

Tricycle Talks

“What Makes a Good Life?”

Episode #97 with Seth Segall

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Seth Segall: If you read the great philosophers, I think it gives you some greater perspective on the things that happen in life, and some of the most important things are that everything that happens in the world isn't about you. I think there's a kind of a philosophical attitude, which is kind of accepting, open to new discovery, and kind of light in a way that has a sense of humor about the world. At least, that's what I've gotten from reading the philosophers.

James Shaheen: Hello and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I'm James Shaheen, and you just heard Seth Segall. Seth is a Zen priest and psychologist, as well as a *Tricycle* contributing editor. In his new book, *The House We Live In: Virtue, Wisdom, and Pluralism*, he pulls from Aristotelian, Confucian, and Buddhist ethical traditions to outline a vision of liberal pluralism grounded in human flourishing. In my conversation with Seth, we talk about what it means to live an ethical life, what we can learn from comparing Aristotelian, Confucian, and Buddhist understandings of virtue, and how cultivating philosophical wisdom can impact our everyday lives. So here's my conversation with Seth Segall.

James Shaheen: So I'm here with Zen priest and psychologist Seth Segall. Hi Seth. It's great to be with you.

Seth Segall: Hi. Good morning, James.

James Shaheen: So we're here to talk about your new book, *The House We Live In: Virtue, Wisdom, and Pluralism*. So to start, can you tell us a little bit about the book and what inspired you to write it?



Seth Segall: There are a couple of things that inspired me to write it. One is just the sheer shock of the 2016 election and the way our politics have unfolded since that time and a concern for the well-being of democracy and civility and our ability to talk to each other across the political divide and remain human to each other. So that was one impetus for the book. The other was a sense that we're living in a very pluralistic society with people from different ethnicities and different sectarian beliefs and people coming from all over the world. It's a country of Buddhists and Hindus and Sikhs and also Christians and Jews and Muslims and atheists and the spiritually but not religious and agnostics and so forth. Somehow we all have to get along together. And even though we have different value systems and different beliefs, we have to have some kind of common ethics that allows us to kind of relate and connect and cooperate with each other. And so I was looking for some kind of ethical system that might be trans- or aspire at least to be transcultural. And so that's one source for the book.

The other is my previous book was looking at Buddhist thinking and looking at Aristotle's thinking and trying to reach some kind of new synthesis, some modern version of what flourishing might be like based on Aristotle's idea of eudaimonia and the Buddhist idea of enlightenment. How could we somehow bring these into connection with each other? In the last few years, I've also been reading a lot of the Confucian tradition, and I realized, well, here's a third tradition that says flourishing depends on virtue and wisdom, and it has a different version of flourishing. So I was interested in comparing all three systems and seeing, is there a way that I can use the resources from all three of those ethical systems to come up with a new contemporary ethics that's useful for us in late modern culture and democracy? So that was the impetus.

James Shaheen: So you mentioned flourishing and you say that the book is geared toward a vision of liberal pluralism grounded in human flourishing. So what is human flourishing? How do you define it?



Seth Segall: What a great question. First of all, I think that flourishing may be different in different cultures and different eras, so that, for example, honor societies or warrior societies might have different niches in which we can flourish, different possibilities for us as human beings. But I'm looking at the kinds of cultures we live in today, these late modern cultures that have a lot in common, despite their differences. What would flourishing mean for us today? And for me, I came up with a definition that flourishing is living a life that is first of all emotionally fulfilling, second of all psychologically rich, third of all meaningful, and fourth of all, it's a life that's attuned to the ethical and aesthetic possibilities that present themselves in each moment. So we're able to enjoy a sunset and a cup of tea or be creative in some kind of way artistically, but we're also concerned about every action we have has ethical consequences too. And we're attuned to them. We're sensitive to them in some kind of way. I mean, that's the kind of life I envisioned that was flourishing.

I outlined seven domains in which we flourish, and not everybody flourishes in every domain, but the domains I outlined were relationships, that we're embedded in a set of relationships with people we care about and care about us in turn; that we have a life in which we've made some accomplishments in areas that matter to us, so that doesn't mean winning a Nobel Prize or Pulitzer Prize, but it may mean raising a child to the point of independence so they become decent human beings or it may be being very good on a dance floor or being good on an athletic field or being good with a potter's wheel. It's going to be very individual what accomplishments are meaningful for us, but we want to feel like we have some accomplishments in our life. Third, that we're tuned in to the aesthetic qualities of the world, we're able to enjoy the beauty of nature, we're able to be creative in some kind of way. Fourth, and this is what I get from my Zen, that we're wholehearted and we're intensely present in the world in a complete sort of way so that when we're doing something, we put all of ourselves into it, body, mind, and spirit. We're not standing back from life or hiding under a rock or something like that. We're really engaged in the world in a meaningful way. We want our lives to be meaningful, which means that it matters to



other people that we've been alive, that we've in some way made the world a little bit better place for the people around us.

