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Helen Tworikov: Anyone who has encountered the dharma is the most privileged person in the world, and that's more true as the world looks bleaker and bleaker to me. I think we're living through pretty bleak times, and I don't think they're going to get better in the immediate future, but to have the dharma just strikes me as being so extraordinary. I mean, what an extraordinary privilege to know that you have within you a refuge that nobody can ever touch. Nobody can take it away from you. It doesn't matter how bad things get. It doesn't matter the politics, the warfare, the AI, the this, the that. That we have something inside that is really true refuge, to have that in my life makes my life extraordinary.

James Shaheen: Hello, and welcome to Tricycle Talks. I'm James Shaheen, and you just heard Helen Tworikov. Helen is the founding editor of *Tricycle* and an old friend and mentor of mine. In her new book, *Lotus Girl: My Life at the Crossroads of Buddhism and America*, she uses her own journey to explore how Buddhism has developed in the West over the past sixty years. Set against the cultural backdrop of the Vietnam war and the American counterculture, the book offers a portrait of Helen's search for meaning and truth as she travels through Japan, India, and Nepal and encounters the great Buddhist luminaries of her time, including the Dalai Lama, Pema Chödrön, Chögyam Trungpa, Dudjom Rinpoche, and Mingyur Rinpoche. In my conversation with Helen, we talk about what first brought her to Buddhism, the dangers of exoticizing Buddhist traditions, the radical nature of Buddhist teachings in a relentlessly capitalist economy, and how she understands the bardos of old age and death. So here's my conversation with Helen Tworikov.

Tricycle Talks

“At the Crossroads of Buddhism and America”

Episode #102 with Helen Tworikov

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James Shaheen: OK, so I'm sitting here with my good friend, Helen Tworikov, who is *Tricycle's* founder. Helen, it's great to be with you.

Helen Tworikov: Thank you.

James Shaheen: I was thinking this morning that you hired me nearly thirty years ago, and now I sit in your seat and I'm interviewing you. So life is funny. So we're here to talk about your new book, *Lotus Girl: My Life at the Crossroads of Buddhism and America*. You said once when you were writing the book that you had an important message to get out. Why was it so important to you to write this book, and what's the message here?

Helen Tworikov: I think I had a couple of different motivations. One is that the Buddhism in America chronicles that I had read were pretty highbrow, and they were very much along the sort of “Aha” moments of what happened, people's enlightenment experiences or the best part of their journey in Buddhism, and also that it was written the way history is often written, that it goes from one great man scenario to another great man scenario. So you start off classically, with, I think it's the 1893 World Parliament of Religion and all the various men who were there and who were then written about by men. And even the best of the narratives, which to my mind was Rick Fields's *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, was very male oriented. So I wanted to get a different take on Buddhism, and part of it was not just a woman's journey, but it was something of what goes on in between those great events, all the messy, chaotic, screwball events that actually take place. What does an actual lived life look like in dharma, which is not always clean and pretty and elevated? So that was one motivation.

James Shaheen: I'd like to ask you a little bit about your upbringing. You grew up in a secular household. Religion was not a part of your family life, and certainly not Buddhism. So what was your understanding of religion back then? How did you view it?



Helen Tworikov: I grew up in a family of artists. This was the 1950s, and my understanding was that art was the religion and that the artists were the high priests. This is something that I do talk about in the book. And it's an important point for me because I grew up in the kind of family that many people came to New York to live, and it didn't work for me. They came to New York because they wanted to be in the art world. They wanted to be around artists. They venerated artists. Artists were the high priests. What I saw was artists' behavior that was not so great. And I wasn't looking at art. I was looking at human beings with very common behavior patterns, which is to say that they were impatient and greedy and harsh and could be angry and loving, everything. But it wasn't a kind of, how shall we say, sanitized version of art or artists. So my understanding was that I learned early on that people who made good art were not necessarily good people. I had to move on to another kind of religion.

James Shaheen: So, Helen, you begin the book with the story of the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc, who set himself on fire in 1963. Can you tell us a bit about the event and the impact it had on you?

