

Life As It Is

“Calling on Our Ancestors”

Episode #31 with Kaira Jewel Lingo

May 15, 2024



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Kaira Jewel Lingo: We can't be without our ancestors, and so mindfulness is really honoring where we come from, one of the definitions of mindfulness being to remember. We can't be who we are without remembering who we come from, where we come from, and mindfulness is about recognizing and being present with what's in this moment. And if we really open up deeply to what's right in this moment, it's also our ancestors. Our ancestors are present in us in every moment. Touching the present means to touch our ancestors.

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 Kaira Jewel Lingo. Kaira Jewel is a dharma teacher in the Plum Village Zen tradition and in the Vipassana tradition, and her teaching weaves together embodied mindfulness practice and social justice. In her new book, *Healing Our Way Home: Black Buddhist Teachings on Ancestors, Joy, and Liberation*, which she co-wrote with Valerie Brown and Marisela Gomez, she reflects on her own spiritual journey and explores how mindfulness can support us in coming home to ourselves. In our conversation with Kaira Jewel, we talk about what led her to ordain as a nun at the age of 25, how we can learn to love ourselves when we feel like we don't deserve love, the power of calling on our ancestors, and what the concept of store consciousness can teach us about processing inherited grief and trauma. Plus, Kaira Jewel leads us in a guided meditation. So here's our conversation with Kaira Jewel Lingo.

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

Kaira Jewel Lingo: Great to be with you both as well.

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Sharon Salzberg: Hi.

James Shaheen: So Kaira Jewel, we're here to talk about your new book, *Healing Our Way Home: Black Buddhist Teachings on Ancestors, Joy, and Liberation*, which you co-wrote with Valerie Brown and Marisela Gomez. To start, can you tell us a bit about the book and what inspired you to write it? In particular, what made you decide to write the book collectively?

Kaira Jewel Lingo: Sure. So it was Valerie who approached Marisela and me at a mindfulness and education conference. We were all friends already, and she said, “We really need to write a book. We need to write about our experiences in the Plum Village tradition and as Black women.” And so we thought, OK. We actually looked to the book, *Radical Dharma*, by angel Kyodo Williams, Lama Rod Owens, and Jasmine Syedullah as a kind of model because we knew that's how they created that book, holding up together in a place and recording conversations, and then those became chapters. So we said, Why don't we try that, where we just have some Zoom calls because we were all in different places and each conversation basically became a chapter. And we just, we thought, What do we really want to hear about from each other? What do we want each other to speak to? So we would choose one sort of central question for each conversation. And that would become the focus of that call and that chapter.

James Shaheen: Well, one of the themes of the book is the importance of spiritual friendship, and it seems like writing the book was itself an act of friendship. So can you say more about how writing functioned as a practice of friendship and solidarity?

Kaira Jewel Lingo: Sure, and it was more talking than it was writing. It's really more the writing and editing came at the end, but really the exchanges were verbal. And what I really realized as I would read through the transcripts and begin to edit my portions was so much of what I shared, it wouldn't have been born without the other two sharing what they shared and inspiring me to excavate stories of my life. It's like a stool with three legs. If you remove one, the stool can't stand. And it felt like that. They were really, each thing that came up was born from

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the collective. Marisela spoke about her early Catholic upbringing, and then Valerie spoke about her early Catholic upbringing, and then I was remembering my early Catholic upbringing. There were things that were stimulated in my memory about the things that really influenced me and made me who I am today that came because of the reflection from the two of them, and we really held each other.

A lot of the things we've shared, we haven't shared before in any other place. So we were midwifing each other in a sense to all with the purpose of helping to make the dharma more accessible to more folks. And so telling our story and relying on each other to do that was a really big part of realizing that aspiration.

James Shaheen: You mention the three legs of the stool, the three authors of this book, and the conversational tone is really wonderful. But you also invoke the three pillars of Buddhist practice, and you link them to ancestry, joy, and liberation, respectively. So can you walk us through these pillars? How do you view the connections between mindfulness and ancestry, concentration and joy, and wisdom and liberation?

