

Life As It Is

“Transmuting Generational Grief”

Episode #30 with Jungwon Kim

April 17, 2024



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Jungwon Kim: I think that the practice and cultivation of joy, especially communal joy, is essential, and we will never last if we don't practice the values of the world we yearn for as we struggle and work for that world. And the world that I yearn for is one where everyone deserves and has access to food, water, shelter, healthcare, and joy, where we are not just stridently criticizing each other and criticizing ourselves but where we are really participating in the potential for creating beauty that we have as humans.

James Shaheen: Hello, I'm James Shaheen, and this is *Life As It Is*. I'm here with my co-host Sharon Salzberg, and you just heard Jungwon Kim. Jungwon is a communications strategist and advocate focused on frontline environmental and human rights movements. She previously worked at the Rainforest Alliance and Amnesty International, and she also co-founded two BIPOC Buddhist communities. In our conversation with Jungwon, we talk about how she became involved in human rights advocacy, her work integrating spiritual practice and social action, how she understands the Korean concept of *han*, or inherited grief and rage, and how she uses narrative and storytelling to mobilize for social justice. Plus, Jungwon reads a poem by Thich Nhat Hanh. So here's our conversation with Jungwon Kim.

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

Jungwon Kim: Hello, James, and hello, Sharon. I'm honored to be here.

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James Shaheen: Jungwon, we're here to talk about your work integrating spiritual practice and social action. But first, I'd like to ask about your own journey. Could you tell us a bit about your career path and how you became involved in human rights and activist work?

Jungwon Kim: Sure. I began in journalism, and after finishing graduate school, I worked as a journalist for a few years. What I found in the field of journalism actually led me to eventually seek work in the human rights advocacy sector, and that was essentially that the journalistic doctrine of neutrality or objectivity in my observation was an illusion and that, as in many areas and as we've really begun to examine over the past few years in our own society, there are so many implicit biases at play that make the power relationships of our society invisible.

A lot of those dynamics would play out in the newsroom because of the composition of the leadership of the newsroom, and I began to feel that my own motivations for going into professional storytelling, I could not fully express them within this context. And I felt that I wanted to more explicitly tell stories that had the purpose of revealing and examining the power imbalances in our society and really speaking up for the people who are most oppressed and suffering the most violence.

So that led me to Amnesty International, where we were openly encouraged and allowed to take that human rights framing and not necessarily have to put everything in this guise of 50 percent of this point of view and 50 percent of that point of view. We could actually advocate for the most impacted people.

Sharon Salzberg: I'm also curious about your spiritual journey. How were you first exposed to Buddhism?

Jungwon Kim: This is such an interesting question, and it really takes me back to this idea that my teacher, Thay, Thich Nhat Hanh, talks about the seeds and all of the different seeds in our stored consciousness and then how they begin to sprout.

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As a child, three out of four of my grandparents, my three living grandparents, lived with us in Los Angeles. Two of my grandparents were Christian converts from North Korea, and then my paternal grandmother, who was widowed by the time she came to live with us, was a Buddhist in the Mahayana Korean tradition.

And so she chanted every day at home and did her prostrations of touching the earth and various ritualistic practices at home. But because I was a second-generation immigrant kid, pretty embarrassed about being Korean in a mostly white environment at school where I did endure a lot of racial bullying, I pushed Korean language away, and so there was a linguistic barrier. So it was grandma practicing, but I didn't understand what she was saying, but the seed was planted.

And then many years later, when I was in university, I began to read some books. I picked up *Being Peace* by Thay. I picked up a few Tibetan Buddhist books and became more like a book Buddhist but was not practicing really in earnest. I was just trying to acquire information. But as with many people, it was a personal crisis that finally led me to the cushion. It was divorce with two young kids and just feeling so much grief over the breakup of my little family that got me to really sit on the cushion. It got me to Blue Cliff Monastery for the first retreat that I experienced led by Thay himself. And ever since then, it was 2009, I began to practice in earnest.