Helen Tworikov: Oddly enough, everyone who ever saw that photograph never forgot it, and they usually misidentify it as a Buddhist monk protesting the war in Vietnam, the American presence in Vietnam. That's not quite true. The photograph has always been associated with the American war, but actually this is 1963, and what Quan Duc was protesting was the crackdown on Buddhist clergy by the fundamentalist Catholic, I don't know whether he was technically prime minister or president, but Diem. This had been going on for several months, and this was a hangover from French colonialism. About 10 percent of the country at the time were considered Catholics, about 90 percent were considered Buddhists, but Diem had this idea, and he did actually fly the flags of Rome, the papal flags, in this 90 percent Buddhist country, and his activities towards the Buddhist clergy and monasteries were becoming increasingly aggressive. In 1963, Thich Quang Duc sat down in a very centrally located part of what was then called



Saigon and set himself on fire to draw international attention to what was going on with the Buddhist clergy, and he did a sensationally fantastic job of doing that.

James Shaheen: Right, but the politics of it weren't really what had such an immediate impact on you. What was it that struck you?

Helen Tworikov: What struck me was how does somebody sit upright in perfect meditation posture while they're burning up? How does that happen? Now, there were lots of theories. Diem's cronies tried to spread the idea that he must have been drugged or he was on drugs—that he was taking some kind of painkillers or whatever. But what we saw visually from the photographs and from some of the videos that got out was a man, a Buddhist monk in Buddhist robes, sitting in perfect meditation posture while he burned to death. There was something about what we were seeing, something about his body and his mind that I had never seen before.

Now, I came from a family that prized itself on intellectual knowledge and that being the highest version of what the mind could do. I was looking at a mind that was so far away from that. I had no idea what was going on, but I certainly wanted to know more. That's what attracted me. That's what caught me.

James Shaheen: So in other words, it was a pretty remarkable challenge to your conventional understanding of the mind.

Helen Tworikov: Absolutely, absolutely.

James Shaheen: You also talk about your experiences with psychedelics, which also changed your view of what the mind or the self might be. Can you talk about that?

Helen Tworikov: I had started taking psychedelics just before Quang Duc died. And I didn't really make the connection. I think in the book I write about how Carol Tonkinson, who worked at *Tricycle* many years ago, at one point when I was on my way to Vietnam, she was the one who



asked me if psychedelics had alerted me to some aspect of Quang Duc's mind that I might not otherwise have been sensitized to.

I had never understood that sequence in that way, but it's possible that was true. I started taking psychedelics in the winter of 1962, something like that. It was certainly an experience of a non conceptual mind. It was a mind that was not tethered to the body. It had a sense of knowingness. It's not like I didn't know where I was or what I was doing, but it wasn't tethered to the normal or what we would consider normal sensory objects, and it was a very vast mind. It was a mind that was very open, very free, very unbounded, but I didn't make any association between my experiences and asking, What's going on with Quan Duc's mind? Where is that mind? If his body is burning up, normally we would associate that with pain, with torture, with tremendous wanting to get away. We've seen other photographs of people who have set themselves on fire in protest. We've seen them among the Tibetans. We've seen them among Americans. We saw them among some Quakers during the Vietnam War in America. But basically we see people running from the flames. We don't see anybody sitting with that kind of pain.

James Shaheen: Throughout the book, especially in the beginning of the book, one experience after the other sort of jars you into a kind of awareness that who you are isn't necessarily what you thought you were. So when you were in your 20s, you traveled to Japan, which continues this self-questioning, and you write, “Japan was utterly new and unknown, but more surprising to me was how quickly I became new and unknown to myself.” So how did traveling also shift your understanding of who you were?

Helen Tworikov: I think that's one of the great privileges of being able to travel is that, of course, we know that most of the time we take most of our minds with us. We think, “Oh my God, if I could just hang out on the beach for a week, I'd be so great.” And then you get to that wonderful paradise, and you discover that all of your anxieties and concerns and spinning mind have come with you. There's always the possibility that actually you allow yourself to be in a “new place”



and you allow yourself the luxury of not knowing who you are or where you are and having to figure it out from scratch, and so that's another kind of opening, another way of seeing the shifts.