Kaira Jewel Lingo: We can't be without our ancestors, our spiritual ancestors, blood ancestors, , and so mindfulness is really honoring where we come from, one of the definitions of mindfulness being to remember. We can't be who we are without remembering who we come from, where we come from, and mindfulness is about recognizing and being present with what's in this moment. And if we really open up deeply to what's right in this moment, it's also our ancestors. We couldn't be here without our ancestors. Our ancestors are present in us in every moment. Touching the present means to touch our ancestors.

And then concentration and joy. Concentration helps us to be with what's arising in a deeper and deeper way. And when we clear out the cobwebs and the various distractions that prevent us from being in touch with life as it really is, that is joyful. It can really allow us to be in touch

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with life. So when we concentrate, when we tune out the static of the things we get caught in, that is an occasion for joy. It's a chance to experience freshness, to experience aliveness.

And then wisdom and liberation are not far from each other. As we awaken to the wisdom inside of us, we become more and more free. We have more and more spaciousness, more and more peace, because we're in touch with reality as it is.

Sharon Salzberg: So you mentioned that in writing the book, you revisited your spiritual background. You grew up in a residential spiritual community in Chicago that you described as a quasi-monastic environment. So could you tell us a little bit more about your religious upbringing? How did it inform your understanding of home and community?

Kaira Jewel Lingo: Sure. So this was a community that was set up with the intention to renew the church. It came out of a world council of religions gathering in the 1950s, but it really started to take shape in the 1960s. It was really wanting to take down the structures of hierarchy in Christian communities and create an opportunity for people to really engage in all the potentialities and possibilities of a very radical Jesus. I called it quasi-monastic because people took vows of poverty and obedience, but not chastity, because they could get married and have children. But it was very simple living. We lived on donations and got stipends. We lived in an eight-story insurance building on the north side of Chicago, near Lake Michigan. And it was kibbutz-like also, where the kids were cared for communally by a few adults. We had one night a week where we'd have family night and we'd eat dinner with our parents. Otherwise, all the meals were with the other kids, and then we'd go off to school. We went to public school, and we'd come home and there would be more learning and curriculum for us to engage in with singing and stories and watching cartoons, regular things, but also we'd wake up at five in the morning or something like that to go down to our daily office. So it was this daily practice of prayer and singing and chanting. And I remember as a young child just feeling the spiritual support of that time. I don't remember the words that we said, I don't remember the songs, but I

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remember there was incense, it was dark, and I remember it being prayerful and that I liked that. There was something mysterious and beautiful about this daily time of prayer.

So this community did human development projects all around the world. At one point there were human development projects in every time zone. So they would go to a village or to a town or to an inner city or to a Native American reservation and hold a town meeting where everyone was invited, and they were invited to articulate what it was that they felt could be improved, what did they really want to manifest in their community. And then the people from the Order Ecumenical would guide them through a several-day process of strategic planning to figure out how to implement that, whether it was an irrigation system or building a bridge or a road or a preschool or a women's cooperative. They would support the people in that place to build that and to realize what they wanted. So we lived for four years in Nairobi with my family as part of this larger community in a slum at the edge of Nairobi. I remember feeling as a young child that I had a purpose, that I was here for a reason, and it wasn't about making money and consuming. It was about seeing myself as a global citizen, that everyone mattered, and that my life should be about the good of the whole, something like that, sort of deeply embedded in me.

Sharon Salzberg: That's beautiful. And what brought you to Buddhism?

