

*Tricycle Talks*

“Welcoming Beginner’s Mind”

Episode #99 with Gaylon Ferguson

March 27, 2024



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**Gaylon Ferguson:** What we most long for is to wake up for the benefit of beings. I suppose from this point of view, that dissatisfaction, that sense of lack and fighting groundlessness is itself, rather than something to be just simply abandoned or criticized or judged as unhelpful, that actually that is a version of this impulse, this inmost desire to wake up. Awakened heart is the aspiration for wakefulness. And there is some seed of wakefulness in it. In the Tibetan tradition, bodhichitta, byang chub sems, is this longing for the same awakening that the Buddha realized, that same seed is in us.

**James Shaheen:** Hello, and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I’m James Shaheen, and you just heard Gaylon Ferguson. Gaylon is an acharya, or senior teacher, in the Shambhala International Buddhist community and a faculty member at Naropa University. In his new book, *Welcoming Beginner's Mind: Zen and Tibetan Buddhist Wisdom on Experiencing Our True Nature*, he uses the classic Zen oxherding pictures as a way of illustrating the stages of the spiritual journey, exploring the paradox of how we can awaken to what we already are. In my conversation with Gaylon, we talk about how he as a teacher of Tibetan Buddhism came to write a book about Zen, why he believes dissatisfaction is actually a sign of awakened intelligence, what we can learn from welcoming and staying with our boredom, and the role of desire on the path to awakening. Plus, Gaylon leads us in a short practice. So here’s my conversation with Gaylon Ferguson.

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**James Shaheen:** So I'm here with Gaylon Ferguson. Hi, Gaylon. It's great to be with you.

**Gaylon Ferguson:** Good morning.

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**James Shaheen:** So Gaylon, we're here to talk about your new book, *Welcoming Beginner's Mind: Zen and Tibetan Buddhist Wisdom on Experiencing Our True Nature*. So to start, can you tell us a bit about the book and what inspired you to write it?

**Gaylon Ferguson:** Yes. So my training is in the Kagyu and Nyingma traditions of Tibetan Buddhism. My teacher was Chögyam Trungpa, and he was very influenced and inspired by Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, who had been in this country earlier and had founded Tassajara and San Francisco Zen Center. And the two of them met, and the foreword to the book is by David Chadwick, who wrote *Crooked Cucumber*, the biography of Suzuki Roshi.

That was part of it. Honestly, James, I've taught for many years at Naropa University in Boulder, and I noticed that my students were talking about what they were currently reading, which might be, say, Pema Chodron, Sharon Salzberg, or whatever, and they weren't mentioning *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, which was a really important book for me in my dharma training and continues to be a resource.

Initially, I wanted to write, I thought, oh, maybe if I did a kind of commentary on *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, even though I've never practiced Zen, I'm not a Zen practitioner. So I actually started writing and I got through maybe a chapter or two and I thought, this is really not necessary. Suzuki Roshi has already said beautifully and elegantly and with poetry. It's poetic in the book. And it doesn't really help for me to go through and say, “What Roshi means is,” aside from being presumptuous. So I threw that away, I put that away. But then I came across this commentary, fairly pithy, maybe a paragraph or two, by Chögyam Trungpa, the Tibetan meditation teacher, on the Zen oxherding pictures. He had seen those at the home of Samuel Berkholtz, his publisher and friend, in Berkeley sometime around 1970, so over 50 years ago. And I'm guessing it was in the book by Paul Reps called *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, which was published in 1957. And it was really, I think, my second year in college I came across that book and I'd never seen anything quite like that. This is the early seventies.



So, Trungpa Rinpoche evidently was quite inspired with these images and wrote a commentary and that's what I really used as my inspiration for the book *Welcoming Beginner's Mind*.

The first thing I should say is I'm not a Zen practitioner, I'm not a Zen teacher, but I was inspired by my own teachers in the Tibetan Nyingma system. We have nine yantras, the complete path of nine yantras, and so he reads the ten oxherding images in terms of the nine yantras of Tibetan Buddhism. That was interesting to me and inspiring to me. And so I spent about a year or so just walking through those comments.

**James Shaheen:** So there is a precedent here for a Tibetan teacher writing about the Zen oxherding pictures. That's great. You're just following in your teacher's footsteps. I want to start with the way you begin the book and you begin it with an experience many years ago when your first Buddhist teacher said to you—that's Chögyam Trungpa—“you don't have to be embarrassed at who you are.” How did you understand that?

**Gaylon Ferguson:** Honestly, James, at the moment, I think it stopped my mind. I would have been maybe in my early twenties. I was struck that he could see that I was just uncomfortable in my own skin and embarrassed to be who I am and how I am as I am. There was such kindness and gentleness. There are all kinds of stories of *Crazy Wisdom* and this and that, but in this case, and in most of the cases that I ever experienced, a lot of gentleness and kindness, that as you are, however you are, as you are at this moment, that's welcome in some way. You could be the human being that you are. And I don't think I said anything in response. It was the end of our little time that we had together, but it stayed with me, something about welcoming oneself as a practitioner.

And eventually, many years later, I developed this exercise that's really the thread throughout the whole book and its commentary on the ten Images called the welcoming exercise. In a sense, what I'm saying is my teachers seem to say to me, “You're welcome. You're welcome to be here



on this planet, in this place, as you are.” You could welcome yourself rather than rejecting yourself or criticizing, judging yourself, we say nowadays. That's the key. That was the seed.