Sharon Salzberg: You've said that you grew up watching your grandmother chant to Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, and that also came to my mind just now as you were talking about suffering as the goad to looking more deeply, finding another story of happiness and peace. And Avalokiteshvara is often described as the one who hears the cries of the world. When we're confronted with suffering, it can be so tempting to look away or try to avoid it at all costs. So I'm wondering how Avalokiteshvara has influenced your approach to witnessing and being with suffering.

Jungwon Kim: That is such a relevant topic right now, but always, I think always. One thing I really think about a lot is how Avalokiteshvara or Gwan-eum, as she's called in Korean, or Guan

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Yin in Chinese, how she is depicted in traditional Asian art and in the antiquities often depicted with 10,000 arms. And in every hand, there's often an eye and or a tool. And I just love the symbolism of that so much because the eye is there. It's the eye of wisdom, so it's to take in the whole thing and not react from emotion, to not be in that place of reactivity. So it's taking the time to really analyze a situation and to find some core of wisdom to then guide the hand to do something. And to me, that symbolism is just so clear. The hands are there to do something. And throughout my career, a lot of it has focused on either intense human rights violations at Amnesty International or later at the Rainforest Alliance, really working with people in areas of the Global South that are really the front lines of the climate crisis and seeing how much suffering is caused even just by our way of life here in the United States or in the Global North, how many tears are in a chocolate bar, for example. And so I have really felt that we just have a responsibility as people who inter-are with each other and inter-are with nature. We have a responsibility to take care of each other. I just have lived that way, and I have found that framing it that way also helps prevent burnout and despair.

Sharon Salzberg: You've written about the importance of what you call spiritual activism. So what is spiritual activism? Is that what you've basically been just describing? And why is it so important?

Jungwon Kim: Yeah, I think of spiritual activism as a broader term than Engaged Buddhism, because although I am a practicing Buddhist, I also have met and worked with so many people from indigenous communities and from other faith traditions who have a really similar worldview and a similar way of being in the world. And that is just that deep understanding of interdependence and collective responsibility. So to me, Engaged Buddhism is a form of spiritual activism and spiritual activism. I like to think of it as a bird where one wing is the spiritual insight, and then the other wing would really be that practice of deep love, *karuna*, compassion. And then the action part is taking flight. And those two things are ideally in balance so that your flight is steady and true.

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Sharon Salzberg: You've shared that one component of spiritual activism is honoring our lineage, our ancestral roots, and I'm wondering what are the core lineages of spiritual activism, maybe in general, and what are some of the lineages that you draw from in your own work? My guess would be maybe your grandmother.

Jungwon Kim: Yeah, I would say Avalokiteshvara and also my grandmother, to a certain extent. That's more on a subconscious level because we did not really have a dialogue about it. And then, of course, I think Thich Nhat Hanh has always deeply inspired me. One thing that I really appreciate about Thich Nhat Hanh is that although he didn't call himself political, he was never politically neutral. And I think his response to the war in Vietnam is a good example of that. He was actually openly questioning and critical of the role of U.S. imperialism in Vietnam, and that was actually what led to the South Vietnamese government exiling him in the sixties. I think he understood the causes and consequences of suffering and was quite courageous in addressing them and also practicing in a way that always attended to the people who were suffering in that moment the most.

Sharon Salzberg: You've quoted Thich Nhat Hanh who said that a sangha, which is the word in Pali or Sanskrit that's usually defined as a spiritual community, a sangha is “a community of resistance, resisting the speed, violence, and unwholesome ways of living that are prevalent in our society.” Can you say more about the power of sangha as a force of resistance?

Jungwon Kim: Yes, I really feel that we are seeing that happening right now. And in fact, one of Thay's favorite things to say in his later years was something like the next buddha is a sangha, or the sangha is the next buddha, something like that. And I have really been observing with great appreciation all of the ways in which sangha has responded to this particular extraordinarily painful moment.

At Harvard Divinity School, I think last week, there was an entire conference on Engaged Buddhism called Burning Refuge, and it was so wonderful. I wish it had been four days longer. It

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was a day and a half, and there were just so many fascinating talks talking about the intersections of Buddhism and James Baldwin's work, for example.