Kaira Jewel Lingo: So I went to college and enjoyed school. I did my master's and I was thinking of doing a PhD, and Ram Dass came to my school and he gave a talk. And he said, “You learn a lot here, but you don't learn how to be happy.” And that really rang true to me because I did a lot of great studying around deconstructing modern society and some of the myths of how society had to work, but those didn't include a spiritual framework. And I really missed that. I thought, “I'm getting great ways of looking at the world more deeply, but not in a spiritual way.” And I really did feel like my personal suffering wasn't addressed in my education. Why did I suffer? Why did I create suffering for others? And so I thought, I want to learn how to be happy. And a friend of mine told me—I had been doing meditation in the yogic tradition throughout college. I would go up to Mount Madonna and learn from Baba Hari Dass and do

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yoga and meditation. But this friend of mine said, “Me and my girlfriend are going to Plum Village this summer. Maybe you should come.” And he had loaned me some books by Thich Nhat Hanh. So I wanted to learn how to be happy. I said, “I’m going to take a year to try to find a spiritual teacher in the community.” So I was in India for three months, and I came to Europe to go to the summer retreat at Plum Village. And as soon as I saw Thich Nhat Hanh, I thought, “This is my teacher and this is the community.” I wasn’t looking for Buddhism; I just wanted to learn how to be happy. And I did learn a lot about that.

Sharon Salzberg: I really resonate with that experience. I feel like with several teachers, as soon as I saw them, I thought, “Oh, here you are.” So can you describe that experience a little bit more for us?

Kaira Jewel Lingo: So when I was in India, this was in 1997. I had been reading Thay’s book, *Old Path, White Clouds*, this really long book about the life of the Buddha. It’s like a novel, and I just fell in love with it. It was so interesting to me, and I really knew nothing about Buddhism. And so it was like a very beautiful way to travel right in the footsteps of the Buddha, and I was there in some of these places visiting Varanasi, so it was really making sense also with some of the places that I was getting to visit. And so I was getting a sense already of what the Buddha’s path meant and how beautiful the Buddha’s life was and how beautiful, how poetically Thay had relayed it as if the Buddha were this close friend. That’s how it felt, the way he described his life and the things he went through. So I was primed pretty well by the time I got to Plum Village a few months later.

I had signed up for the month. And then when I got to the registration table, I said, “Can you change that to two weeks?” because I just thought, “What if I don’t like it?” So I changed my registration, but then the next day or so we had our first dharma talk and I just saw Thay come into the hall, and he moved so gracefully. I just hadn’t seen anyone with that kind of presence, and it was so powerful. I just had this voice in me that said, “This is my teacher. This is the person.” Just listening to his teachings, everything rang true and felt very much like exactly what

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I had been looking for. And the community also felt very sincere, very true to Thay's teachings, very many noble people with a lot of integrity.

I was 23, but it still felt like there were lots of layers that had to come off. And I found myself basically crying every day for that first month, even as I found myself happier than I'd ever been because everyone was so authentic with each other. I didn't have to have this face, like a screen up pretending to be something that I wasn't.

Sharon Salzberg: So I'm curious about when you went back to the registration table and said, “Can we change that back to a month, please?”

Kaira Jewel Lingo: Yes. I'm sure they had lots of experience of people waffling like that. It's really funny.

Sharon Salzberg: You also wrote that at age 11 you decided you wanted to be a nun one day, and 14 years later you became ordained. So I'm wondering what drew you to monastic life.

Kaira Jewel Lingo: It's funny, when you say something when you're 11, right? I was with my friends at this Catholic school that I was at in Nairobi, which was taught by the nuns. And I think it was so impressive for girls to see women making that choice. That was quite a powerful choice. And I don't know what was happening in me when we both said that, but we both said, “Oh, I want to be a nun when I grow up.” And I forgot all about that. And then I fell so in love with Plum Village that not only did I stay a little longer than two weeks, I canceled the rest of my trip around Europe and I spent four months in Plum Village. So I was like, this is really where it's at. I don't need to go around. I need to go within. And at the end of that four months, I felt more and more like, this is so important to me, just this mind training. And I felt like I would never get to the end of what I needed to learn. And I thought, Why don't I just do this all the time instead of working in order to come on retreat? Why don't I just always be on retreat? And so I went home for a year and worked and I went back to Plum Village and lived in Plum Village for a year

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as a lay person, just to really test it out, and I still really wanted that. So about two years later, I did ordain when I was 25.