**James Shaheen:** Yeah. You say until then, or at least when he spoke to you about that, that you were using spiritual practice as a way of avoiding yourself or, to use your words, of unwelcoming yourself.

**Gaylon Ferguson:** Yes. I don't think I was unique in the sense that when I sat, I wanted to be a good Buddha practitioner, and my notion of good was something slightly different than who I am or as I am. These pesky thoughts, these unruly emotions, body sensations. That's all okay, that's a starting point, but what I really want to get to is to jump over those and get to this 2.0 version, this better version of myself through meditating. And so of course that sets up a duality between the person that we are and the person that we think we're going to become through mindfulness awareness or zazen or vipassana or whatever it might be. So, that was the rub, so to speak, that I was actually using practice as a way to not welcome myself, to get over myself, to get to something else. And I don't think, again, that I was alone in doing that, and I don't think that goes away necessarily with years of practice. We can continue with a kind of turning away from ourselves, you might say, a kind of self-aggression, an improvement project.

I was very impressed with this book by Jenny Odell called *How to Do Nothing*, and I was so happy that *Tricycle* did a podcast with her, but it's there in Jenny Odell's work, this sense of we're often trying to optimize ourselves into this 2.0 version, 3.0 version of ourselves. And that has vast cultural implications in terms of consumerism and self-improvement, or Pema Chodron might say, a kind of self-aggression can be at the root of even our dharma practice. So that's some of how I got into this welcoming notion.

**James Shaheen:** Yeah, it's really easy to turn ourselves into self-improvement projects. The whole cultural thrust seems to be, “You can be better, you can get better, you can improve yourself,” so let's then talk about what might work counter to that, what you described as the



practice of welcoming, which you already mentioned. Can you say a bit more about how we can learn to welcome ourselves, our experience, the world around us, and so forth? What is that about? What is that practice?

**Gaylon Ferguson:** That's the question, is it a practice, welcoming? That's what I tried to explore in the book, that since we can so easily turn any practice, any meditation, and there are many good practices, I'm not against practicing and so forth, or various meditation traditions, and yet, as you just spoke of it, the self-improvement version of practicing may miss the point.

Suzuki Roshi says at one point in *Zen Mind*, “If you are trying to attain enlightenment, that is part of karma. You are creating and being driven by karma, and you're wasting your time on your cushion. According to Bodhidharma's understanding, practice based on any gaining idea is just a repetition of your karma. Forgetting this point, many later Zen masters have emphasized some stage to be attained by practice.” So that's in a chapter called “Traditional Zen Spirit” in *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*.

So somewhere in one of the retreats that I was involved in, we came up with, we developed something just called welcoming as the beginning of any meditation session that we would simply sit there for just a minute. So it's not strictly speaking a practice or a mindfulness meditation or zazen or anything. It's just sitting there for 60 seconds and not doing anything. What we discovered was that even though we're not deliberately consciously practicing something, we're alive. We have thoughts as we sit there, we have emotions. We may feel happy about something that just happened or sad about, or maybe grief, we have body sensations. We have sense perceptions of the world around us.

Another connection to the Jenny Odell *How to Do Nothing* book, where she goes birding and she goes and stands in the Oakland Rose Garden and the birds come near and she hears them. And she's not really doing anything. She's just standing there as a human being open to what's around her and the trees and the sky and the birds. So this is a sort of way of doing this in a meditation



room where you just sit there for, let's say, 90 seconds and don't do anything. And then you might begin what you think of as meditation, your formal meditation practice based on the nonaggression of not improving, not fixing, not changing, not transmuting or getting better at anything, simply sitting there doing nothing as much as possible. No planning or figuring out or analyzing or contemplation or anything. So I've explored this in many settings. I teach meditation sometimes in prison. I taught college students, grad school students for 15 years on long retreats, a month-long retreat. We'll sometimes just begin our day with simply not doing anything and welcoming our experience.

**James Shaheen:** It's funny, the compulsion to do is so strong that doing nothing or just welcoming, as you put it, does not come so naturally to us, but the book does help the reader ease into that simple welcoming, I wouldn't even describe it as an act or an effort, and we will go through the oxherding pictures together, but what you're saying reminds me of phase seven, and you quote Trungpa, who says, “Give up all attempt to manipulate,” something like that. And it reminds me of that. So the book is structured around the classic Zen oxherding images, and you explained when Trungpa first came across these images. When did you, and what drew you to write about them aside from the example of your teacher?

**Gaylon Ferguson:** As I mentioned, they were meaningful to me, even as I think literally I was a sophomore, second year in college, and this is a time when many of us would have been reading the Carlos Castaneda Don Juan books and Philip Kapleau’s *Three Pillars of Zen*. There were not nearly as many publications as there are now about buddhadharma, but it would have been that kind of soup and stew of the early 70s counterculture. And there was something about the oxherding images that you start out and you're looking for the ox, and then you see glimpses or footprints, and then you contact or touch the ox, and then you ride the ox, and then the ox disappears. What is that? This traditional Japanese circle is called enso. Suddenly there's no ox. And then directly after that, there's no oxherder. What does that mean? What are we doing here? Where is this? I don't think I particularly had any insight about them, but they were certainly



intriguing. And so, over the years, oh right, those oxherding pictures. What interests me is the sense that it's a gradual path. The ten oxherding images are images of a gradual unfolding and development. And so much of our life is developmental, from being infants and children and adolescents and adults. There are a lot of studies about the developmental stages, say, moral stages of development. So our journey, just even life journey, aside from the spiritual path as well, seems to be step by step. And yet at the same time, in that quote I just read from Suzuki Roshi, there's no emphasis on some stage to be attained. He says we should sit zazen, or meditation, with no gaining idea. So it's not, oh, once you get to ten, that's the point of the oxherding. There's the sense that even one is beginner's mind, seeking for the ox, and each of them along the way. So there's both stages and no stages. Each step of the way is the way. There's a Christian mystic, I think it's St. Catherine of Siena, who says, “All the way to heaven is heaven.”

