me or insulted me or diminished me in some way, or I can let that story go and, and move forward into my life.

And I think living fully with joy, we are much more likely to be able to put those petty resentments behind us. And forgiveness is a huge part of recovery. There's a phrase I came across, because so much of recovery is asking others to forgive our misdeeds in the past. If we're going to ask others to forgive us, shouldn't we first completely forgive others?

Now, this doesn't mean that the ways in which an abuser has harmed us is OK, you know. It doesn't mean it's OK for people to mistreat us and that we should just take that. I don't believe that at all. And in fact, if somebody has been frightening or abusive or toxic in our lives, we can certainly separate ourselves from them and wish them well from a distance, understanding that there's something in their life that has caused them to behave in this destructive way. That's, to

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me, an opening to compassion for those people. But it doesn't mean that we have to expose ourselves to further abuse or harm. We can let those people go with love.

Sharon Salzberg: When I'm trying to understand a quality like forgiveness, I usually make forgiving myself the laboratory and look at what that means. Does it mean it didn't matter what I did? Maybe it did really matter what I did. You know, there's still a lot of repercussions, but there's something else that I think you described so well about what happens when we don't nurse our resentments and allow them to solidify. And it's like we might realize with ourselves, “I did that and it was really harmful,” which is different from “I am so bad and I always will be,” and so I wonder if you could say something about working with resentments and how to come to see them as less solid.

Laura Burges: Yeah, to go back to shame for a second, you know, part of the noble eightfold path is right speech. I think sometimes we overlook the way that we speak to ourselves. And I used to have a very critical voice in my head that would stand next to me with a clipboard, acknowledging everything that I had done wrong and chastising me for that.

Once I'd been in recovery for a few years, that voice really quieted down. And in fact, at the beginning of my recovery, that little voice said, “Come on, honey, let's go get some help.” There's a lot of writing that's done in recovery. And I think writing about our resentments is really, really helpful because once we start writing down the things that we're resentful about and we start looking at maybe we had a part in that, you know, maybe there was something that I said or did that engendered this reaction from another person, seeing our own side of things is a wonderful pathway toward forgiveness, I think. So writing about it, sharing with a trusted friend or a Buddhist teacher is very helpful.

There's a wonderful quote by Wordsworth. He said, “If we could but read the secret history of our enemy, we would find there suffering and sorrow enough to disarm all hostility.” And so this

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goes back to the practice that I try to remember that when somebody is behaving in a destructive way or affecting me deeply in a hurtful way, to just understand that something happened to that person in their life that's making them lash out in this way and whatever that is, it probably has very little to do with me because I've certainly overreacted to something in the present because there was something in my past where I hadn't stood up for myself.

This is where knowing our own history and coming to terms with it can really inform not only the present but the future. We can walk with an open heart and a clearer sense of ourselves when we take a good look at the past and make amends for things that we've carried with us for a long time.

James Shaheen: As a part of the framework that you're referring to, the recovery framework, making amends and atoning for the past is essential, and often when we're focused on our own hurts, we neglect to do that or even turn to that. So it's a process and one reaches a point where one is ready to start to atone. So how can atoning for past wrongs actually free us to live more fully in the present?

Laura Burges: I think one of the great blessings of sitting is that our effort in sitting is not to empty the mind or to completely get rid of thoughts, memories, and reflections but to notice what arises as we sit. And so sitting is such an intimate way to get to know ourselves. And if I'm sitting zazen and I find this prickly, bothersome thing from the past keeps arising that's telling me that I need to take care of this in order to be free of it, it might be something unskillful that I said or did that I haven't really taken care of, and so sitting in silence, we get to know ourselves in a very, very intimate way. Often when I'm sitting in a long sesshin, seven-day sitting or a one-day sitting in the past, I would have vivid memories come to mind from, deep in my childhood. So I knew that I was getting to know myself in a very intimate way.