James Shaheen: Coming up, Kaira Jewel talks about the power of calling on our ancestors, the role of joy on the path to awakening, and what Buddhist psychology has taught her about working with anger.

James Shaheen: Now, let's get back to our conversation with Kaira Jewel Lingo.

James Shaheen: Kaira Jewel, when you were a nun, you helped organize the largest convert Buddhist retreat for BIPOC in the West in 2004, and it drew over 400 people. Can you tell us more about your work building up BIPOC Buddhist communities and spaces of healing?

Kaira Jewel Lingo: You know, as we would come on retreat with Thay to the US and do retreats for a thousand people here or two thousand people there, it was very obvious when we come up on stage to chant at the beginning of a talk, looking out into the audience, that it was not a diverse group of people that were coming on these retreats. They were a week long, and they required resources and a certain kind of exposure. So it was mostly white, mostly middle class. We did have dharma sharing groups for people of color within these larger retreats. And it was very powerful, profound, and meaningful. That's where I met Valerie Brown was in one of these group discussions on a big retreat. And we were always talking about how can we help more people of color access these teachings because they're so transformative and so helpful. And so Larry Ward, a Black dharma teacher was part of the community that I grew up in as well, the Christian community, but he found his way to Plum Village many years before I did and had been ordained with his wife as a dharma teacher. He and I approached Thich Nhat Hanh when we were on tour with him in China in 2003, and we said, “Thay, would you be willing to offer a retreat for people of color?” And Thay looked down at his skin, and he pointed to his skin and he said, “Yes, I'm also a person of color.” And so the next year he came to Deer Park, he did a three-month retreat at Deer Park, the rains retreat, a kind of historic time where all the monastics

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from all the different centers sat a three-month rains retreat all together. It was about, I don't know, 600 monastics, and we decided to schedule this retreat at the end of that three-month rains retreat. This was in 2000, and we were putting up flyers in Harlem and putting out ads in LA newspapers. I didn't know anything about how to advertise for things like this, but we were just sending the word out to anyone, anywhere. And I thought we would get 75 people. I thought that would be great if we got 75 people. When we ended up with 400, I thought, “Whoa, this is incredible. This shows you what a need there is for this.” And that Thay was offering this just for folks with that experience, with that kind of suffering, with that kind of joy, with that kind of resilience, coming from those experiences, it was so profound. And the teachings he gave were so deeply responsive to what he understood to be the needs and the concerns of BIPOC people. He was so supportive, and I think people on that retreat felt so met. They felt so seen. And of course, Thay was also saying, “I see your suffering because I have also experienced racial discrimination and racism.” And he was also saying, “This doesn't need to limit you. These experiences don't need to define you.” He was really offering liberation, a path of freedom, but he was not saying that in a spiritual bypassing way of “Just get over it.” He was saying the historical realm, the historical dimension exists, and there's real suffering there, but the ultimate dimension exists also. He was inviting people to walk through the historical dimension in order to arrive at the ultimate dimension, not bypass the historical to get there. So people really got that. I think they really heard, they felt their suffering was deeply honored, and then they could be invited to live beyond that experience. And it was extremely joyful, that retreat. It was one of the most joyful retreats. We always end our retreats in the Plum Village tradition with a be-in, a kind of celebrative evening. And it was the most incredible evening with Korean drumming and African American Briar Rabbit stories and native chant and just incredible poetry, spoken word, laughter, tears, ceremony. I think all of us, all the monastics, everyone was like, wow, when we create a space like this, so much healing, so much transformation can happen because this experience is really being honored. It's lovely to talk about it because this year is the 20th

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anniversary of that retreat, and Deer Park is doing another retreat in honor of that very first BIPOC retreat.

James Shaheen: You know, you mentioned joy, and you describe liberation as deeply intertwined with joy. You say that joy is a powerful foundation from which you can look deeply at the roots of the pain so we can transform this suffering together without overwhelm. So could you say more about the role of joy on the path to awakening?