**James Shaheen:** Or the other nice thing was ground, path, and fruition. We'll get there, but I hope you don't mind our going through these because they're so wonderful, and I'd like to start with the first stage, seeking the ox, which you link to a sense that something is missing. So what is this sense of lack? What's missing?

**Gaylon Ferguson:** One of the things that we notice when we sit there and don't do anything is that we are looking for something as we sit there. It can be, I'd like some yogurt. It can be another job. It can be my relationship. As we sit there, we're almost always seeking something. David Loy talks about a sense of lack, and I mention that in the book. There's a sense of an inner dissatisfaction. One teacher once said, “One can never get enough of what does not satisfy.” And Trungpa Rinpoche links this fundamental dissatisfaction with the first noble truth of the Buddha, dukkha. The suffering is not the suffering only of “I burned my finger” or physical pain, or even psychological pain of anxiety, or whatever it might be. There's some underlying dissatisfaction, even in moments of pleasure or happiness. Because we wonder, how long will this last? How do I keep this? So that's a kind of seeking or effort or you just talked about the compulsion to do



something. The first image, the oxherder is out looking like, where is it? What should I do? Where should I go? What is there to be done? That, to me, is connected with this feeling, a felt sense of something is missing and where would it be?

**James Shaheen:** You describe your own relationship to lack, and I'm going to quote you, “Lack is as close to me as my breathing, as intimate as my own death. So what have you learned from your own experience of lack?”

**Gaylon Ferguson:** Chögyam Trungpa once said that he learned the word bifurcation when he was living in India, that the conductor would say, “And now the track will bifurcate.” So there's a possibility of a bifurcation when I feel that lack. Either I could try to fill it with something external or even internal: “Oh, if I were in a higher meditative state, this lack would go away.” So that's one avenue or track or train route that I might go down. And the other one is I can simply feel the lack, feel that kind of gnawing, inner sense of dissatisfaction. There is much room for improvement in my life and in my person. There are many things I could get better at doing and skills that I don't have, languages I'd like to speak that I can't. So it's not saying that there isn't room for improvement. What's the story of Suzuki Roshi looking out at his students? “You're perfect as you are and you could use some improvement.” The second route is to feel that lack, to not try and solve it or make it go away or fulfill it with something new, but to lack in itself. In a sense, Trungpa Rinpoche says that it's basic intelligence. I always thought that was an interesting comment, that somehow there's some inner wisdom that bubbles up as, “Oh, something's missing.” It's just that something missing is at no distance from us. It's not lifetimes out ahead of us or next year or something like that. What we're looking for is here.

**James Shaheen:** So you also then move on to the absence of solidity. What does that teach us about no-self and the nature of change?

**Gaylon Ferguson:** Yes, that's a very good question. I guess in part I'm probably looking for a fixed identity. And when we say there are Buddhist chants that say, “May I free all beings from





sickness, aging, old age, and death,” one teacher says aging is like a nonstop subway that we're on, that really first we were teenagers and then we were in our 20s and actually the word in Tibetan, it means goers, those who are moving.

We're all migrators in that sense, where our life is this movement, and there's something unsettling about that from the point of view of the longing for, “Oh, I want to be that person that I was. Now I've arrived, and if I just consolidate this and stay here, things will be OK.” And yet, of course, the most basic teaching of the Buddha is impermanence, that there isn't a solid place to be, to set up camp and build a house, try as we might. In fact, the very effort to establish ourselves solidly and make our world fixed, our relationships and our communities, makes more suffering. That's the irony is that the search for security in that way just heightens the insecurity.

**James Shaheen:** You link this stage of seeking the ox to the way-seeking mind, as you put it, which you compare to bodhichitta or the awakened heart mind. Can you say more about the relationship between these two? How can seeking actually point us toward our true nature?

**Gaylon Ferguson:** You're a very close reader. Thank you for these questions. They're wonderful questions. I had never heard the phrase way-seeking mind. Suzuki Roshi comments on it at one point in one talk at Tassajara. But I did visit, I was a visiting teacher, oh, 15 years or more ago at San Francisco's Zen Center. Suzuki Roshi founded that center there near Haight Street. And as part of their program, in order to be a resident or part of the community, you had to give a talk on your way-seeking mind. And so I remember someone recounting her journey and what it had been like and how she'd come to look for the way or find the way.

And that stayed with me in some sense. There's something in us, Suzuki Roshi sometimes calls it, our inmost request. What we most long for is to wake up for the benefit of beings. I suppose from this point of view, that dissatisfaction, that sense of lack and fighting groundlessness is itself, rather than something to be just simply abandoned or criticized or judged as unhelpful, that actually that is a version of this impulse, this inmost desire to wake up. We long to wake up, our



inmost request. So awakened heart is the aspiration for wakefulness. And there is some seed of wakefulness in it. In the Tibetan tradition, bodhichitta, byang chub sems, is this longing for the same awakening that the Buddha realized, that same seed is in us.