Also, as I write about, I had studied anthropology in college, but I had never really been to another country. Japan was my first experience of a foreign country. So then you begin to see how relative everything is. It's all relative. And I had always desperately wanted absolutes, and I always wanted certainty. Through psychedelics and various other things, I began to get the slow, kind of terrifying idea that certainty doesn't actually exist. So Japan pushed me towards that also.

James Shaheen: I think it was in Japan that you first came across D. T. Suzuki's writings, and you say that it cut through your cultural conditioning around illness and dying, and you write, “Buddhists told the truth about things Americans lied about. First a Vietnamese monk burning to death while sitting in meditation, embodying a truth too profound to comprehend; and then a Zen master speaking of death without embarrassment or despair.” So how did Suzuki and Thich Quang Duc change your understanding of the truth, the self, and suffering?

Helen Tworikov: I think like many Americans, especially growing up in the late '40s and '50s, death was a dirty word. We didn't get to talk about it. It was never up for discussion. I didn't go to my own grandmother's funeral. It was considered not appropriate to take a child to a funeral. Death was like cancer or polio. It was considered impolite. We weren't supposed to talk about anything so impolite. And most of what I read of D. T. Suzuki, I didn't understand at all. I still can pick up D. T. Suzuki and not understand just about 98 percent of what I read. But he did write this sentence about death. It wasn't that he said anything that was particularly profound at all. It was that the tone was, “Yeah, that's the way it is, folks. We're all going to die.” That was a tone that I was not hearing from my own culture or from my own parents. I think the first time I saw dead bodies was in India, floating in the Ganges River, but I don't think I had ever sat with a dead body. I don't think I had ever seen a dead body. It was the comfort, it was the acceptance of death that we didn't have, that we're just learning. I think we're just learning about that now in



our own culture. I think there's been huge shifts in the last thirty or forty years. We still have a long way to go before we actually understand the integration of life and death.

James Shaheen: You know, in the book you write about some pretty intimate details of your life, and I know you well enough to know that you don't talk about those easily or frequently. But in the book, some of the things do come up, especially some of the more painful events in your life. For instance, you write about a traumatic miscarriage, which pushed you to seek a form of spiritual experience. Until then, you had not yet found Buddhism. But could you say something about that experience? What were you seeking as a result?

Helen Tworikov: Well, I had been in Asia for two years before that happened. My experiences in Asia, especially in Kathmandu in the early sixties, I had no sense that Buddhism could be taken out of Asia at that point. I didn't understand its capacity for borderless understanding.

James Shaheen: Or its universality. Its universality.

Helen Tworikov: And I didn't know how to approach anything called practice. What happened with the miscarriage, it was a late-term miscarriage, and I just could not shake the pain. I didn't know how to get out of it, and I got more and more depressed, and my husband and I became further and further apart. He was, at some point, quite understandably ready to move on, and I just couldn't. I was just stuck. And then I began thinking about some kind of spiritual practice, but at that time, and in retrospect, this sounds so crazy, but I thought that it was somehow embarrassing or insulting to the religion to have to start off from this low state of so much confusion and self-hatred and despair. I didn't understand that was the only place to start from. I thought there was some elevated place that you started from and then you just went up from there. I didn't get that that was the only starting point.

James Shaheen: So you were really coming at it from a feeling of deficiency somehow that the miscarriage was an expression of your own deficiency.



Helen Tworikov: Totally.

James Shaheen: So you did try a few New Age practices, although they didn't stick, but then you serendipitously came across Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and a talk he gave. Can you say something about that and what attracted you to that and the Tibetan tradition?