Kaira Jewel Lingo: Sure. I love the Buddhist psychology teachings that our minds are organic or the neuroscience perspective that our brains are plastic, that they are capable of changing, and whatever we cultivate in our mind is what grows. And so we know that our evolutionary tendency is to be way more focused on what's painful and negative out of the need for survival to avoid danger, but it means that the beautiful, nourishing, incredible things that are also a part of human life sometimes don't get attended to the way that they need to be. And mind training, this path of really understanding our minds, it teaches us that if we can cultivate joy as a practice, if we can learn to orient to joy, to see all the things that are there, inviting us to treasure them, these things, what They would often call the miracles of life, we can bring more balance to our psyche. We can have more of a buffer so that when the inevitable challenges and difficulties of life arrive, we have a reservoir because we've been nourishing the good, we've been training our minds to see what is beautiful. When difficulties arise, we don't get bowled over as we would if we hadn't been doing that kind of cultivation.

And when we do orient to joy, Marisela tells this story, I love it, she looks for hearts wherever she goes. As she's walking through Baltimore, if she sees a puddle in the shape of a heart, she takes that in. If she sees a cloud in the shape of a heart, she takes that in. If she sees a pebble, she might pick up a pebble if it's in the shape of a heart. And I love that, that she is someone who looks for the shape of a heart in a tree, in a potato sometimes somehow shaped like a heart. You could just see that as just like a weird shape. You could also have the joy of seeing, “Oh, look, here's a potato in the shape of a heart.” And so when we orient towards that way of looking, life

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becomes more joyful. Life becomes more miraculous, more worth living. And so we actually have more energy to then transform the pain and the wounds and the suffering, because we know that life isn't only those things because we're actively training ourselves always to see the whole picture.

It's not that orienting to joy means we don't look at our suffering or we ignore the painful things. It's the opposite. When we really train ourselves to see the good, we can actually see the difficulty more clearly because we're not going into a reactive, habitual avoidance of what's painful. The more we train to see the good, the more actually we can be willing to be with what's painful, what's difficult, because we know that's not all there is. We have this inner fortitude that says, “Yeah, OK, life is hard. Life can be difficult sometimes. And I can also be with that because I know how to also be with the beauty.” And I would say the same is true when, in the other way, when we are able to be very much with our suffering, we can experience more joy. They really seed into each other.

Sharon Salzberg: Another aspect of working with painful situations and difficult emotions is processing intergenerational trauma. I wonder if you could speak some about things you've learned in terms of working with inherited grief and trauma.

Kaira Jewel Lingo: So back to the ancestors that we talked about in the beginning, because we aren't separate from our ancestors and the suffering that they have experienced. If they didn't know how to transform it, it has been passed on to us. Part of this path of really getting to know ourselves and understand ourselves is getting to know and understand the people who made up who we are, which are parents, grandparents, those who raised us, and understanding what their suffering was. And when we can see what they had to endure, or even sometimes all we can do is imagine, we can appreciate both their strength, their resilience, their tenacity, but also their suffering, their pain, and how that gets passed on. And so we talk about this in the book, all of us from our different family lines of how a big part of each of our healing was learning to recognize what's ours as an individual and what's our families. Part of the discussion, part of what came

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that I don't know if it would have come up if I had just been reflecting on this on my own, was hearing them talk about their families, looking at my family and realizing that probably one of the reasons why there was considerable amount of harsh speech in the Black women in my family was because of this very, very harsh world that they were living in and this sense of toughening up the children to be able to face this harshness, honoring the complexity of that and touching the compassion of how much pain that must have come from to pass on that way of speech, and also very much being in touch with just how much our ancestors were able to hold, to be able to pass on all the good that they passed on in spite of all the things they were dealing with in terms of poverty and racial terrorism.