Mona Chopra from Interdependence Project has also been offering morning meditations as well to address the acute suffering that so many Buddhist practitioners have been feeling in response to the mounting death toll in Gaza. And then I myself, along with a friend of mine, we created what we call our solidarity pod, our Gaza solidarity pod. So we just meet a few times a week, and we practice metta meditation to keep our hearts soft, to hold all of the victims. All of them. Not one side, not the other. We hold all of the victims and just remind ourselves and keep ourselves grounded in what our motivation is, what is goading us, as you said, Sharon.

And we do that before we make our phone calls to Congress and before we write our letters and before we do our collective actions. So that's, to me, an example of how I put spiritual activism into practice. It's integrating these things so that we stay in a right heart mind. As we take collective action, and then also afterward, we'll do a movement practice. Before, we'll often do breathing. So we also do other practices to water those seeds of equanimity, stamina, and metta.

James Shaheen: So one of your most recent projects with your solidarity pod was a collective zine, “Love in Action.” Could you tell us about the zine and how it came together?

Jungwon Kim: Yes, sure. This was such a wonderful collective labor of love. We had been gathering since mid-October for our collective actions, which for the first month or two really consisted of calling our elected representatives, writing letters and emails to our reps, and also writing emails to various mainstream news organizations that we felt were not covering the genocide in Gaza in a way that really humanized the people who are suffering the most.

So with that frustration, we thought, well, how can we do something that channels our grief, which really is an expression of love? So how can we channel that in a way that harnesses our

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creativity and waters those seeds of love and also humanizes people who are by and large being dehumanized in the mainstream news media?

And so we came together and created a zine. And the goal with the zine was not to present news and analysis but actually just to speak from the heart. So each person who wrote for Issue #1 is really just here from my perspective to yours. This is why I'm here in solidarity. You know, we have a piece from my friend who grew up in South Africa under apartheid, for example, talking about the International Court of Justice ruling about the case that South Africa's team brought. We have a piece by a Yemeni friend of mine talking about how complex the Yemeni involvement has been for him as someone who lives in the diaspora. We also have a piece from a Palestinian pod member and a piece from a Jewish pod member, just really trying to present a 360-degree view of all of these different perspectives and focusing on our response, our grief, and what is actually motivating us to be in solidarity. And so we're really just trying to complicate, I think, the mainstream narrative with some of these other narratives.

James Shaheen: So before starting up the solidarity pod, you also co-founded a BIPOC-centered sangha. Can you tell us more about your work building up sanghas, particularly in the context of Engaged Buddhism?

Jungwon Kim: This is such an interesting history because I think today we really take for granted that BIPOC sanghas are needed, and so many of the larger Buddhist centers have BIPOC offerings now, but around 2010 or 2011, when a few friends and I co-founded the Love Circle Sangha, we did not really know of any BIPOC sanghas practicing together in Brooklyn. And my experience after having this really eye-opening retreat at Blue Cliff with Thay was coming back to Brooklyn and just finding myself being the only person in a large Brooklyn-based sangha who was not white, or maybe one of two at the most out of forty or fifty people.

And although I really loved the sangha siblings that I practiced with, I did feel an acute sense of longing to be able to practice with other people from marginalized identities because I think there

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is a particular set or a particular range of suffering and frustrations that we deal with. And now I think we all have awareness now that there are some communities that enjoy much more privilege. There's communities like East Asians who are more white-adjacent, et cetera, et cetera. But anyway, the point is that I felt that strong desire, and around that time, a couple of wonderful people I knew through friends mentioned that they really wanted to have a BIPOC-centered sangha, so we co-founded Love Circle Sangha and practiced together for about seven years until the pandemic and the Brooklyn Zen Center closed its physical space.

James Shaheen: You've also talked about the Korean concept of *han*, which you describe as inherited grief and rage. So can you tell us a bit about *han*? In particular, how do you understand *han* in the context of activist work?