I think it also has something to do with acceptance, that when hardship comes, we find ways to grow and continue to maintain and sustain ourselves despite hardship. When we sustain losses, we find ways to find new avenues to fulfill ourselves in and not be totally stymied and flooded and destroyed by our losses. The other area I listed was integration, that if we have certain values that are really important for us, they should permeate our entire being. We don't just enact them in some sphere and then not let them out in other spheres. So of course we all know people who are well respected in the community but treat their children and spouses terribly or people who are inspiring from the pulpit but then sexually abuse their parishioners and so forth. The idea is that our values should permeate our entire life. That's what I mean by integration. People who achieve a high degree of value integration are the people we value as kind of secular saints in the society.

James Shaheen: You talk about the virtue of integration, and we'll get back to that in a bit. So far, with regard to flourishing, you've mentioned Confucius, you've mentioned Zen, and in the book, you suggest that we can foster human flourishing by looking to the traditions of Aristotle, Confucius, and Buddhist ethics, which you describe as virtue ethics traditions. So what do you mean by virtue ethics?

Seth Segall: The term virtue ethics was originally designated for Aristotle's ethics, but it's been applied to Buddhist ethics and Confucian ethics since then. There are a number of books on that. Daniel Keown, for example, wrote a book on Buddhist ethics as virtue ethics quite a number of years ago. But the idea is that there's an ideal state which we hope human beings aspire to. In Buddhism, that's going to be being a bodhisattva or being an arhat, for example. But each of the



traditions has their own name for that higher level of being. And that the way you get there is through some combination of virtue and wisdom.

The idea of virtues are things that we have to cultivate. And we cultivate them over the course of a lifetime. So in Buddhism, those virtues are going to be things like compassion, lovingkindness, equanimity, and so forth, but they'll be different in different systems. But what I found was that there's a lot of commonality between all three systems and what's considered virtuous. These all look at a superior kind of well-being that's the result of cultivating virtue and wisdom. It's a lifelong cultivation. You can always get better at it. That's the vision I'm talking about when I'm talking about virtue ethics.

James Shaheen: Speaking of the word virtue, you say that it can sometimes get a bad rap or be seen as stuffy or holier than thou, but you suggest that it is instead about skillfulness in the art of living. So how have you come to this understanding of virtue?

Seth Segall: First of all, in Buddhism, we talk about things as being skillful or unskillful, *kusala* and *akusala*. So I think my first orientation to that came from my Buddhist practice, that things that are bad aren't bad because they're sinful or because God disapproves them but they're not skillful ways to live. They're destructive to our well-being and the well-being of people around us. I list a group of virtues, seven virtues in the book that I think are universal virtues or at least aspire to be, things like truthfulness, things like courage, things like benevolence towards other people and so forth. There's a long list of them. Seven of them. But in the book, I describe how each of them are related to well-being, that they lead to well-being.

For example, if we are honest people, other people see us as trustworthy, they're more willing to collaborate with us and so forth. If we recognize truth when we see it, we're also more likely to understand the truth about ourselves and what really makes us happy and what doesn't make us happy, what leads to us being better human beings and what doesn't lead to us being better



human beings. We see things clearly in that way. So truthfulness is integral to well-being in that way. And not only is it integral to well-being, but I think it's part of what we mean by having a superior level of well-being.

When we think about the people we think of who are really moral exemplars, we think about people who have some degree of truthfulness, some degree of courage, some degree of benevolence towards others and so forth. So they constitute the enlightened state as well as being pathways to the enlightened state. When we talk about someone being a bodhisattva, what are they like? Well, they're compassionate. They manifest lovingkindness. They're equanimous. So they're not only pathways to better well-being, but they're actually the destination we want to end up into.

James Shaheen: You know, you write that the ancient Greek word for virtue was *arete*, which also carries the connotation of excellence. So how do you view the connection between excellence and virtue?

Seth Segall: Well, we talk about *paramitas*, right? That's excellence too. The virtues are excellences in the Buddhist system. They are in the Greek system too. And Confucius would say that too. We're really looking at what does it mean to be an excellent human being? When we think about the kind of person we want to be or the kind of person we want our children to be like, what do we want them to be like? Well, we want them to be courageous and honest and benevolent and all the other virtues that we can list as well. That's our hope for our children.

James Shaheen: So Aristotle also introduced the idea of eudaimonia, which you and many others translate as human flourishing. So what did Aristotle mean by human flourishing, and how do you understand this concept? You've already touched on it, but I thought if we look at Aristotle's understanding, we can understand a little bit more about your own.



Seth Segall: Well, Aristotle is saying that the person who cultivates all the virtues also cultivates wisdom. He outlines four different kinds of wisdom, but the kind I emphasize in my book is what he calls practical wisdom, which is knowing how to do the right thing in the right way with the right people at the right time. It's a little bit like Buddhist right speech, saying the right thing in the right way to the right person at the right time and so forth. So Aristotle is kind of lacking in that he never really defines what he means by practical wisdom. What does that entail? But the idea is that if you're cultivating wisdom and if you're cultivating virtue, you're going to make the most of the opportunities that life presents to you. You're not always going to be right in your decisions, because who is? None of us is perfect, but when you get up to bat, you're going to hit that ball more successfully more of the time, and so you're going to be happier.