Helen Tworikov: I had been reading Trungpa. I forgot about this part. I had been reading Trungpa Rinpoche, I forget what year. So I knew who he was. I knew about him. I knew that he was brilliant, but also at the time that I went to that talk, I already knew about his reputation for drinking and about sleeping with his students. So I did try several New Age type things. At some point, I thought maybe I should try something that was more traditional, and however crazy Trungpa Rinpoche's reputation was, he was very much within a very traditional way of teaching. So I signed up for a seminar that was in California, and it was a seminar that he was holding in, I think, Oakland, and it was on Milarepa.

Neither he nor his teachings were particularly attractive to me at that time, but the big attraction, the takeaway from that weekend, was the concept of lineage, that this person who was dressed in a three-piece suit and whose glass beside his table was reportedly filled with sake, could be the interpreter, the translator, the transmitter of this great Tibetan saint, 11th-century saint, Milarepa. So we're talking about a thousand-year history here, and we're talking about the transmission of mind-to-mind teachings. So it wasn't the inheritance of blood and flesh, it was the inheritance of mind understanding. And the possibility that this lineage could be so robust, could be so energized, and so echoed by living masters, gave the lineage itself a kind of credibility that reduced the emphasis on any one person in it. Up until then, I had a hard stance against teachers. I didn't want a guru. Gurus were terrifying to me. But that softened my stance against teachers because it made them part of a much bigger fabric.



James Shaheen: You eventually found Dudjom Rinpoche. Can you tell us who he was and what was so striking to you about the way he moved through the world?

Helen Tworikov: I first met him when he was visiting New York. I always feel extremely self-conscious talking about Dudjom Rinpoche because when I look back, I was barely what you would call a student. I didn't know anything. I was hanging out. There was something attractive, but there's so much there that I didn't know about. I didn't get it. My own mind was too clogged up and cluttered and opaque. But what I could see or what I could feel, there was no place to land your mind. If I meet somebody, like I meet you, you meet me, we try to figure out who we are. Who is this person? Who are they in the world? What do they do? Where do they come from? Where did they go to college? All these questions that we ask to try to set the coordinates of who they are. And we all do that. I certainly did, maybe less so now than I used to, but in those days, certainly trying to figure out who they are, who I am, who I am to them, who they are to me.

With Dudjom Rinpoche, it was like talking to the sky. Who are you? I don't know. It was like he communicated a quality of a non-referential mind. So you couldn't reference him and he couldn't reference you in any normal way of what that might mean.

James Shaheen: You at the same time talk about the dangers of exoticizing Buddhism, especially among those who came to Buddhism by way of rejecting their own cultural heritage. Could you say more about how Buddhism was romanticized in the American counterculture? The experience you had with Dudjom Rinpoche was one thing, but you also talk about how at that time, the Buddha was something out there or other. Can you say something about that?

Helen Tworikov: Part of that was my own limitation, my own limited understanding, I think. It's something that I definitely shared with many members of my own generation. There were clearly people around who understood a lot more than I did, Westerners who were new to Buddhism but who had gone further in their studies and their understanding. Part of what I try to do in this book is to express misconceptions that I believe I shared with a lot of people in my own generation.



And so one of them was that the Buddha was out there over there. It took me a long time to, first of all, actually hear the teachings that told me that the Buddha was inside and then to actually take that to heart and to actually practice from that view. That did not come naturally or easily. I mean, I'm this New York City kid and I'm told, “Oh, you are the Buddha.” Oh yeah. Really? Really? You're talking to me? Really? That was a slow process, and it's still going on.

James Shaheen: So you go on to describe your experience of taking refuge with Dudjom Rinpoche, and you say that the language of leaving home resonated with members of the counterculture, but also you write that “none of these social repudiations approached the true meaning of leaving home. Basically, we renounced one version of samsara for another and seamlessly bypassed the home of our habitual addictions and proclivities—the comfort zone that unconsciously accepted and recycled afflictive behavior.” Can you say more about this paradox? What home are you leaving and what home were you not ready to give up?