Jungwon Kim: *Han* is what I was just talking about without naming it in response to the question of why BIPOC sanghas. I think that a lot of people who come from lineages that have colonialism or U.S. imperialism or the experience of the Middle Passage and slavery in their lineage. In my observation, many of those people carry a lot of *han*. *Han* is so hard to translate, like some of the best words. It refers to the embodied experience of inherited grief and rage. And it usually is related to historical injustice. So it is this deep feeling inside. And I think that some people would argue it's uniquely Korean.

I personally believe it's a really useful framework for many different peoples to consider. And the reason I feel it's so useful is because it's important to name that that's there. And that helps us then begin the work of transmuting it before it makes us ill, before it makes us ill with anger, before it affects our psychological well-being and even our physical well-being.

So I think right now we see so many different aspects of *han* untransmuted and how untransmuted *han* can be really destructive. So I recently learned that there is an Arabic equivalent to the word *han*, and it is, forgive my pronunciation to all Arabic speaking people, *qaḥer*. Khadija Dajani, a scholar, describes it as “‘anger’ but it's not. It is when you take anger,

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place it on a low fire, add injustice, oppression, racism, dehumanization to it, and leave it to cook slowly for a century. And then you try to say it but no one hears you. So it sits in your heart. And settles in your cells. And it becomes your genetic imprint. And then moves through generations. And one day, you find yourself unable to breathe. It washes over you and demands to break out of you. You weep. And the cycle repeats.”

Khadijah Dajani is naming what other scholars might call epigenetic trauma. I think there's been some fascinating research on epigenetic trauma or generational trauma that really was innovated by scholars of the Holocaust and how it has affected people of Jewish ancestry and that there are physical manifestations as well as manifestations in the collective psyche.

So I think han or qaher or generational trauma, all of these things are really active conversations in our public discourse right now. And the urgency of transmuting and healing han before it turns destructive either to ourselves or to others is really in the forefront of my own practice right now.

James Shaheen: Yeah, I've heard you talk about how anger and rage, or han in this case, can backfire if we're not aware of it. So what are some of the ways that we can work with anger effectively and transform it into more sustainable fuel for the actions we take?

Jungwon Kim: My goodness, isn't that the question? I would love to ask both of you to share wisdom on this question as well. I have observed in my own experience that the work of transforming it for me must not just focus on the mind. It has to be an embodied practice. It has to move through my physical body as well. There is another closely related concept to han. It might be a corollary or a complement called heung. And heung refers to a kind of cathartic joy. It has a sort of a wild element to it, a sort of feeling of abandon and I guess surrender. And I really believe that for some people, people might be able to sit on a cushion and just practice and practice with anger and be able to transmute it effectively that way. I think for other people, that's really hard, and transmuting han requires more than sitting meditation: walking, dancing, being

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together, doing things collectively, ritual. I think those are all really incredible ways of transmuting han.

James Shaheen: Sharon, you've worked a lot with people on the front lines who suffer from overwhelm, burnout, anger, frustration, emotional collapse. What ways have you found that are effective in addressing something like burnout and rage?

Sharon Salzberg: Well, my work in that arena actually started with caregivers, the people we tend to term caregivers in society, people who may be on the front lines of suffering, trying to make a difference, often facing seemingly intractable systems, often burning out.

And one day I asked myself, what does that remind me of? And I thought, oh, activists. There we go. A lot of that work is centered around, first of all, in a kind of balance that can seem on the surface to be really selfish and besides the point, but it's really not. It's having enough compassion for oneself to realize that we need a sense of inner resource in order to keep up the work.

That falling apart, being depleted, being overwhelmed is not actually going to serve anybody, neither ourselves and certainly not the people that we are wishing to make a difference for. And some of it I've seen really involves working with that kind of balance, and some of it has to do with the next question I was about to ask, which is the relationship between han and joy, which you referenced a little bit. It seems so counterintuitive, but somehow being able to take in the joy as well as acknowledge deeply and frankly the suffering seems really important so that we don't fall into such a state of depletion.