Aristotle believed that if you had those kinds of virtues and that kind of wisdom, that the small things in life weren't going to throw you, that you had a sense of your own presence in the world, your own well-being, you have a sense of self-satisfaction, that you and your community recognize that you have a whole variety of excellences, so you're valued within the community as well. I think that's what Aristotle meant by it. We can differ with some of the things he has to say, but I think he's on the right track there.

James Shaheen: You know, nowadays so many people are afflicted with a lack of a sense of purpose, but you say that for Aristotle, flourishing is also linked to telos or an aim or purpose in life, which is so essential. Can you say more about this?

Seth Segall: Aristotle pointed out that if you take an acorn and plant it, it grows into an oak tree and not a maple tree. There's a way that things are preprogrammed to grow and develop, and given the right amount of sunlight and the right amount of water, there's an optimal way in which an oak tree will grow. You know what a stunted oak tree looks like, and you know what a flourishing oak tree looks like. And he said it's the same thing with human beings, that there's a way we're supposed to be. He wouldn't have used the term genetics or anything else, but he



would say that there's an inborn way in which we were meant to be. And what we're meant to be in this way is wise and excellent. We're rational social beings, he would say, at our best. And to be really excellent, you have to use your rationality, and you have to recognize your social connections with other people that you live in a community, you're part of what the Greeks called a polis. You're part of that community. Your job is not only to benefit yourself but to benefit the community you live in so that everybody can flourish. You're going to be an involved citizen in that community.

James Shaheen: So in addition to Aristotelian ethics, you draw from, of course, Buddhist ethical frameworks. So what do you see as the core components of Buddhist ethics?

Seth Segall: Here I pull a little bit of a trick. Buddhism is historically rooted back 2,500 years ago in a particular kind of metaphysics. It has to do with the idea of karma and the fact that we have all these realms of rebirth: hell realms and heaven realms and deva realms and brahma realms and hungry ghost realms. And so the whole premise is based in the idea of trying to live in such a way that you are at a minimal level moving to better kinds of rebirths and then at the highest level stepping off the wheel of rebirth entirely and going to the state of nirvana, which transcends ordinary existence. And for me, that system really doesn't work all that well, just because it's hard for me to believe in all of it.

I'm not saying it's wrong. It's just that as a thoroughly modern person who's been trained as a scientist and tends to be a bit of a naturalist about things, it's just hard to see how that really works. I think it works psychologically, and you can talk a lot about how Buddhism in the West has become psychologized over the years, but it works psychologically when we think about heaven and hell realms as ways that we can live. We can live in hell on this earth, and we can live in a more heavenly realm on this earth. What are the behaviors that get us there? And the paramitas that are outlined and the kinds of wisdom that are outlined, *prajna* and Buddhist wisdom, are, I think, very skillful ways of getting us to a better life in this lifetime. Do we have



other lifetimes? I don't know. That's beyond my pay grade. But I am able to concentrate on what makes sense in this lifetime. And for me, that's the kinds of virtues and the kind of wisdom that the Buddhist tradition talks about.

James Shaheen: I appreciate your approach as a modern person, and I've asked you this once before, and you had a pretty good answer. Is anything lost by taking Buddhism out of this cosmological framework that many of us simply cannot accept?

Seth Segall: For me, my own personal response is no. I understand that mythological and cosmological beliefs lend a kind of grandness to a vision. But if they don't work anymore, if you can't make yourself believe in them—I mean, if you can believe in them, great. Use the old way of looking at it. I don't have any complaints about that. It's just for if you're a modern person, somewhat agnostic, somewhat naturalistic, somewhat pragmatic, like I am, I want to take from Buddhism what works for me. And I enjoy reading the cosmology. I enjoy reading the mythology. I like reading all the suttas and sutras, both in the Theravada canon and in the Mahayana canon. So I'm very much attached to that.

But I have to believe it in a kind of contemporary and modern way. I have no choice. And for me, there's a question about, well, are there higher levels of achievement within Buddhism that I'm going to miss out on? And the answer is I can't know one way or the other. I know other people say, “Well, I no longer have a sense of self, and I'm forever living in deep interconnection with everything.” I can take their word for it that they are. And maybe if I compare myself to that, I say, well, I'm deficient. I don't live that way. But all that does is create a sense of separation for me and a sense of not being good enough. And it doesn't do anything for me. I mean, I can aspire to try to be like that, but I don't see any pathway through to it. So I just do what I can given my belief system of what I'm capable of believing.



James Shaheen: You know, I know your work very well, but many of our listeners may not. First, I imagine you find metaphorical value in much of the cosmology, to some extent anyway. But more, you have been very clear that you do not call yourself a secular Buddhist. In fact, you wrote a piece about that. So could you briefly explain what makes you not a secular Buddhist?

Seth Segall: Sure. I think when you say “I’m a secular Buddhist,” you’re creating a dividing line where there’s this kind of Buddhist, the secular, and then there are other kinds of Buddhists, traditional Buddhists, monastic Buddhists, whatever you want to call them. And you’re saying there’s some kind of clear separation there. I don’t feel any need to make that kind of clear separation because there are ideas within Buddhism that I think resonate. For example, in my meditative experience on retreats and so forth, I have an enhanced sense of the sacred, that everything is sacred and everything is a potential object of love and deep connection and so forth. I think a secular worldview doesn’t really accommodate that.