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To free myself to move forward into the future, I need to take care of some of the things that I've let languish in the back of my mind. Often somebody will present themselves that I owe amends to. I'll just be walking down the street and I'll see somebody and I'll think, “Wait a minute,” and I might stop and say to them, “Do you remember such and such? I didn't feel too good about that, and I want to say that I'm sorry that I behaved in that way and I'll try to do better going forward.” Usually they don't even know what I'm talking about. It's something that's been bothering me that they let go of a long time ago.

James Shaheen: I guess that kind of housecleaning allows for the quiet mind that can rest in the present.

Laura Burges: Yeah. Yeah.

James Shaheen: You quote the Song of the Jewel-Mirror Samadhi: “When erroneous imaginations cease, the acquiescent mind realizes itself.” Can you say more about our erroneous imaginations, in particular, how fear can condition how we view ourselves and the world around us?

Laura Burges: When erroneous imaginations cease, the acquiescent mind realizes itself. That phrase in this Jewel-Mirror Samadhi really leapt out at me. You can hear a sutra for a long time and not hear it, and then something will really impress itself on your mind. That really made me think about how in my past I had been kind of pushed around by conditioning, by certain fears, by the opinions of other people. That, by the way, is the difference between living from the inside out and the outside in. You know, I would create these scenarios about things that might happen and not notice that they never did happen. And I say in the book one of the most debilitating erroneous imaginations we have is thinking that we are a separate individual in our tiny little boat trying to make our way by ourselves. The teaching of no self is quite threatening to some people when they hear that idea of no self. Actually, for me, it's so comforting to think

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that I can't exist for one moment without the effort and the care of myriad beings, most of whom I'll never even know: the sun on my face and the rain that grows the trees whose oxygen I breathe.

This is the teaching of the Buddha: that there's no independent self apart from everything around me. On the other hand, there's nobody else in the universe like any of the three of us. There's only one of us in the universe. I'm a collection of intersections of many beings and many experiences that don't exist anywhere else in the world. And we live with these two realities. But my erroneous imagination that I could stop drinking on my own without help almost cost me my life. I'm speaking literally about that. And so to cast aside that erroneous imagination that I had to do this by myself, that's what saved my life.

So that phrase, James, is very, very precious to me. I also love later where it says, “Practice secretly working within as though a fool, like an idiot. And so we make our way, one step at a time, one day at a time. failing, getting up, trying again. Seven times down, eight times up.”

James Shaheen: Laura Burges, thanks so much for joining us. It's been a great pleasure. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *The Zen Way of Recovery*, available now. We like to close these podcasts with a short guided meditation. Often Sharon takes that role, but today we're going to ask you to lead us in a short meditation. Laura, would you mind?

Laura Burges: I'd be very happy to do that. Let's sit up straight with some strength in our lower back, rolling the shoulders back, having some strength in the spine that lifts up through the crown of the head, and taking some deep breaths. Invite your breath to enter the farthest reaches of your body, letting go of any place where you're holding on to tension, preoccupation, worry, gently letting go and entering this present moment deeply. Pay particular attention to when the in-breath turns around and becomes an out-breath. Bring in the attention into the heart area. Send golden tendrils of lovingkindness out into the world to help heal this troubled world touching all

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beings. I'd like to dedicate the merit of our time together to all beings in the ten directions past, present, and future. May all beings be happy. May they be joyous and live in safety.

Thank you both so much for your wonderful questions and for your wonderful work in the world.

Sharon Salzberg: Thank you so much.

James Shaheen: Thank you, Sharon. Thank you, Laura.

James Shaheen: You've been listening to *Life As It Is* with Laura Burges. To read an excerpt from Laura's book, visit tricycle.org. Tricycle is a nonprofit educational organization dedicated to making Buddhist teachings and practices broadly available, and we are pleased to offer our podcasts freely. If you would like to support the podcast, please consider subscribing to Tricycle or making a donation at tricycle.org. 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!