My great-grandmother, I think I share in the book, she just had so much joy, so much lightness, so much kindness and friendliness, even as her life had been so hard. She buried five of her six children and most of them as adults, but she outlived all of them, except my grandmother, and had a very hard life on so many levels, but she had this inner buoyancy that she also transmitted, that the ancestors that came through her somehow transmitted. Along with all the painful things, just reflecting on how given so much hardship, so many difficult circumstances, what our ancestors did pass on is pretty incredible.

James Shaheen: Kaira Jewel, you also explore the importance of collective awakening and transforming our store consciousness in the context of inherited grief and trauma. So first, what is store consciousness? And how can we transform harmful seeds within it so as to reduce further harm to ourselves and others?

Kaira Jewel Lingo: Store consciousness is a teaching from Buddhist psychology that there are different layers of our consciousness. There's our conscious mind, which is called mind consciousness, and store consciousness is like our unconscious mind, which holds the seeds of all of our potential mind states, all our potential mental formations. In store consciousness, there are, depending on the school of Buddhism, fifty-one or fifty-two kinds of seeds, kinds of mental formation possibilities. There are wholesome ones like mindfulness, compassion, joy,

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equanimity; there are unwholesome ones like greed, hatred, violence, confusion, doubt; and then there are some that are indeterminate that depend on the circumstance whether they're wholesome or unwholesome. And so the practice is to be aware of what's arising from store consciousness into mind consciousness as soon as possible so that as, for instance, anger might arise if we get cut off in traffic or someone says something.

If we notice anger arising before that difficult incident happened, that anger was asleep in the form of the seed in our store consciousness. Then that thing happens, and anger now arises into mind consciousness. Now it's an active energy. It's awake. It affects our body, it affects our heart rate, it affects our digestion, everything. The first stimulus is not up to us, but the next thing that happens is up to us. Do we feed that seed? Do we keep anger continuing in our mind? Or do we not feed that seed? And the longer anger is arising in our mind, the stronger it's getting at its root, at the seed level in store consciousness. So if we give it twenty minutes of air time by ruminating on that experience, planning what we're going to do in retaliation, telling other people how horrible that person is, that's twenty minutes of feeding anger. And so the seed of anger gets twenty minutes of food and it's stronger, so the next time a difficult experience like that arises, we will get angry faster. Our anger will be more intense and it will last longer.

It's so important to take care of the quality of the seeds in our store consciousness to not let the unwholesome seeds get a lot of airtime and let the wholesome seeds get a lot of airtime. Like we were speaking before about the importance of joy, how healing, nourishing joy can be. It's not that we avoid suffering or we suppress suffering. It's just that we accompany suffering with mindfulness. So if anger arises, right away, we breathe and we know anger is arising so that anger doesn't take control of the situation. We can let anger be there, but mindfulness is also there.

We can think of our suffering as like a crying child. Thich Nhat Hanh would often give this example. Our mindfulness is like a caring caretaker, an adult who picks up that child and holds the child and calms and soothes the child until we can figure out what's going on. They calm

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down enough that we can resolve the issue. And so mindfulness turns toward the pain and says, I'm here for you. And, gonna take good care of you. We don't abandon that experience by watching a movie or shopping or whatever. We turn towards it, but we also don't let it take over. We don't let it explode. We have this middle path. And when we hold a difficult emotion with mindfulness, it actually gets smaller at the root. When it has a bath of mindfulness, when it gets massaged by caring, loving presence, it weakens in store consciousness. So then the next time we're exposed to something irritating or difficult, anger is slower to arise. It's less intense, and it doesn't last as long. So turning towards our difficulty with kindness, with friendliness, with the awakened presence actually helps transform the seeds in our store consciousness to work with our goal of awakening, of liberation, rather than working against us by pulling us into a lot of painful mind states.

We can have the pain. The pain is not the problem. It's what we do with the pain. And that's how those seeds change. And we all know people ourselves, or we know of people who the same exact thing happens to one person and they react completely differently from another person who experiences the same exact thing. And that's because the seeds in their consciousness are different. There are people who remain peaceful or grounded even in the midst of really horrible things that happen to them. And that's because of the seeds that are strong in their store consciousness. And then there are people where the slightest thing and they're in a rage. And that's because of the size and the quality of the seeds in their store consciousness. That's why it is so important that we pay attention to what we are cultivating and how we take care of what arises.