I think there are senses in which the idea of the dharmakaya or the sense of the totality of the world as one integrated whole, like Indra’s web. I think there are ways that that kind of approaches views of other religions that look at a kind of God. I look at Spinoza’s view of God, for example, as the God that’s nature and everything else all working together. I think there are parallels. When I talk with fundamentalist Christians or mainline Christians about their beliefs or their experiences, I can create connections to what they’re experiencing and what I’m experiencing. So I don’t feel this need to create this hard line of categories and say, “I’m this, I’m that.” I’m what I am. And what I am is someone who’s kind of a contemporary person, scientifically trained and so forth. And so that’s part of who I am, but it’s not all of who I am. And I’m open to other things. I might be wrong about this and that and there really are more spiritual kinds of connections to things in the world. I’m open to that possibility too. I don’t want to write them off.



James Shaheen: So you've mentioned that there are many different ways of thinking about enlightenment within the Buddhist tradition. So how do you view the metaphysical, psychological, and moral aspects of enlightenment?

Seth Segall: Well, it's an interesting question. We've had people who have been recognized as great enlightened beings, for example, the Japanese Zen masters during World War II, who thought that going to war and killing people and torturing people in scientific experiments was OK for Buddhists to do because there's really no such thing as death and dying and there are no individuals that exist. And nowadays we look at those people and say, is that really enlightened? You know, what does that mean to say they were enlightened? We know of renowned Buddhist teachers, for example, who were abusive to their congregations and so forth. Was that really enlightened?

Or we can talk about what does it mean to be enlightened today? Does that mean being enlightened in regards to racism and sexism and ableism and ageism and all the isms that we're looking at today? So I think the meaning of enlightenment, first of all, changes century to century and culture to culture. And I think instead what I'd like to talk about is not some final state of mind but some process of awakening, and that's a kind of being awake to each moment, being present in each moment, seeing a path that emerges from each moment and maybe taking one step on it. It's a way of engaging life moment to moment and living life moment to moment in a way that's really vital and alive and open and constantly learning. I think enlightenment isn't a final place that we end up, but we have an enlightened way to be. And that way is going to embody wisdom and virtue as we discover in each moment.

James Shaheen: So what then do you see as the relationship between enlightenment and eudaimonia?



Seth Segall: Well, if we look at Aristotle's way of looking at things and the way Buddha looks at things and we list what the most important virtues are, Buddhists clearly say the most important virtues can be compassion and lovingkindness and a kind of benevolence and recognition of a deep interconnection with everything else that exists and emptiness. Those are going to be the most important things for us. Those really aren't very high on Aristotle's list. He would have put courage first, for example, and things like having a sense of humor, being witty but not buffoonish. That would be a virtue for him. I think that the sets of virtues are a little bit different and what they emphasize are different.

I like the idea that Buddhism puts compassion first and connection to other people first and interconnection first. For me, those are the most important values. I think Confucius does that too. When he's asked what's the most important virtue, his answer is *ren*, which means human-heartedness or humaneness. And when he's asked at least at one point in the *Analects* how he defines *ren*, he says, “Love people.” That's the foremost commandment in Confucianism too. And also the recognition of our interdependence is foremost there too. I mean, one way in Confucius is better than the Buddhists is that Confucius had a very developed sense of how one interacts with society, what the relationship between the individual and society is in a way that goes a little bit beyond what the Buddha imagined. And one way that Aristotle is better is he has a more defined sense of justice than either the Buddhists or Confucians have. So I think each of these systems has something unique to contribute to a modern idea of what it means to live well and to have a kind of superior level of well-being.

James Shaheen: Right, so you describe Confucian ethics as the most profoundly social of the three classical systems. So what does it mean for ethics to be social?

Seth Segall: First of all, it means we're living as parts of families, we're living as parts of communities. One of the worst things—let me go on my high horse here a bit. If you look at the history of the West over the last five hundred years, one of the most prominent features in it has



been the development of what we call individualism. You see this throughout the Renaissance and throughout the Protestant Revolution, throughout the Scientific Revolution, the Age of Reason, the Romantic Era, there's just progressive development of the idea that we're individuals. So when John Locke comes along, he says, well, society is an agreement between people. It's a social contract. Well, nobody ever asked me to sign that contract. You know, I didn't contract to form a society. I was born into a society, and every human being is born into a society and born into a family, born into a community. We're integral parts of them and we're parts, as we're finding out now with the climate crisis, also parts of bio and ecosystems, integral parts of them.

So I think this kind of ecological vision of deep entanglement, the Indra's web kind of vision of how we all kind of reflect each other, is absolutely crucial. So we have a culture today. We can look at what the philosopher Judith Green calls ego-capitalism where people like Jeff Bezos earn thousands of times what the employees in their fulfillment centers do or the head of Walt Disney earns thousands of times what a Disney Princess earns in a theme park.