**James Shaheen:** I think we're ready for the second stage. I don't know how I'm going to get through all these. I may have to skip around, but they're all so wonderful, but each one contains a world. It's so great. The next stage is seeing the ox's footprints. You tie the experience of dissatisfaction as we continue to explore our sense that something is missing. Can you say more about the role of dissatisfaction in this second stage?

**Gaylon Ferguson:** In two, the main emphasis to me is this interesting image of you're seeing the footprints. You're not yet seeing the ox. We're on the path, but the footprints of the ox are there. Oh, look at that. You look down on the ground and some rather large being, and so the dissatisfaction is something that we can make inferences about. That's the connection to me. The footprints are inferential knowledge. It's like we're out for a walk in the woods and we see smoke up ahead above the trees, and we know that there's fire there. It's inferential knowledge. It doesn't mean we're actually seeing the fire yet, but we see the smoke and it's a sign of the fire.

So the footprints of the ox and inferential knowledge are often dismissed. There's often, in Buddhist discourses, a sense that, “Oh, that's not the real thing.” And that's true. That's accurate. It's not yet the ox. And yet, when Trungpa Rinpoche talks about them, he says, you're learning about cause and effect. You're coming to logical conclusions. That it isn't just that it is at this moment I feel dissatisfaction, that once I notice that dissatisfaction, eventually I'll see a pattern, like the twelve nidanas of, “Oh, if I act on this dissatisfaction and try to acquire something and overconsume and overeat or something, all these things that can come about from trying to get away from my experience of dissatisfaction,” that's first an insight. It's not so much a meditative experience of the sense of feeling it intuitively. So the footprints point to the value in the buddhadharma of intellectual knowing, let's say, a knowing capacity.



**James Shaheen:** You suggest that this dissatisfaction is a sign actually of awakened intelligence. Is that right?

**Gaylon Ferguson:** That's right. And that again comes from Trungpa Rinpoche, that the dissatisfaction is a sign of, and yet it's pointing to something more than just dissatisfaction. At one point he says, alright, so you discover suffering in your life, in moments of pleasure, in moments of pain, you discover suffering. What is it that knows that suffering? That itself is the awakened intelligence.

**James Shaheen:** You also talk about boredom, and the reason this is really on my mind right now is that I took the subway this morning, as I do, and I usually watch and count the number of people who are on their cell phones, and how many are not, and almost usually about 94 percent are on their cell phones, a moment alone. So, you talk about boredom and how being bored, though, can actually be an important experiential gateway. Can you say more about this? What can we learn from welcoming and staying with our boredom, rather than turning to something to do immediately?

**Gaylon Ferguson:** Yes, and your mention of the cell phones is so relevant in terms of cultural patterns, and I notice it as well in traveling that we're all looking at our phones so much of the time in a bus terminal or subway station or airport. There need never be a moment of just open space or a gap in our activity and our thinking, whatever, because we can always turn to and click on something. Oh right, there's that podcast I meant to listen to or there's a book on tape or a book that I'm reading or a friend to text and so forth. So there's this sense, again this is there in the Jenny Odell book, we're missing something by this sort of acquisition mentality. By always trying to acquire another moment, another now, as someone once said, we're actually missing what's present in this moment. But presence and being with this moment, I think almost all meditators have experienced this, that if you do a one day or a weekend or a week long retreat, there are moments when you're sitting there, And it's boring. And I think it's helpful just to be honest about that. And I'm sitting here and nothing seems to be happening. I'm following the



instructions and this is not being entertained. It's not dramatic and there's no blockbuster video playing in my head or particular. So boredom is actually a gateway into a kind of wellbeing that's less dependent on some external or even internal stimulation. So that's the irony of that. When's the last time we saw an ad that said, come to this retreat and be bored?

**James Shaheen:** I don't know how many people would show up.

**Gaylon Ferguson:** Exactly. So the marketing and publicity folks are probably not going to lead with that. And yet it's a gateway. It's a doorway into, Oh, what am I like without an add-on, without an upgrade, without clicking on something to keep myself interested and entertained.

**Ad break-in:** Coming up, Gaylon talks about how our perception that something is missing can obscure the fundamental richness of our experience, the dangers of doubting our basic goodness, and how we can learn to see the sacred in the everyday.

**Ad break-out:** Now, let's get back to our conversation with Gaylon Ferguson.

**James Shaheen:** Okay. So in the third stage, we catch a glimpse of the ox, though it's just a momentary flash. The ox is partially obscured. So, what's the significance of this momentary or fragmentary glimpse?

**Gaylon Ferguson:** Yeah, I think the word glimpse is the key there, that we do have moments of wakefulness, and those don't last—impermanence rules there as well. I think there can sometimes be a frustration of how will I make the experience that I might have had on retreat or in my own meditation practice, how do I make that last? And of course, that's turning it into something to be attained and achieved, and actually gets in the way of the natural, spontaneous wakefulness. But I guess I just wanted to acknowledge the sense of glimpse that the path may include momentary glimpses. There's even a book called *Momentary Buddhahood*. I like that title. *Momentary Buddhahood*.



**James Shaheen:** You say that in glimpsing the ox we're, and I'm going to quote you here, “joining the Buddhas, at least momentarily, in seeing beyond the extremes of existence and nonexistence,” and in the process we're losing ourselves as we find ourselves. So can you say more about this dynamic? What does it mean to see past these extremes and to see past ourselves? That's not a trick question or anything.