Sharon Salzberg: A question you raise is what it means to love and care for yourself when you're conditioned to feel like you don't deserve it, which I find a really fascinating question, and actually, of course, as you know, very widespread. So what do you think about this question of cultivating self-love and compassion?

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Kaira Jewel Lingo: I really think when I think about being on this path of spiritual practice, I feel one of the biggest gifts it's given me is I'm becoming a better friend to myself. And I have to thank you, Sharon. I actually read your book with my mom. After I came back from Plum Village the first time, I went to live with my mom in Denver, and every night we read a little bit of your book before going to bed.

Sharon Salzberg: Oh, that's so lovely. Thank you.

Kaira Jewel Lingo: I think it was the book on faith. Anyway, it was such a wonderful experience, but all of the many teachers I've had, in addition to Thay, all the many teachings have been to me about learning to take good care of myself, to befriend myself, to be honest with myself, and this deepening relationship with myself, is where the feeling that I am worth taking care of myself comes from. And it's surprising to me that, as long as I've been practicing, there are still some very deeply rooted beliefs about how I should prioritize some other people or other needs above my own. Maybe that was some of the shadow side of being raised in a quasi-monastic community so focused on service. And then to see all these ways in which I don't take care of myself because of this orientation to keeping everyone else happy or prioritizing other people's needs.

Therapy is really helpful. Dharma is really helpful. My relationships with people who see me clearly and can show me things about myself, that's really helpful to just see, actually, if I don't take care of myself, I'm not going to be able to show up the way I want to show up for other people. So it's actually that my needs and other people's needs aren't really that separate.

So I think there's this deepening of friendship but also deepening of seeing just how deep this goes as a woman, as a BIPOC person, as just the kind of history that I really need to be committed to what is really true about me and my needs and not make light of those. So that's a lot of that has happened, and a lot more can happen. So yeah, it's a journey.

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May 15, 2024



Sharon Salzberg: That's beautiful. I have one last question, especially in this era where people talk so much about loneliness and epidemics of loneliness. You've said that your teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, taught you to call upon the Buddha and the ancestors for support when you felt like you were at your limits. I'm wondering if you can tell us about that practice.

Kaira Jewel Lingo: You know, They really emphasized how the Buddha is in each of us, that the Buddha and all of us as his students are not separate that we can access. Going back to the seeds, we all have a seed of the Buddha in our consciousness. So what's beautiful about this kind of metaphor of the store consciousness is we all have all the seeds, and those seeds never go away. So the seed of the Buddha never goes away. Even if we do terrible things with our life, the seed of the Buddha is still there down in store consciousness. It may be very thirsty for nourishment, but it's there. And so if the seed of awakening is always in our store consciousness, that means a buddhanature is always there. We are Buddha. We are a continuation of the Buddha, and it's just a matter of how much time we spend on that channel. But the channel is there, that's not a question. And nurturing the capacity to manifest is what the whole path is about.

They would tell these lovely stories of how he would get into difficult situations, like in Korea, where just so many photographers were coming at him and he had to lead a walking meditation. And he was like, “I don't know how to do that.” It didn't seem like there was a way. And he said, “Buddha, you're there. So you make this happen.” So he said the way opened, and he was able to lead the walk by calling on the Buddha inside. “Let the Buddha walk,” he would say. So when things just don't seem like you have a way to do it, you yourself, you ask the Buddha to do it for you. And we can ask the ancestors as well to support us. If we know that we are all of the wisdom, all of the strength, all of the clarity of our ancestors that have gone before us, when we get into difficult situations, we can call upon them. We can call upon our spiritual ancestors, call upon our family line, and who knows how they may show up, how they may give us strength that we didn't know we had. They may make things possible for us that we of our own selves wouldn't be able to do.