We've never had that before in this country. It used to be that the CEO made maybe a hundred, two hundred, three hundred times what the lowest employee did. Now it's everything goes to the richest, and that's individualism too. Colonialism is individualism, that we can go ahead and control Indigenous peoples. Patriarchy is like that, that men have a right to control women. All the extractive industries we have that are destroying the ecology, those have to do with people thinking “I have a right to just get maximum profit out of things and I don't have to pay attention to how that damages people, the environment, or culture.” We need a profoundly different view that we're really interconnected, that everything we do affects everyone else, and we have a responsibility to take care of everybody. I think that responsibility for care is maybe the most important part of the ethic I'm promoting.



James Shaheen: From these three ethical systems that you identify, you point out a few core virtues that you see as essential to human flourishing. So first, what makes something a virtue?

Seth Segall: Well, here's my definition of virtue, for the sake of the book. A virtue is, first of all, a constellation of habit and value. So, for example, if we're honest, let's say, I'll give the example of a two-year-old who bites or hits his sister, for example, and mom says, “Did you hit your sister or bite your sister?” And you say, “No, I didn't do it,” because you don't want to get punished. And then your mother says, “I've caught you in a lie. I saw you do that. And now I'm going to punish you even worse because you lied on top of hurting your sister.” So now after a while you begin to develop the habit of when you're asked, “Did you do something or not? You think about it a little bit, you realize, “I'm going to be punished even worse,” and you develop the habit of answering truthfully over time.

But truthfulness is more than a habit—it's also a value. So as it turns out, as we become adults, we not only have the habit of being truthful, but we value being truthful. We like ourselves because we see ourselves as truthful individuals. When we lie to someone, we have a sense of regret or remorse about ourselves. When we meet someone who's a liar, we don't like them. So it becomes part of our values as well as just a habit. So it's a constellation of habit and value.

Virtues, I say, have to be both things that benefit us, they make us better people in some kind of way, but also that benefit the people around us. So if we're truthful, for example, in our discussions with other people, it not only benefits us, but it benefits everyone who's interacting with us. And people are going to—no one wants to make a contract with a liar, whether it's a business contract or a marital contract. It's helpful for us inside, but it's helpful for society as well. It's helpful for us when other people are truthful and when everyone is truthful, they both help us and they help other people. Virtues always take the needs and consider the concerns of other people into account. They're not just self-centered. So I think that's crucial too. So, I'd say a



virtue is a habit and a value that is both self-regarding and other-regarding that is conducive to, or partially constitutes, flourishing.

James Shaheen: So you've mentioned truthfulness, and I'd just like to ask you about a few other virtues. One you identify as courage, and you focus particularly on the everyday sort of courage. So what does everyday courage look like, and how does it contribute to human flourishing?

Seth Segall: Courage means within your family and your workplace and your neighborhood, maybe at the town council, at the small town council meetings, it means standing up for what you believe in the moment, saying what you actually think and feel. It means when you're thinking of taking on some kind of new task and not shirking from it and saying, “I'm going to fail, I'm not going to try,” but it means, “Alright, maybe I'll fail, but I'll give it my best go anyway.” It means if you're having a dispute with your spouse, both pretending like you don't believe what you believe, not just agreeing because you want to create peace, although sometimes that's necessary, but it means really having an honest discussion. It means setting boundaries for yourself when other people are stepping on what's your sphere and invading your space. It means in the same way stepping back a moment. All those things take courage.

It means if someone you know is being treated unfairly in the workplace, it means standing up for them and putting in a good word for them. So courage always involves taking some risk. But if we don't do that, we begin to shrink the sphere—we're not seen by other people. We hide ourselves. The space that we occupy is smaller and smaller. Our self-esteem shrinks and shrinks as we do that. So it's a recipe for ill-being not to have that kind of courage.

What I suggest is that there's certain roles we volunteer to take on in the world, and we're expected to be courageous in those roles, but not in every role. You know, we're not expected to take out enemy machine gun nests or rescue children from burning buildings. Firemen do that and soldiers do that. They've signed up for that. That's their role in life. So our role isn't that, but



our role is to be good parents, to be good spouses, to be good citizens, to be good neighbors. And being courageous in that role is very important for getting anything done or feeling good about ourselves.

James Shaheen: OK, well, here's a virtue that many of us struggle with: temperance, which Plato considered the most important cardinal virtue, and you compare it to the Buddhist virtue of self-restraint. So how do you think about self-restraint or temperance as a virtue? And I ask that because everywhere there's evidence of a lack of self restraint.

Seth Segall: Buddhism and I would say Stoicism too are very outspoken on this. The idea is that as we engage the world and live, we have all kinds of desires and urges and reactivity to all sorts of things. And if we just act in a knee-jerk way on all of that, we're probably making life worse for ourselves and for everyone around us. So the idea is to be discerning about things, to look at an urge that comes up or a desire that comes up and say, “Well, wait a minute, if I continue to think this way or act this way, what's it going to look like down the road?”