Helen Tworikov: Well, we were certainly ready to leave the conventions of our society. I would say, certainly for all of my own friends and groups of Buddhist converts that I knew, we were all against the war. In some cases, that had so fractured families that people of my generation didn't have families to go home to. We were experimenting with sex, with drugs, with new art, with new music. So we were ready to leave behind a lot of conventions. That didn't mean we were ready to give up our own egocentric, habitual patterns, the way we behaved toward each other, toward ourselves, our own what felt like intractable interest in putting ourselves first every single minute of the day. I don't even know that we knew what leaving home meant. In the old days, initially in the Buddha's time, you might have initially joined a monastic community. Now, of course, there are so many considerations or concessions made to secular modern life, but I still think the essential message is the same. You leave the home of your comfort zone, you leave your attachments, you give up the things that provide the most, you give up your habitual neurotic habits. That is not easy. And actually, I think it's one of the things I do talk about in the book. It's another way in which I see myself as extremely typical of my generation, is we thought



of a habit. When I gave up smoking, I thought that I did something so amazing, I could probably climb Mount Everest. I didn't realize that that didn't hold a candle compared to giving up certain psychological or neurotic habits that I had with regard to my own behavior.

James Shaheen: Yeah, I think that really comes through in the book, and I don't think it's so terribly different for others nowadays. There's an idea of the practice, and then there's what you find out when you actually undertake the practice. It's not so easy, and these habits of mind aren't so receptive until you practice for quite some time, and even then. So you were also a student of Thinley Norbu Rinpoche's, who was Dudjom Rinpoche's son, and he advised you to relax your mind. You cite this as the most profound instruction for liberation that you received. Can you say more about this? Because I've heard you talk about this, and I was really happy to see it appear in the book. Why is relaxation so difficult? Or what does it mean to relax the mind?

Helen Tworikov: Well, when I first heard of this from Thinley Norbu, which he used to say right from the beginning, when he first arrived in New York. It was one of his statements, “Relax your mind.” This was 1976, and I thought he was talking about relax, have a drink, smoke a little dope, relax, go to the beach. It had completely nothing to do with that, of course. It turns out that as you begin to practice more and you begin to really explore the nature of mind that we're living inside these prisons, these tightly bound wires that are just tightening around our mental capacities, that we see with our minds, not with our eyes, we hear with our minds, not with our ears, that we're constantly constricted by patterns, by habits, by preconceptions. So relax, in a way, is like taking this extraordinary matrix of intertwining, binding ropes and relaxing them, letting them loose, loosening them. Relax your mind. Then, what you can discover is that it might feel, and it does feel at times, as if you let go of the conceptual mind, that you're just going to drop dead, or that there's nothing there, or you're just going to die on the spot, or you'll become like a zombie, like an idiot. It turns out that there's a lot there that will rise to the surface, that will flourish in the absence of the tightly held conceptual overlay.



James Shaheen: I'm going to jump to the founding of *Tricycle*, which is of course dear to my heart. That's when I first met you. But in the mid 1980s, long before I came to *Tricycle*, you and Rick Fields started thinking about founding an independent Buddhist publication. So what was the inspiration for starting *Tricycle*?

Helen Tworikov: Well, initially, there was a group of us who had talked about how great it would be to have a pan-Buddhist nonsectarian commercial magazine. That just simply did not exist. All that existed were these small community-based newsletters. And it was part of our goofy, romantic idea of Buddhism in America, how great it would be, and it would be nonsectarian, and put the word out there. And it was a little bit evangelical, I think, looking back on it. We thought we had something great going on, which I still do actually.

So then what happened was that Rick was asked by Trungpa Rinpoche to go to Colorado to edit Trungpa Rinpoche's community house magazine, which at that time was called *Vajradhatu Sun*. And so that whole thing got put on hold. And then starting in the mid-80s, there was a series of scandals in the Buddhist world, the Zen world, the Tibetan world, the Theravada world, the Insight world, all within a couple of years. And of course, nobody in the little community magazines was allowed to write about it because there was this brotherhood of teachers that would not allow anybody in any of the other magazines to say anything about any of the other teachers. Of course, that was all we were talking about. We were on the phone. We didn't have email in those days, but Rick and I were on the phone all the time. So suddenly the need of what was possible shifted. And it wasn't just talking to non-Buddhists in the big world, it was Buddhists being able to talk to each other. All the sort of sectarian sniggling, niggling little rivalries that existed all seemed to dissolve under this big understanding that none of us knew what the heck was going on. None of us could comprehend how any of this was happening. None of us knew what a teacher was. None of us knew what to expect from a teacher, what the issues were, why our teachers were not perfect. So the possibility of creating a forum where these things could be discussed became a little bit more urgent. Rick had written his book by that



time, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, and he then began to joke about how the sequel would be *How the Swans Died in the Lake*. But there was also the possibility that if it was going to die, let the obituaries be written by those of us who were sympathetic, because by this time the mainstream press were picking up on these scandals, and they were not very kind, as one might expect.

James Shaheen: Well, these scandals also stirred another debate, this whole question of how could an enlightened teacher behave in such a miserable way? And so people said, “He's not enlightened because he did these things,” or “He's beyond ethics because he's enlightened,” And this whole debate emerged. What about that? What are your feelings about that?

Helen Tworikov: My feelings about that is that we don't know much about what enlightenment means. We didn't know about it then, and we still don't. We're still trying to understand the relationship between the enlightened mind and the conceptual mind. It would be very rare for any one individual to live a nonconceptual reality 24/7. And even then, we don't know what the form of behavior is. Everybody's got a container. Every enlightened mind that's living has a container. That container has footprints. That container has causes and conditions. That container has karma. And how that manifests, we don't know. We know that one person's behavior is always going to be faulted by somebody else. That's a given. We already know that. We already know that no version of perfect, enlightened behavior is going to satisfy everyone's descriptions. So I don't know how to answer your question. I think teachers, you read books, you watch videos, and you follow what resonates with you, what you think is going to help your own enlightened journey, and you stop worrying so much about them. Either this is going to help you in some sense of what you want to do, you have some sense of what you're going for, you have some sense of what the obstacles are, and this person can help you or they cannot help you, or their teachings can help you or not help you.

James Shaheen: You know, when I first came to *Tricycle*, I was rather new to Buddhism, and all of these scandals were being discussed. It never struck me as odd that people misbehaved. That



was a given. People in communities misbehave, and these fledgling communities had very little support from the broader culture. So they were finding their way, and what I got out of *Tricycle* was a place where they could find their way together. But that people misbehaved wasn't surprising. What it did is throw the notion of enlightenment into high relief. What is it? And that, I don't know if that conversation is fruitful or not, but it comes up and it will continue to come up in the magazine too. Something else about *Tricycle's* early days, you say that it was most important to focus on the truly radical teachings of Buddhism rather than social or political commentary, and I happen to agree with that. I followed in your footsteps, and I adopted that view too. And to quote you, you write, “in a relentlessly capitalist economy dependent on the excitation of greed and desire, nothing was more heretical than the claim that the material world would never provide reliable and lasting happiness.” Can you say something about that?

Helen Tworikov: That's true today, and it's been for the last several thousand years since the time the Buddha first taught. It's absolutely true from my point of view. I think it's increasingly obviously true. We're living in a highly materialistic society. Nobody is happy. All the things that are supposed to make us happy are not making us happy. We're a pretty unhappy lot in terms of what's going on in America right now. So where's the payoff? Where's the payoff in buying all the cars and the houses and the nice clothes and the whatever, the iPhones and the iPads and the blah, blah, blah, blah, blah? Where's the payoff? You know, it might have been a radical idea for Americans that the materialistic aspects of our society were not paying off, but right now it just seems like you'd have to be walking around dead not to notice. Sometimes I'm just utterly struck by the language of advertising. This is something that I saw several years ago, but I still think about it. It was a newspaper line on the floor of the subway, and it was an advertisement for a Broadway show. And the screeching headline was “Addictive.” Through all the addiction problems we have, suddenly addictive became a positive advertising term. If it's addictive, that's really great for your advertising. That's what we're living with. So I think that there are many different ways of trying to help the society that we're in, but certainly becoming aware of how manipulative the society can be, the advertising world can be, the wheels of materialism can be. I



think becoming more sensitized to it can be very helpful for our own state of mind, our own well-being.