**Gaylon Ferguson:** No, it's actually a very doctrinal question. I was recently having some conversation with the class about the early story of the Buddha in which he goes from the comfort of the circle. He has a very privileged life as he's growing up in the palace, and music and food and dance and everything is so wonderful there. And then he goes to the other extreme of asceticism, this rigorous, in some accounts, he ate one grain of rice a day. And then when he comes back and joins his five friends or so after his awakening, he says, “Friends, I have discovered a middle way.”

The name for the path of the Buddha as the Middle Path is there in that early-life experience of indulgence and asceticism. But then, of course, this becomes a key philosophical theme, including the great Mahayana teacher, Nagarjuna, of a middle way between things existing solidly, permanently, as though they have an inherent existence, and nonexistence, a kind of nihilism, there's nothing.

When I was first reading texts from the 1950s like D. T. Suzuki and so forth and various early translations, they would translate emptiness as nothingness or the void. And that's not quite right. We now have better translations than that. That's one extreme, that there's just nothing. It doesn't matter, or there's nihilism. And then eternalism is the other extreme, solid existence. And in the Buddha's life story, as you remember, he remembers a time when, I think it was an apple blossom festival or something, and he was sitting as a boy, a young boy, and he remembers that moment of just a kind of naturalness, in which he wasn't trying to attain anything, nor was he just simply indulging in, where's the next delicious this or that. And that actually becomes the basis of his sitting, that leads to awakening, is a kind of natural wakefulness. That's in the middle



between solid existence and non existence, between asceticism and indulgence. In a way, this middle is a word for our natural state, what Roshi is calling beginner's mind, what's called true nature and Zen, buddha nature in many Mahayana traditions. We're glimpsing our own inherent wakefulness that is called our buddha nature.

**James Shaheen:** That takes us to the fourth stage. Not surprisingly, we finally arrive at touching the ox, which you describe as coming into contact with our original nature. So one question that comes up. It's how we can lose what we already have, yet we feel this loss on a regular basis. Can you walk us through this seeming paradox, this idea that we can lose what we already are?

**Gaylon Ferguson:** The description of the book says that it works with the paradox of opening to our self at each stage of the path. But for me, the very word, beginner's mind, in the prologue to *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, Roshi says, “The most difficult thing is always to keep your beginner's mind.” And yet beginner's mind isn't something that comes and goes. That's its nature is it's without beginning and it doesn't end. So to speak of keeping it is a puzzle in a certain way. I'm not sure if it's a koan, but it's like, what is this beginner's mind? It's not something we can lose, really. It is our own innate wisdom. It's not something we can achieve or attain. Because we can only attain what isn't here already. And beginner's mind is already there in the mind of the Buddha, in the mind of the beginner, the mind of the person who's been on the path, the mind of the person many, many years on the path. Beginner's mind is there in the beginning, the middle, and at the end. It's what the Buddha awakens to. There's a paradoxical sense of a journey, and yet it's a journey to nowhere, a journey to here. And I don't quite know how to think about that. And in the book, that's why I say these are conundrums in a certain way, and we could puzzle about them and intellectually wonder about them. Is it like this? Is it like that? Is it bigger than a breadbox? We need something experiential so that we don't just oscillate back and forth around the paradoxes of the Middle Way. And that's why the welcoming is offered as, “Oh, here's a not doing that anyone could do.” You don't have to take a weekend or do a month retreat. Just sit for a moment. It's very simple and don't do anything and notice your experience, appreciate the



experience you're having, whatever the experience is. So that was part of why that came up is it's a way beyond the paradoxes.

**James Shaheen:** In this compulsion to do, as I said before, as we discussed, we can lose touch with our original nature, and you say that can cause us to lash out. You write that many acts of greed and destruction arise from our fundamental doubt about our basic goodness, basic goodness, of course, being the way that I believe Trungpa put it. So we recently had Tara Brach on the show, and she calls this dynamic the trance of unworthiness, which can blind us to our connection to ourselves, our communities, even our earth. So can you say more about the dangers of doubting our basic goodness and losing touch with that?

**Gaylon Ferguson:** Yes. It's a wonderful phrase, isn't it? The trance of unworthiness. And we know now in our culture and society, how many acts arise out of a sense of I'm not good enough, and then envy, jealousy, resentment, attacking others can come out of the sense of my own insecurity, aggression, jealousy, all these things. We project that inner sense of unworthiness onto others. They are unworthy. We stigmatize, right? These others are the threat to the well-being of our country, these preposterous claims.

**James Shaheen:** Now, we're getting very specific here.

**Gaylon Ferguson:** I think so. It's almost unavoidable. I mean, you think, really? This is a threat?

**James Shaheen:** Some commentaries describe this stage as a rodeo chase. There's a real struggle before the oxherder catches the ox. So we may think it's the ox who is running away, but you ask, who is avoiding whom? So why might we avoid touching our true nature?

**Gaylon Ferguson:** I think because it arises as a kind of groundlessness and insecurity. It may not arise as a feeling of solace that, oh, everything's alright and everything's going to be alright. There isn't that kind of certainty or guarantee in the teachings of the Buddha, that it's all going to be OK. Quite the reverse, actually: Be alert. That's almost the last thing that he said, right, is be



vigilant, be awake, work out your own liberation here. So there isn't a sense. Nowadays, it's kind of, “Oh, it's all OK. It's all good,” in some kind of cliched, easy sense. And I think awakening made Dawn first as groundlessness. That's why we might avoid it and run away from it.