So we have to evaluate what the long-term effects are of saying things, doing things, thinking things, and make some decisions about what we want to continue and what we don't want to continue. And usually that means restraining at least some of our desires and passions. For example, I'm a diabetic and I would love to have a piece of chocolate cake. I love chocolate cake, but I don't eat it anymore. But I can have that wish—when someone brings that out at the party, I want to do it, but then I'll step back and get some perspective on it and say, “Wait a minute, what's going to be the long-term effect of eating this cake?” I'm going to go blind. I'm going to have a heart attack. So I say, no, I'm not going to do that. You have to think about the consequences of your actions.

John Dewey, the philosopher, came up with a difference between value and evaluation. So value is the value of eating that chocolate cake. You eat it and boy, it has a positive value to it. You



know, you love the flavor. That's value. An evaluation is stepping back, critically examining, using discerning judgment, and then deciding, is this really good for me in terms of the goals that I've set for myself in life?

James Shaheen: You know, one virtue you say that appears across these ethical systems is wisdom, and you focus especially on *phronesis*, or practical wisdom. So what is *phronesis*?

Seth Segall: Well, as Aristotle said, it's the ability to know what's the right thing to do at the right time in the right sort of way with the right sort of people. So there's a tremendous amount of judgment involved in this. It means you have to weigh a lot of things. In the book, I come up with my own thoughts about the kinds of skills that we need to act wisely in the world in that way, and some of them are what we call emotional and social intelligence. It's the ability to really know what your own thoughts, feelings, emotions, desires, goals, and motivations are. It's to know how other people see you. It's to be able to walk into a social situation and read the room and know what's going on. It's the difference between, for example, walking into a party and walking into a courtroom, and you know that a whole different kind of behavior is called for.

There are the skills that are involved in maintaining relationships: knowing how to negotiate, knowing how to make amends, knowing how to be convincing, knowing what kind of behavior is called for. Does this call for explaining to people why something is in their best interest or does it mean twisting an arm? It means being a good salesperson when you're a salesman or being a good hostage negotiator when you're a hostage negotiator or just being a good partner in a relationship. So these are interpersonal skills, how to set boundaries. You need to have all of that.

And then in addition, over the last 2,500 years, and at least in the Western world since Socrates and Aristotle and all the way through Russell and Wittgenstein and so forth, we've developed a way of thinking about what is logical and what is illogical, what's a good way to judge whether



something is true or not or valid or not, what's a good way to predict what's most likely to come in the future, and following those rules are really important. We seem to have thrown those rules out the window. Now we're living in the age of alternative facts, and everyone can believe what they want to believe, but we need to go back to evaluating sources, knowing how to sort through information and know what's reliable and what's not. I mean, those are skills we need to be teaching everywhere in every grade in school right now.

In addition to that, there's the ability to think, to take multiple factors into account at the same time. There's the ability to see things from other people's perspectives. There's the ability to think abstractly. And then lastly, there's Buddhist mindfulness, being able to stand back, look at your thoughts, emotions, feelings, desires from some perspective. There's what I call the wisdom of the body, which is that sometimes our body knows things that our mind doesn't yet know and that you need to listen to what your gut is telling you. It doesn't mean your gut's always right, but at least you have to take it into consideration. And I think that the people that I've met in my life who were really wise both integrate this kind of intellectual way of looking at things and also balance this heart-centered way and body-centered way of looking at things. And I think that's one thing that Buddhist practice is very helpful for.

James Shaheen: It's interesting. I mean, I was just going to point out the connection between the ideas and their practical application, which you manage so beautifully. So how can meditation encourage the cultivation of practical wisdom?

Seth Segall: Well, we're hopefully doing that in every moment when we're sitting meditating. I mean, there are so many ways in which meditation contributes to the skills that we need to live well. One is we begin to learn that every thought that comes up in our head, we don't have to believe that. Distancing and being able to see our thoughts and feelings in some sort of perspective is really crucial. We can separate ourselves from it and say, “Well, at least it's just a thought. I don't have to believe it. I don't have to follow it along.” It's learning to see which kinds



of thoughts and ways of thinking are skillful and which ones undermine our well-being and the well-being of other people around us. So we learn that certain kinds of ways that we've been thinking, all they do is make us miserable, and that it's possible to just drop them, which is an amazing discovery.

There is that ability that we have to listen to deeper wisdom inside ourselves as well. In our heads, we've decided that some way is the way we want to be or something we want to do. But as we're just sitting with it quietly, we discover that there's somewhere in our body that's saying, “No, this doesn't feel right. This isn't right.” And we learn to listen to all that as well as it comes up.

There's also a way in which we learn to be present with things, to accept things as they are. There's a great deal of acceptance that comes out of the practice. We want to be very concentrated and just stay with our breath and say, “That's not going to happen today.” It happened yesterday, it may happen tomorrow, it's not happening today. And there's a reason for that, because the mind is created out of causes and conditions and the causes and conditions aren't just right at this moment. So we need to step back there and maybe all we can do is have some compassion for ourselves in that moment as we're going through some kind of mental storm. But we learn how to see that too and how to have that kind of self-compassion.