James Shaheen: Well, another sentiment that runs counter to the culture also came to you via Thinley Norbu Rinpoche, his teaching that “useless is best.” So how did this advice influence your approach to *Tricycle*? In other words, how did you balance the desire to be useful with Thinley Norbu's prioritization of uselessness?

Helen Tworikov: Yeah, I'm still working on it. I think it still speaks to wanting to be helpful and do something good without a gaining mind, which has something to do with not getting so attached to results. You do the best that you can. You help people the best that you can. You figure out your social action moves the best that you can but without getting so attached to the results. It doesn't mean that what you're doing is useless. Certainly I wanted to do something useful, and everybody who worked at *Tricycle*, and you too when you came, wanted to do something useful. So it's not that it wasn't useful but that we wanted it to be non-gaining, that we could do it without attachment to results. Was that my trip? No, no, absolutely not. I'm working on it, but I think that would be a more palatable way of understanding it.

James Shaheen: I still think that aptly describes our approach. I'm not telling people what to think, who to vote for, or what actions to take, but whatever kind of mind we bring to it, hopefully we're not attached to the outcome, because that's a lot of trouble and heartache. But moving along here, it was around this time that you returned to Vajrayana Buddhism and experienced the power of the novice ordination ritual and embodied practice. As you write, “this ritualized obeisance to the Buddhist path can transform what it means to be human. Or what kind of human you wish to be.” So how has your relationship to ritual shifted over the years? Because you were at the Zen community of New York, you formally studied Zen, Maezumi Roshi was your teacher, Bernie Glassman was your teacher, so by this time you were familiar with ritual.



But it's not something you started out understanding or gravitating to, and a lot of Americans don't. Ritual seems superfluous to them or meaningless.

Helen Tworikov: I'd like to just say that when we talk about ritual, we often associate it with religion, but actually we're talking about something that many of us are engaged in all the time, which has to do with some form of transformation of the environment to help aid the transformation of mind. So if you're having a birthday party for someone, there's a very good chance that you're going to put a tablecloth on your table, and you might buy flowers and you might light some candles. This is all part of transforming the atmosphere to create a different kind of atmosphere so that when one walks into the room, one is going forward into a new space. And that's not so different than what we're talking about now. I think it's taken me a while to understand, like when you go to the theater, and whether it's a movie or a drama, the lights go off, you're focused on the screen. All of that is some kind of ritual. It's some kind of a transformation. We do it all the time. I just think we're not so sensitive. We don't call it ritual. We call it ceremonial. You have a marriage. People are still getting married, as far as I know. They wear a special dress. It's a special color, even very common things. It always cracked me up that everyone thought that Tibetan Buddhism was so weird considering how many people, like your family, went to church every morning and ate and drank the blood and body of Christ. I thought, well, it doesn't get any stranger than that.

James Shaheen: It was pretty tasty.

Helen Tworikov: But I thought, well, it doesn't possibly get weirder than that. We have all these things that are very normal in our own culture that we've somehow decided to shelve as something other than ritual. Part of where I'm going with this is just that recognizing this helped my own accommodation to ritual.



James Shaheen: Yeah, it's kind of like going to a play and a suspension of disbelief and participating in that ritual, really.

Helen Tworikov: I just came back from Nepal. I was with my teacher, Mingyur Rinpoche, in Kathmandu, and I was at his monastery and there was a special ceremony going on. You go into this huge shrine room. The drama is absolutely extraordinary. It's nothing but high, high, high drama, intended as a transformative experience, but very intensely dramatic.

James Shaheen: I'd advise our listeners, if they're interested in reading more about this, Anne Klein has written on this extensively for *Tricycle*, so if you go to our site and search for “Anne Klein ritual,” you'll get a sense of what Helen's talking about. So, more recently, you helped Mingyur Rinpoche with his book, *In Love with the World: A Monk's Journey through the Bardos of Living and Dying*. Could you tell us more about your experience working with the bardo teachings? What was it like learning to die every day?