**James Shaheen:** It's also true, as you point out in the book, that we get used to our own prisons and the openness, the vastness that can be destabilizing. But I'm going to take us to the fifth stage. Hopefully we will get through these, but then if we don't, so what? There's no beginning and no end. They're there at each stage.

**Gaylon Ferguson:** Before you move on, since you did say, that was a very good connection that we become comfortable with our own imprisonment, our mental imprisonment. There's one version of the six realms, some of your listeners may be familiar with the six realms of jealous gods and hungry ghosts and so forth, where they're called styles of imprisonment. And even though they're imprisoning each of those habitual thought patterns and so forth, we can get cozy with them: “Oh, this is my familiar jealousy, my familiar envy,” and so forth. And so then when the ox begins to dawn on us, to mix metaphors, there's like, “Oh, shouldn't I just stay in here where it's uncomfortable, but at least it's familiar?” and the ox is inviting us into a much bigger world that includes caring for others when we get to the 10th and the return to the marketplace, it's great compassion, the ox.

**James Shaheen:** We're now at the fifth stage, which is the taming of the ox. And you write that the basis of taming is close contact and embodied communication. So one question that comes up is how to remain in contact without annoying or alienating each other. So how would you answer this question?

**Gaylon Ferguson:** I would connect the fourth and the fifth here of touching the ox and then taming. This word, touching the tangibleness of it. And for us as the practitioners of mindfulness,





awareness, insight, zazen, whatever it might be, that's the physicality of the practice. The closest aspect of nature to us is our own bodies.

Our bodies are natural in some way. They're also cultural and culturally inscribed and all kinds of things. But our own bodies are a connection with nature and true nature. So someone was just mentioning recently that they practiced for many years, there's the phrase, talking heads. They said, “I was like a meditating head.”

**James Shaheen:** I've been one of those before.

**Gaylon Ferguson:** Exactly. It sounds familiar to me as well. So there's this sense of discovering, Oh, it's the whole body that does zazen. It's the whole body that engages mindfulness. It's the whole body in walking meditation. And that is the ox. Touching the ox and taming the ox comes through connection with our body.

**James Shaheen:** Many commentaries describe taming as an act of domination, but you suggest instead that we're taming our own impulse to control. Can you say more about the relationship between taming and control?

**Gaylon Ferguson:** Well, you know, it's 2024, so this notion of successful control and domination, it now resonates in a different way. We live in a time of decolonizing and postcolonial. And so when I read these commentaries about, oh, you're going to whip the ox into shape and completely rule the ox and so forth, I think, well, really? Like, how does the ox feel about that? No wonder the ox runs off and resists us or rebels. We're approaching it in such an unfriendly, aggressive way.

And so there's something there about making friends with the ox and welcoming the ox, and in that way, lo and behold, the ox is willing to give us a ride, right? It's not our enemy. It's not an obstacle. So this is Suzuki Roshi's chapter called “Control,” where he has this wonderful image of giving your cow or sheep a spacious meadow, a chapter in *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. And so



that's my suggestion based on Roshi's insight: give the ox a spacious meadow. And in that way, it's gentling. Isn't that it? Rather than breaking a bucking bronco, it's horse whispering, it's gentleness that tames.

**James Shaheen:** Yeah, again, there's this metaphor of openness, I don't want to get stuck there, but so often people respond to that with an intensified desire to control, constrain, imprison, and we see that playing out everywhere, I would say, but I'm not going to get into 2024. I'm going to go back to the sixth stage. In the sixth stage, the oxherder is depicted riding the ox playing the flute. Can you say more about the role of delight at this stage? How does this delight coexist with suffering and what you call sad-joy?

**Gaylon Ferguson:** It's true that the flavor of this image, after all that seeking and after all the discipline and taming and rigorous long-term practice, I think, at this point that we're seeing in our oxherder, now it's riding on the ox, the feeling of being carried along. And that goes back, I think, to our sense of awakened heart, bodhicitta. Something clicks in where we realize it isn't just how much can I make, how much can I create, how much wakefulness can I manufacture or manipulate into being? There is some natural arising, some spontaneous emerging, people talk nowadays about emergent phenomena, that this wakefulness, it's like it's the ground underneath us, and it's carrying us and supporting us and welling up in some way.

And there's a delight in that, that the oxherder is playing a flute as it goes along. Now, the question of how this goes with perhaps this celebration also has to include more awareness of suffering, not just our own suffering as seeking beings who are dissatisfied and being in our frustration, but all around us, so much suffering around us, physical suffering, mental suffering, psychological suffering. So, this term from the Tibetan, sad-joy. We have a sadness of heart, and we have the possibility of liberation from suffering. If we can help some being that we encounter, lessen their suffering, alleviate it, then we do so. And that's called joyful exertion in the Mahayana bodhisattva path, the joy of helping others. And if we can help liberate beings, bring them into their own liberated true nature, there's a joyfulness there. So we're not being



Pollyannaish and celebrating by ignoring suffering. It's somehow that great joy and suffering are rising together.

**James Shaheen:** Here you explore the role of agency. We're swept up by our desire to awaken for the benefit of all beings in some ways. There's no going back. So how is riding the ox an act of surrender to the bodhisattva vow? You were just now touching on that.