I think there are almost an infinite number of ways that meditative practice adds to things. For me, the most important is the immediacy with the life process that you get out of meditation. And it's a kind of a lesson about how to live in every way. When I was working as a chaplain for a number of years at a local hospital on the medical and surgical units, you walk into a room and there's a patient you've never seen before and they're suffering through some kind of hell in that moment. And you just ask yourself at this point, “How can I totally be with this person right now? What does it mean to really be present for them, to really allow them to be themselves, to really find some way of connecting with this person in a way that's meaningful to them?” I mean,



that takes a kind of a wholeheartedness and a whole kind of presence. You can't just go by the numbers there. You have to be fully present and take some risks, and meditation is wonderful training for how to do that, how to be really present with someone else.

James Shaheen: Seth you also explore another type of wisdom which you call philosophical wisdom. So can you walk us through the Aristotelian and Buddhist notions of *sophia* and *prajna*?

Seth Segall: I mean, Aristotle has a whole thought about what he calls the beginnings of things, how things start in the world, and he has a whole theory about the unmoved mover and so forth. He has a whole metaphysics that he thinks that you can get to by contemplation. And for him, the highest thing a human can do is contemplate these divine mysteries in some kind of way. So that's *sophia* for him.

I mean, for *prajna*, whether you're a Theravadan or Mahayana Buddhist, it's going to be a little bit different. But *prajna* is a number of things. At the lowest level, it's understanding the law of karma, that what you do is going to have an effect on who you're going to be the next moment. You're kind of recreating yourself in each moment through the things you're doing and thinking and feeling. It's the understanding that all things contain some degree of suffering, that all things are impermanent, that all things are nonself. Those are three other components. And then when you get to the Mahayana tradition, it's understanding the emptiness, understanding the deep interconnection of everything with everything else, and the unity of everything.

And I think each great philosopher contributes something to this vision of life. I don't think Buddhism has the final answer to everything, or Confucius or Aristotle. I think they're all partial visions of this larger whole. When I look at the Zen masters, for example, throughout history, my own fantasy about them, and this might not be true, is that the enlightenment that each of them have is going to be different for each of them, that they each have their own partial view of the



way everything fits together. I mean, if I'm very intimate with everything in this moment, and I feel my deep interconnection with everything, I'm just connected and feeling a deep connection with the things that are right in front of me right now. I'm not deeply connected with whatever is happening in Alpha Centauri in this moment. And Dogen says when something is in light, that means the other side is in dark. And he talks about going beyond Buddha. Every vision we have of wholeness, integration, emptiness is just a partial vision, and it's always possible that someday we may have a greater opening. So you read about Hakuin's openings, and he has a series of openings, and each one is bigger than the one before it until he says, “I'm done.” And I would just say, no, Hakuin, you're never done.

So that's what I want to say that each philosopher brings a new vision to understanding life. So Spinoza has a vision of the wholeness of life. It's different from the Buddhist vision, but it's his own. Or Hegel has a vision about how the universe is developing and evolving and so forth. It's a huge vision. Maybe we don't agree with that. But when you read all these different visions, it enlarges your own sense of what's possible and how you can look at the world. And I think that's what we get from reading the philosophers. You don't read Plato and Aristotle and Spinoza and Whitehead and say, “Well, which one of them was right?” Well, none of them were right. But they all had something unique to say about the world. Nietzsche and Aristotle might not agree on a lot of things, but they each have something valuable to say about the way the world is.

James Shaheen: You know, often people think of philosophy or philosophical wisdom as something lofty and removed, but you make it clear that philosophical wisdom can impact our daily lives. Could you say something about that? As you said, we're not out there in Alpha Centauri.



Seth Segall: Right. Well, if you read the great philosophers, I think it gives you some greater perspective on the things that happen in life, and some of the most important things are that everything that happens in the world isn't about you.

James Shaheen: That's a hard one.

Seth Segall: That's a hard one. But we think that we think we're at the center of the universe and you learn, well, that's not true. You learn to take all the things that you believe with a little bit of skepticism and hold all the beliefs lightly because you could discover you're wrong about them tomorrow, even your most deeply held beliefs. It means you get some degree of a sense of humor about yourself when you make a mistake and so forth. I think there's a kind of a philosophical attitude, which is kind of accepting and open to new discovery and kind of light in a way that has a sense of humor about the world. At least that's what I've gotten from reading all the philosophers.

James Shaheen: Yeah, you suggest that this philosophical wisdom or this attitude can help us tap into awe, wonder, humility, and transcendence, and you also write something very beautifully: it allows us to bear untoward events with grace, dignity, and equanimity, and perhaps a dose of humility and humor. So thank you for that. You've mentioned wholeness and integration, or the notion that flourishing includes manifesting our values in every aspect of our lives. So often there can be a big gap between our ideals and how we actually live our lives. I sometimes wonder to myself, what do I say I believe and how do I actually live? And there's always a gap. So, how can we actually integrate our values on a daily level?

Seth Segall: Well, I give some suggestions in the book. I give an example of, for example, taking one virtue, say honesty, and for a week, every day, devoting some time to saying, well, how honest have I been today? Have I shared a rumor from the internet with someone when I didn't really know it was true? Or have I told a white little lie? You know, somebody showed me their



grandson's picture, and I said, “Oh, what a cute baby.” And really the baby just looked like a shriveled prune. Or somebody says, “How do I look in this dress?” And you say, “Great.” We're not always honest about things, and sometimes we hide things that we've done because we'd be ashamed if people discover them. Maybe we told a story and it wasn't exactly accurate, but we told it a little bit exaggeratedly for good effect, because it made a better conversation piece, but someone could call us on it one day and say, “Well, that's really not a hundred percent true.”