Jungwon Kim: I agree 1000 percent that joy is part of the recipe. Another element of the recipe is, to me, doing this in sangha. I was joking with my family the other day that I feel like I have a pod for every aspect of my life. There's the sangha dharma pod, and then there's the solidarity pod. I think that when people are confronting something as profound as han, there's what in the

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Black American spiritual tradition is also referred to as congregation. Doing things in a sort of collective formation, to me, it gives individuals the strength to face something really huge and painful. These are all huge, complex, and just immensely painful things to bear witness to and to respond to, and I think that sense of overwhelm and burnout and also the corrosive effects of anger are greatly mitigated by both a sort of dedicated joy practice and also a joy practice that is done in community. And in that way, we hold hands and face together what is too daunting or painful or scary to face individually. It somehow gives more strength, to me anyway, to do things together. The joy part is really important.

James Shaheen: You've mentioned solidarity and community a few times. Can han also be a source of solidarity or community or connection? Can you say more about how we can work with our anger and rage to create greater solidarity rather than divisiveness, division, or isolation?

Jungwon Kim: Yes, I think this is also a big question of the day. I do think han can create great solidarity if the right kind of practice of wisdom and understanding is applied. You are right, James, in saying han could also lead to division. I think untransmuted han or han that doesn't take a wide enough view can definitely lead to division if we are not careful. And so I think for me that practice of spiritual activism is to bear witness to each other's han, and we've seen so many beautiful examples of that.

You know, there's been just wonderful solidarity work, for example, between Black and Korean Americans in Los Angeles in the wake of the 1992 uprising, for example. There are just too many examples to name, but I think that certainly even just the existence of a BIPOC sangha is a kind of solidarity-building exercise where we begin to learn and bear witness to each other's han, and that to me waters seeds of generosity and also seeds of trust among marginalized communities that are often quite intentionally pitted against one another by the dominant power structure, this kind of fighting for crumbs or, “Oh, look how recent immigrants from Asia are excelling at so and so and this and that,” and pitting them against other marginalized groups,

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Black and Native Americans, for example, without taking into account what those histories entail. So we all learn about each other's han, and I believe that learning process waters those seeds of trust and solidarity.

Sharon Salzberg: I've been thinking of this experience I had of looking at compassion in a different way, and this is when I was doing a program for nurses. It was International Nurses' Week. I was invited to Walter Reed Army Hospital to do this program, and a friend of mine was a nurse there at the time, and she arranged for me to have a short tour of one of the wards before I was going to teach, and it was, of course, extremely intense and painful, and between the soldiers and their families, and it was so much. And then at the end of this tour, my friend the nurse turned to me and she said, “The nurses who can stay here,” which means the nurses who can continue to serve and try to make a difference. She said, “The nurses who can stay here are not the ones who get lost in sorrow. The nurses who can stay here are the ones who can connect to the resilience of the human spirit.” And that for me, it almost was like a different definition of compassion. And so since burnout is so prevalent amongst good-hearted people trying to make a difference, all of those elements of community and joy and taking in the joy, allowing the joy and finding some balance and understanding things, all of that seems really a part of that movement toward greater sustainability. So I'm wondering what your experience has been in terms of preventing burnout and fostering sustainability.

Jungwon Kim: Yeah. I mean, I think here I would love to quote the work of a very well-known Black feminist, Toni Cade Bambara, who said something like the job of the artist is to make the revolution irresistible or something like that, and then of course Audre Lorde and her talk about the power of pleasure and so many other great thinkers. I think that the practice and cultivation of joy, especially communal joy, is essential, and we will never last if we don't practice the values of the world we yearn for as we struggle and work for that world. And the world that I yearn for is one where everyone deserves and has access to food, water, shelter, healthcare, and

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joy, where we are not just stridently criticizing each other and criticizing ourselves but where we are really participating in the potential for creating beauty that we have as humans.

And so I want to uplift a recent life-affirming event that very much exemplifies this idea that you have raised, Sharon. It was a series of chef pop-ups, and it was a collaboration between a Jewish American organizer friend of mine, Ora Wise, and a few of her comrades and some Palestinian chefs and also some Cambodian chefs who come from lineages that have also, as her lineage, carry a lot of han. And so in making those connections between her Jewish lineage and the Palestinian lineage and the Cambodian lineage, and they did one with a Korean chef as well, they created these beautiful events where they had a full dinner conversation with some speakers and then performances, music, poetry, and all of this taking place as people were sitting together face to face, having meals together, and of course talking about suffering and the difficult moment we're in, and also addressing han. It was a beautiful series of events, and it was all about putting joy at the center.