**Gaylon Ferguson:** Yes, exactly what I was touching on. The vows that are chanted in the zendo, in the Zen tradition about beings are limitless, I vow to awaken them all. It's such a noble aspiration, isn't it? That's what we call the noble heart of bodhicitta. It's the heart that isn't just concerned with me and mine and how this might get better, but it's the heart that It's as wide as the world, I think, in someone's phrase.

**James Shaheen:** I think that's Sharon Salzberg.

**Gaylon Ferguson:** I think it is, yes. It's a heart that cares for all beings.

**Gaylon Ferguson:** Is that agency? It is an agency, but it's not the agency of the small me, of *I'm* going to do it. The Mahayana scriptures, the Prajnaparamita, again and again say that the bodhisattva saves all beings realizing there's no bodhisattva, there's no saving, and there are no beings, which is a kind of reminder to lighten up on this kind of heroism of I'm going to go out and fix everything and make everybody OK or whatever. That's kind of a fast track to burnout in a certain way.

**James Shaheen:** Since I'm determined to get through these, I'm going to take us to the seventh stage. All of a sudden, the oxherder is back at home, and all of a sudden there's no ox. We've forgotten the ox. So in your commentary on this stage, you suggest that maybe there is no ox out there, but instead we are the ones that we've been searching for. Can you say more about this?



**Gaylon Ferguson:** I can, and that allows us to say, both of us have been this notion of stages, but the no ox nature is there before one. It's without beginning or end. It's there at one, it's there at two, it's there at three. It's there when we're riding the ox, it's not anything external. It's not a goal. It's not an achievement. It is the ground of emptiness. If you will, it is the openness that we walk on the path. Wherever we are on the path, there's openness with us and around us. So it could be very disappointing that the ox disappears. Like, what have I been doing here? All of a sudden he's not there. And yet at the same time, it's a relief that there's no external goal to be sought or achieved. It's returning us to the richness of our own nature.

**James Shaheen:** You suggest that in forgetting the ox, we may even forget to construct a self, which is more or less the point here.

**Gaylon Ferguson:** It is the point.

**James Shaheen:** Right. Stage eight, despite the fact that stage is an imperfect description, there are stages and there are no stages at the same time. So forgetting ox and oxherder is a particularly striking image. It's just an empty circle. So tell us about this image.

**Gaylon Ferguson:** Well, the enso is complete in itself. Most people have seen it. It's been on the cover of *Tricycle* and other magazines, I'm sure. So it's a graphic image. It's simply an open circle. And I was very struck by one depiction of the oxherding pictures, a modern one. I came across the artist, the illustrator had drawn in the ox and the oxherder. And I thought, Oh, isn't that revealing? We're not that comfortable. There's a sense of openness that cannot be grasped, and no one to grasp it, and nothing being grasped. There we are.

**James Shaheen:** You tie the final three stages to the three buddha bodies, and you link this stage to the dharmakaya in particular. So first, can you tell us a bit about the Buddha bodies?

**Gaylon Ferguson:** Yes. These are more or less familiar depending on traditions. The Sanskrit word is *kaya*. The *trikaya*, they're called, the kaya of Wisdom, the jnanadharmakaya, the Wisdom

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Body, associated here, this is following Trungpa Rinpoche's commentary, with eight. And then nine, the body of richness and abundance, the *sambhogakaya*. And ten, the *nirmanakaya*, or the body of humanly defined embodiment that we see in great teachers, let's say. *Nirmanakaya*. This is very prevalent in the Tibetan texts. They often open with this. Oh, the true Buddha is the Buddha of these three bodies. The openness, that's dharmakaya. The colors and play, the sounds and smells and tastes echoing the celebration of that riding and playing the flute, the arts are connected with sambhogakaya.

The early Buddhist tradition had no images for the Buddha. It's what's called an aniconic tradition. And then I think the wheel or footprint was used. But then with the Mahayana, we have this kind of explosion, this proliferation of verse and sculpture and painting and so forth. So Buddhist art altogether becomes one of the great ways of teaching. And that's connected with the body of enjoyment. Sambhoga actually means complete enjoyment body. So this is the true Buddha. Suzuki Roshi, I found this series of talks where he was giving a talk on the *Lotus Sutra*, which we don't study so much in the Tibetan tradition, the *Lotus Sutra*, but the *Lotus Sutra*, he says, is about the true Buddha, not just the historical Buddha.

Roshi actually says something like it took us Buddhists several centuries to discover the real meaning of Buddha. In some sense, Buddha is here before Shakyamuni's awakening. It's the ground of openness, it's the play of nature, trees and greenery and so forth, and it's the embodiment. Dogen Zenji says somewhere, trees and the mountains and so forth, this is the Buddha.

So that's what's going on, I think, in those last three, which are not last, they're actually before 8, 9, and 10, if this sequence makes any sense. They come before one in the oxherding. So you can say it's cyclical or circular, but this ground of our being, the openness, the colorful play, and the forms, those forms are open. Form is emptiness in the Heart Sutra. So that's what's going on in those last three.



**James Shaheen:** OK, then let's go to each one. We've got the eighth here, that you associate, or Trungpa associated, with Dharmakaya. So how does this stage relate to dharmakaya? How do the enso and dharmakaya go together?