There are all kinds of ways in which you avoid being honest in very small ways throughout the day. Some of them are justified. I mean, sometimes it's better to be kind than to be honest, and you have to weigh the different virtues and so forth. But I think we can inquire each day, the ways that I was dishonest today, were they called for? Were they really the wisest decision? Or do I wish, looking in retrospect, that I had said something different? And if I wish I had said something different, is it alright to just keep it to myself and try to do better tomorrow, or do I need to go up to the person I was dishonest to and make amends in some kind of way? You could do this every day for a week, and the next week you could look at courage and you say, well, was I courageous today in ways that I really hoped I would have been, or was I a bit of a coward in some way?

You can take that as a daily meditation, a few minutes a day, or some sort of journaling, and you can go virtue by virtue that way and then at the end of, say, seven weeks start at the beginning again. So I think we can always do this inquiry about whether we're living up to our values. And we could also ask, Should we be living up to those? Because maybe some of our values are wrong. Maybe we have to kind of inquire about whether they still really are the values we think we ought to have.



James Shaheen: Right, you draw from the psychiatrist Carl Jung, who saw life as a process of growing into wholeness. So how can cultivating virtues in this way help us grow toward wholeness? I'm not asking such easy questions, but there are no trick questions.

Seth Segall: The thing is that as you discover things about yourself that don't fit with how you thought about yourself before, don't think there's something defective about you in that moment or don't think that you need to excise this part of you and shouldn't exist anymore, but look at how it might be telling you that you're living in a one-sided way and that maybe you need to integrate something from this new part of yourself that you didn't think you ever would before. I'm thinking about, for example, someone who grows up as a Marine in the traditional kind of way and maybe comes from a very authoritarian household. And they look, for example, at masculinity as being one thing only, and then they discover there's a soft feminine side to themselves as well at times. And at first they're ashamed of it and don't know what to do with it. But if they're really going to grow, they have to somehow pay attention to it and figure out, How am I going to integrate this new discovery about myself into my life?

That's a lifelong process. It's not like, “I did it yesterday, I'm done now.” And it's true with every other part of ourselves that we discover that we didn't know we had before. Jung talks about the emergence of unknown or unconscious parts of ourselves that come to awareness and the process of dialoguing with those parts and integrating in with us so that someone who is very rational all of a sudden discovers that they have a feeling side, and they have to figure out how to integrate that. But it's a lifelong process. It's a lifelong koan. You're never done.

James Shaheen: Yeah. I guess as I listen to you, a big problem is the question, “Are we there yet?” We'll put that out of our minds. So wholeness also includes accepting the parts of our lives outside of our control. So what are some of the ways we can cultivate acceptance in the face of, say, loss and hardship, things over which we have no control?



Seth Segall: Well, I think the first step is acknowledgment. This really does hurt as much as it does hurt, allowing yourself that space to grieve. You know, in the Tibetan tradition, there's a story about Marpa, the translator, who loses his son and he cries as a result of it. And people say, “Well, Marpa, you said death was just an illusion. How come you're crying?” And he says, “Well, yeah, but it's the hardest illusion to get rid of.”

I don't think death is an illusion. I think loss is real. Somebody is in your life and they're contributing to it and making it better, and all of a sudden they're gone and there's a hole in your life. You need the space to appreciate that and accept it. But it also means that you have to be open to the possibility of new things coming into your life. And I think that the richer our lives are, the more we flourish in a number of different dimensions, the more we can tolerate a loss in our life and somehow find a way to continue on until some new experience comes in and begins to—maybe nothing ever takes its place. Maybe there's always that hole. I remember years and years ago, I had a patient whose son had died. And his feeling was, “I'm totally cut off from my son, there's just a hole in me.” Sometimes people have a sense of, “Well, my son is in heaven, he's somewhere else, but maybe there's some way I can still communicate with him in some way.” He had none of that sense of any kind of continuity with that loss. It was just the hole. Over a course of ten years, he began to think about the hole more as a tunnel and that he could have some sense of connection and feeling with that son, even though the son was no longer there.

Somebody else once told me a similar thing. After a loss, they had a hole. They envisioned their life as a landscape sitting by this empty crater. And then little by little over the years, water began to trickle into the crater and the plants began to grow. And the hole is still there, but it's been transformed in some kind of way. I think we have to allow those possibilities to happen.

James Shaheen: You know, that's really interesting because it really makes me think that it's easier in that case for me to think in terms of change rather than closure. Closure is often a trap.

Tricycle Talks

“What Makes a Good Life?”

Episode #97 with Seth Segall

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There is no real closure. Things remain open-ended. But how they change, like loss experienced changes, but it doesn't go away, and it can become rich. So Seth, thank you so much for joining. It's been a great pleasure. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *The House We Live In*, available now. Thanks again, Seth.

Seth Segall: Thanks, James. Always a pleasure.

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