Sharon Salzberg: We recently had the poet Ross Gay on this podcast, and he spoke about how joy and sorrow are inextricably linked and how joy actually merges from how we care for each other. I'm curious if this resonates with your understanding of han.

Jungwon Kim: I think so. I always think that to me, some of the best humor often comes from people who have han in their lineages, thinking about comedians that I find to be really funny, and even just individuals in my life. My own maternal grandmother was just hysterically funny, and she had such a sad life. But when she laughed, I felt like the pain that she had experienced as someone who—Northern Korea was essentially decimated by the United States in an extended bombing campaign as the US led forces withdrew, and many historians now call it a genocide. Three million people were killed, and the United States carpet-bombed many villages, and there was no differentiation between civilians and combatants as we're seeing today in Gaza, for example. I just found that she had the experience of displacement. She had the experience of having to flee and becoming an internal refugee. She lost her mother at age 11 and then never

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was able to return to her homeland because Korea remains divided. It was divided in 1948 and remains divided today. So there's an entire generation or two of people who were forced to leave their homeland, their home village, their *gohyang*, their ancestral hometown, never to return, never to be reunited with their spouses, their children, their parents, their friends, their siblings.

And I think about that sometimes because it makes me think of this idea that the pain carves out a bigger space in the heart and then that space also becomes the capacity for joy, hopefully, if you're cultivating it. As you were saying, joy and sorrow are inextricable. And I feel something about that is that the depth of sorrow one feels can also carve out a greater space for a different kind of joy. And it's a kind of joy that doesn't turn away from sorrow. If you know sorrow, your joy is tinged. The sorrow gives it the dimension, the shadow that makes something three-dimensional. And so it's not a sort of blissfully ignorant joy where you're just indulging in happiness all the time. It's a deeper kind of joy. It's a joy that understands how precious life is and how precious every moment is because that space has been carved out by sorrow.

James Shaheen: You know, you mentioned the Korean experience. We had Marie Myung-Ok Lee on our podcast discussing *The Evening Hero*, a novel she wrote. She's a *Tricycle* contributor. And at a time when Korean pop culture has swept the country, a lot of people don't know about where it's actually coming from in the Korean war experience, so I advise our listeners to listen to that podcast or buy her book, *The Evening Hero*.

Jungwon Kim: My friend just gifted it to me and I'm so excited about it, so thank you for shouting that out. And I didn't realize you had a podcast episode, so I will definitely look that up.

James Shaheen: Yeah. Marie also contributes to the magazine and has something coming up, so it's really worth a read. So you've worked as a journalist and editor, which is close to my heart. I should also mention you're from southern California and you went to Berkeley. So that's my lineage.

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Jungwon Kim: Oh, really?

James Shaheen: Yeah. We've had a string of Berkeley grads on, and people may think it's a bias. I call it karma.

Jungwon Kim: Yes, you didn't know until we were connected.

James Shaheen: That's right, I didn't know. So you were most recently a journalist and editor for the Rainforest Alliance and previously for Amnesty International. Could you tell us a bit about how you use narrative and storytelling in mobilizing for social justice?

Jungwon Kim: Yeah, sure. I will say my journalism career flowed seamlessly into my work as a human rights advocate in that my job at Amnesty International was actually to edit and produce a quarterly human rights magazine, and so that to me felt just like journalism but with a very clear focus and with a very clear agenda, which was to uplift the human rights framework and to uplift the voices of people being denied their human rights. I saw my job there as cultivating karuna, you could say. And the way that I tried to do that was through storytelling and through narrative.

One of the first things I did after becoming editor there was to change the visual format of the magazine, which until then would have all sorts of different images on the cover. But once I became editor there, I thought it might be skillful to always have a close-up portrait on the cover so that you are looking directly into someone's eyes. The idea is to humanize everyone, to humanize the people who are most dehumanized in our sort of dominant mainstream media. And unfortunately, that does tend to be people from the Global South or Black and Brown people, Asian people, people from SWANA.