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It's really about getting out of the way. When we think things are so hard, we can actually get stuck in that thinking it's so hard, and we make it a selfing moment where this is about me and things are so hard and I don't know what to do. But if we just get out of the way and say, “OK, I can't figure this out, but I know there are capacities in me, beyond me that can come through me,” that can help shift this situation. So then it's not about us.

One of the things I love in this description of ancestors and future generations is we think of ourselves as a stream. Our ancestors are upstream flowing into the present stream that we are, and who we are becomes the downstream, which is our descendants, whether they're biological or spiritual or in our community, the people we influence, the people we support. They become the stream downstream, but it's all one stream. And so when things are difficult, we don't have to think of ourselves as alone and having to figure out the solution by ourselves. We just let the stream that's already here, let the Buddha that's already here, that's always here in our consciousness, let the ancestors that are always supporting us, let them flow through and show us what to do to make a way.

And so it's really about not seeing ourselves as separate and cut off and alone, but that we have this incredible inheritance. Every human being has an incredible inheritance of their ancestors, and we can always call upon that to come through us and shift. More than anything, it's a shift in our perspective of what we're up against.

James Shaheen: Kaira Jewel Lingo, thanks so much for joining. It's been a pleasure. Anything else you'd like to say?

Kaira Jewel Lingo: I would love to just let people know about a new project that my partner and I are engaged in. We've been given a monastery in upstate New York.

Sharon Salzberg: Wow.

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Kaira Jewel Lingo: Yeah, it was a Benedictine monk, Brother Victor, who lived there for forty years. We've been given it, and we want to start a contemplative center for engaged spirituality. We're calling it the Beloved Community of Engaged Spirituality, bringing Christian and Buddhist practice together. My partner is an Episcopal priest. If anyone listening has curiosity or interest in this, go to my website or stay in touch with me at kairajewel.com.

James Shaheen: OK, that sounds like it's worth a visit. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *Healing Our Way Home*, available now. We like to close these podcasts with a short guided meditation. This time, I'll hand it over to Kaira Jewel.

Kaira Jewel Lingo: Thank you. So I haven't prepared a meditation, so I'm going to do what we were just talking about and let the Buddha come up with our meditation improvisationally. So just for a few minutes, we can come into whatever position is comfortable, letting the body come into rest, taking a few deeper breaths, and with each exhale, allowing tension to soften throughout the body, reassuring ourselves that we are right where we need to be. You don't have to be anywhere else. You don't have to do anything else than what we're doing. You don't have to become anyone else than who we are right now. Opening with this moment, with this body, just as it is. Releasing tension, offering ourselves our true presence, our full presence, to whatever extent we can, and I'll invite us to practice with a kind of mantra or exercise that Thich Nhat Hanh would offer.

As we breathe in, we can reflect that the Buddha is in me, and as we breathe out, the Buddha is in me, awakening, wisdom, joy, those potentials are in me. I have confidence. I give them the time and space to grow, to reveal themselves. I trust that they're there. Beauty, goodness, truth is in me. Breathing in, I have confidence. Breathing out, whatever quality that you feel is important for you now. Maybe patience or compassion or forgiveness. Patience is in me. Breathing in, I have confidence. Breathing out. And for the last moment of this practice, just noticing the

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resonance that's here as you engage with this practice. What do you notice in your heart, mind, in your body? We'll close our practice there. Thank you.

James Shaheen: Thank you, Kaira Jewel. Thank you, Sharon.

Kaira Jewel Lingo: Thank you very much. Thank you for the very thoughtful questions.

James Shaheen: You've been listening to *Life As It Is* with Kaira Jewel Lingo. To read an excerpt from her new book, visit tricycle.org. Tricycle is a nonprofit educational organization dedicated to making Buddhist teachings and practices broadly available, and we are pleased to offer our podcasts freely. If you would like to support the podcast, please consider subscribing to Tricycle or making a donation at tricycle.org/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* and *Life As It Is* are produced by Sarah Fleming and The Podglomerate. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!