Helen Tworikov: Well, you're asking me at an extremely fraught moment because I have spent the last week in a hospice ward about three blocks from here with my brother-in-law, who's very slowly, but very surely, dying. In some ways, I feel that the mystery of life and the mystery of death, the mystery of dying is so profound that any reference to preparation for dying somehow feels absorbed by the mystery. Preparing to die, which is a very big part of the Tibetan teachings, makes so much sense. And at a certain point it just all falls apart. So that's sort of where I am right now, but I do feel very grateful for working on that book with Mingyur Rinpoche as I feel that I'm able to maintain a steadiness in the midst of what's going on for myself and especially for the rest of my family. That has been very helpful to me and to them, perhaps.

James Shaheen: Along those lines, you explore what you call the bardo of old age, not necessarily dying, but the bardo of old age. So how has growing older changed your relationship to the bardo practices?



Helen Tworikov: The bardo principle is based on impermanence and change. And of course, that's happening every single second. It cannot not happen. So all we're really talking about is the recognition of it happening. It's happening. Whether you recognize it or you don't recognize it, it's still happening. So the bardo of aging, or studying the bardos at all, definitely increases the recognition. So you become more sensitized, you become more aware. Certainly if, as many of you already know, if you're sitting by the bedside of somebody who's dying, the sense of change, of impermanence, is pretty intense. I think that intensity, I think that recognition can be very helpful in whatever you're doing and whatever stage of your life that you're in. Again, when it comes to is, is this a preparation for dying? That, I don't know. I don't think I'm going to know that. I like to think that maybe my own death will not be as horrific as some deaths I've heard about, but maybe it won't. I don't know.

James Shaheen: I guess we really don't know. All we know is that we will die, right? You say that Suzuki Roshi's answer to the question, “Why do we meditate,” was in order to enjoy old age. So how are you enjoying old age?

Helen Tworikov: I think a lot of the things that beset me as a younger person just dissolved. Whatever that was, anxieties about my looks, my vanity, wanting people to like me, wanting to be successful in some terms, I don't have any of that left. I think a lot of things that made me anxious when I was younger, now, so what? So what?

James Shaheen: So we can end with, “So what?”

Helen Tworikov: Yeah, so what?

James Shaheen: But when you think back to that young girl or the young woman who saw Quang Duc, and all of a sudden you're sitting here with all of this behind you, does it strike you as extraordinary, this life?



Helen Tworikov: Just absolutely extraordinary for many different reasons, but mostly because I really feel that anyone who has encountered the dharma is the most privileged person in the world, and that's more true as the world looks bleaker and bleaker to me. I think we're living through pretty bleak times, and I don't think they're going to get better in the immediate future, but to have the dharma just strikes me as being so extraordinary. I mean, what an extraordinary privilege to know that you have within you a refuge that nobody can ever touch. Nobody can take it away from you. It doesn't matter how bad things get. It doesn't matter the politics, the warfare, the AI, the this, the that. That we have something inside that is really true refuge, to have that in my life makes my life extraordinary.

James Shaheen: Well, Helen, I have to thank you for introducing me to the dharma thirty years ago and thank you for hiring me.

Helen Tworikov: I'm glad I did.

James Shaheen: Helen, it's been a great pleasure. Thanks so much for joining. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *Lotus Girl*, available now. Thanks again, Helen.

Helen Tworikov: Thank you, James.

James Shaheen: You've been listening to *Tricycle Talks* with Helen Tworikov. To read an excerpt from Helen's book, visit tricycle.org/magazine. Tricycle is a nonprofit educational organization dedicated to making Buddhist teachings and practices broadly available, and we are pleased to offer our podcasts freely. If you would like to support the podcast, please consider subscribing to Tricycle or making a donation at tricycle.org/donate. We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at feedback@tricycle.org to let us know what you think. If you enjoyed this episode, please consider leaving a review on Apple Podcasts. To keep up with the show, you can follow *Tricycle Talks* wherever you listen to podcasts. *Tricycle Talks* is

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