Obviously, there are many studies about how othering works and is institutionalized through mainstream and dominant media narratives. And so I felt my job at Amnesty International was to swim against that stream. And so putting people's portraits on the cover, I think if you are taking away a scene of a crowd where you have a lot of visual noise, or you're taking away even a

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full-length photograph of someone where you might focus on, “Oh, their clothing is so different,” so we would have very close-up images, almost like how fashion magazines have a close-up of a model or a celebrity on the cover. That was our approach to have a super close-up. And if you're stripping away all of the differences and you are just confronted with somebody's eyes and you are looking at this person, it is harder to other them. It is harder to dehumanize them.

We think of dehumanization in its most extreme forms—dehumanizing rhetoric in the case of war, for example. I think dehumanization also takes place in much more subtle fashion sometimes. And that can be just feeling that this group of people don't deserve as many rights as we have, or it's not as big of a deal if they have less rights. And for example, that manifests in how mainstream media will even count the death toll. If a tiny number of people die in the United States, for example, it's big news. And if a huge number of people die somewhere in the Global South, it's just not the same. The value of life is reported differently, as we have all observed. And so my aim with using narrative and storytelling is to encourage people to connect to individuals and communities who might otherwise not get that kind of attention and not get that kind of investigation into their humanity. So visually using those portraits was one way to do it.

Another way to do it was to run stories that really featured some of those voices. So for example, the U.S. prison in Guantanamo Bay is such a terrible and painful topic, because there were so many people in there who were never charged and who were basically abducted and in prison there, including many children and teenagers. Of course, getting an interview was not possible, but one of the stories we published was the best attempt at approximating an interview. There was a young detainee, I can't remember his name, but he wrote poetry on Styrofoam cups that he got from the mess hall, because going back to this idea of joy and sorrow, it was the survival mechanism. He created art as a sort of psychic survival mechanism. And then his lawyer took those poems and then transcribed them and published them in a book called *Poems from*

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Guantanamo. We ran a story about the poems from Guantanamo and allowed or invited people to read the words of this individual to see that it isn't just nameless, faceless, “Everyone is a terrorist.” There are a lot of people who were rotting in that prison for years and years, and they might be innocent, and also they have entire lives and thoughts and they are human and their suffering also is meaningful.

James Shaheen: You know, Sharon and I recently had writer and activist Rebecca Solnit on the podcast, and she described the climate emergency as a storytelling crisis, which reminds me of what you're talking about, where we're surrounded by stories of despair and declinism. So how do you understand and work with these narratives of despair?

Jungwon Kim: Yeah, this is also a huge topic of formal research and also active conversation within the climate community. How do we tell the story of the climate crisis in a way that motivates people to take collective action and to hold our leaders responsible for the kind of interventions that we need at scale immediately? It's like walking on a razor's edge because on the one hand, we have to convey the severity and the urgency. I know many scholars have studied the human mind and concluded that the human mind has a bias toward urgency, and it's very hard to care equally about something that seems distant. The climate crisis is inherently disadvantaged in the human mind. And then another problem we have is the othering. So right now, many of the most severe climate impacts are happening in Global South countries. Those are countries that have not contributed much to our overall carbon footprint, whereas Global North countries continue to have a lot of carbon footprint and generate completely unsustainable amounts of carbon and other greenhouse gas emissions. So othering is another problem where we think it's easy for people to say, “Well, those people are suffering over there, but that's so far away.” And then the third thing is that it's a big problem that's really complicated, and lots of interdependent factors are happening. The Arctic ice shelf and the greenhouse gas emissions and deforestation and unsustainable agriculture, which in the United States, every aspect of our own

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lives contributes to all of these. As I mentioned, for example, every time I bite into a chocolate bar now, I think of all the deforestation that probably contributed to that cacao.