**Gaylon Ferguson:** The openness of the enso, it's just an open circle, is the openness of wisdom itself. The full name in Sanskrit for what we call dharmakaya, the body of dharma, is jnanadharmakaya. Jnana is wisdom, and the Tibetan word is *yeshe*. *Ye* is a kind of primordialness, and *she* is knowing. There is some primordial knowingness that's there before the path, before sharpening prajna and the sword of Manjushri and all of these things. These are wonderful. But there's some, in a sense, background of intuitive wisdom. And that openness of the enso expresses that. It's the openness of the ground, as mentioned in the book, ground, path, and fruition. The openness of the ground is the enso.

**James Shaheen:** And the 9th stage, which you associate with *sambhogakaya*, enjoying the Source, or the body of complete joy. And you suggest that our perception of lack often obscures this basic richness. So how can we learn to tap into this sense of life's fundamental fullness, or sambhogakaya?

**Gaylon Ferguson:** Yes, that is the question, isn't it? How could we learn to?

**James Shaheen:** Or how can we just enjoy it? How can we welcome it, Gaylon?

**Gaylon Ferguson:** There we go. There we go. Exactly. I just want to note that part of what I'm connecting there, and maybe this is a hint, and again it circles back to Jenny Odell and this book *How to Do Nothing* and going birding, is this fullness is there in nature. And I think that's why we're drawn to nature. If we live in the city, we'll take some time, if we can, to go to the park, or go to the ocean, and so forth. In the earliest version of these, one Taoist teacher says, we had a Taoist version of the ox herding, and those came into Chan Buddhism as the Chinese version of these. And in those versions, of course, Taoism has a great emphasis on the human relationship



to nature. I'm using nature in the ordinary sense now of trees and ocean and sky and earth and mountains and rivers. So there's some sense of when we walk in nature and appreciate nature, we're being returned to some kind of fullness that we didn't manufacture. And it's not a matter of our stock portfolio or anything like that. It's a natural richness in that way.

**James Shaheen:** Very nicely put. You know what, believe it or not, we're at the tenth stage. I think we're going to do this, Gaylon. In the final stage, “Being in the World,” the oxherder appears in the marketplace with a sack full of goods. Can you tell us about this image? What can we learn from the ordinariness of this scene?

**Gaylon Ferguson:** Yes. So I draw on various commentaries in writing the book, and of course, as we talked about at the beginning of our conversation, the meeting of these two dharma pioneers, Shunryu Suzuki Roshi and Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, they met at Tassajara, as David Chadwick tells the story there, in the foreword to *Welcoming Beginner's Mind*. But there are other commentaries I want to mention, in particular John Daido Lori Roshi of Mount Tremper Monastery and that tradition. He has a book on the oxherding images, and Martine Batchelor, from the Korean Zen tradition, also has commentary. And both of them mention this image of the sack of goods, the goodies, so to speak, and returning to the world, and entering into the world, and seeing glimpses of this wisdom in the world around us.

I end the book by talking about poetry as a connection to nature and our own nature and the fact that these things can only be expressed in a sense poetically. So that haiku in the Japanese tradition or nature poetry, I think that's what's going on in that last one as well. The figure enters back into the marketplace and engages from a sense of fullness that's there in the world and there in their own being, and maybe their actions have a kind of poetry to them.



**James Shaheen:** You quote one commentary on this image, and I'll read it: “In the wine shops and fish stalls, people are transformed into buddhas.” So how can shifting our perception help us perceive the sacred in the everyday?

**Gaylon Ferguson:** That's exactly it, Jim. You named it. It's a shift in our perception. In the Tibetan tradition, this is called pure perception. The word is *dak nang*. *Dak* means pure, and *nang* means perception or perceiving. Trungpa Rinpoche translated this as sacred outlook. So it's seeing the sacredness in the everyday, which is, of course, a big theme in the Zen tradition. Roshi says “nothing special,” and yet that nothing special is somehow the sacredness of everyday life.

**James Shaheen:** You say that this stage reminds us that the three bodies of enlightenment can appear in human form. So how are all three buddha bodies present in this tenth stage of an ordinary person exchanging goods in the market?

**Gaylon Ferguson:** That's exactly it. That's the shift in perception is that we see that what we might call worldly or degraded or not spiritual, that right in the middle of, Pema Chodron has this phrase, and she says right down there in the thick of things, we discovered the love that will not die. So it's something like that.

**James Shaheen:** We actually did it. We got through all ten. I was wondering if that was even possible, but we did it. And I hope I didn't give any of them short shrift. The question I kept asking as I was reading this book about welcoming is what am I waiting for? Just relax. So the book was really wonderful if only for that, because I keep thinking “When I do this, then that,” and this book invited me just to be there already. So Gaylon, is there anything else before we close?

**Gaylon Ferguson:** Just to have a moment, even if we took 30 seconds of just doing the welcoming and allowing our experience to be as it is. I know sometimes in your podcast, you do a little meditation. I think Sharon Salzberg did the one with Jenny Odell.



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**James Shaheen:** So why don't you then guide us through a brief version of welcoming.

**Gaylon Ferguson:** All right. So for the next 30 seconds, just simply sit as you are, however you are, let your hands fall into your lap. We're not going to meditate, whatever you usually do for meditating, mindfulness, awareness, insight. Don't meditate, and just let your experience be however it is. If you hear anything, smell anything, you have a memory, body sensations, simply let that be for the next 30 seconds.

That's it. And this is available to us at any time as the entrance into meditation. Just welcome.

**James Shaheen:** Thank you so much, Gaylon. It's been a pleasure. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *Welcoming Beginner's Mind* available now. Thanks again, Gaylon.

**Gaylon Ferguson:** Thank you very much.

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