In telling such a huge story, some narrative experts have said the best way to do it is actually to focus on the smallest story, to go back to that close-up, intimate story, and then to zoom out. So that's been my approach. And the other thing I'll say is this. We have to uplift the positive examples of community-led leadership, especially across the Global South. There are so many really fantastic initiatives led by individuals, communities, and also even by state and regional governments that are doing quite frankly so much more than what we're doing here in the United States. And I think it's really important to uplift those success stories and to show how another way really is possible because look, these people are doing it.

James Shaheen: You say to tell very small stories, and I smiled because what really changed my mind in a moment was seeing a lone polar bear on an ice floe. It was a very small story, but it really broke my heart and changed my willingness to engage. And it was a very small story that others may not have looked at. But before we close, what would you say to people who would like to take action are feeling overwhelmed and don't know where to begin?

Jungwon Kim: I would tell them to pod up. I would say find your sangha. And even if it's not a Buddhist practice sangha, sanghas take many forms. A sangha is just a community of practice. So find even one friend or two friends and invite them to sit down and say, “Hey, I'm feeling really overwhelmed,” or “I'm feeling motivated to take action on this particular thing. Would you do it with me?” Can we get together and do it next to each other? Or can we get together over Zoom and do it together? And then can we build in some practices of care, mutual care and sustainability, so that when we get together regularly to take action, we're not just calling on our members of Congress. It's not really encouraging. Many of them actually have instructed their staff to just let us go to voicemail. Some answer, and sometimes you get someone who is genuinely eager and curious to listen. And then sometimes you get someone who's clearly just taking a tally. So it's definitely not a rewarding experience. So I think, again, how do we make it

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irresistible? How do we make it alluring? Add a little dancing at the end. Add a metta meditation at the beginning. With our Gaza solidarity pod, we look forward to getting together. We have a very busy Signal chat, and we get messages saying, “I can't wait until our next meeting. I really, really need to see you all. I'm really hurting and hoping that we can hold space for each other.”

If you do this in community and you make it something that is enticing where you're nourished through the experience, that will sustain your action and also help you so that you're acting from a well-resourced place, not a place of despair or reactivity or rage. We can't just live in the rage channel. We want to be able to calm down and to feel supported and to feel connected before we take action so that it's wise action.

James Shaheen: Jungwon, thanks so much for joining us. We like to close these podcasts with a short practice, so I'm going to turn it over to you.

Jungwon Kim: Thank you so much. I really appreciate the opportunity to talk about my favorite thing, which is spiritual activism and Engaged Buddhist practice. So today I am not going to lead a formal meditation. Instead, I thought it might be an opportune moment to share and read a poem by Thay, Thich Nhat Hanh, called, “Please Call Me By My True Names.” And I do consider this a precious dharma gem, so I will ring a bell before and after I read the poem.

Don't say that I will depart tomorrow —
even today I am still arriving.

Look deeply: every second I am arriving
to be a bud on a Spring branch,
to be a tiny bird, with still-fragile wings,
learning to sing in my new nest,
to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower,
to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone.

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I still arrive, in order to laugh and to cry,
to fear and to hope.

The rhythm of my heart is the birth and death
of all that is alive.

I am the mayfly metamorphosing
on the surface of the river.

And I am the bird
that swoops down to swallow the mayfly.

I am the frog swimming happily
in the clear water of a pond.

And I am the grass-snake
that silently feeds itself on the frog.

I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones,
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks.

And I am the arms merchant,
selling deadly weapons to Uganda.

I am the twelve-year-old girl,
refugee on a small boat,
who throws herself into the ocean
after being raped by a sea pirate.

And I am the pirate,
my heart not yet capable
of seeing and loving.

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I am a member of the politburo,
with plenty of power in my hands.
And I am the man who has to pay
his “debt of blood” to my people
dying slowly in a forced-labor camp.

My joy is like Spring, so warm
it makes flowers bloom all over the Earth.
My pain is like a river of tears,
so vast it fills the four oceans.

Please call me by my true names,
so I can hear all my cries and my laughter at once,
so I can see that my joy and pain are one.

Please call me by my true names,
so I can wake up,
and so the door of my heart
can be left open,
the door of compassion.

James Shaheen: Thank you so much.

Jungwon Kim: Thank you so much for having me.

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