

Tricycle Talks
“Warrior Zen”
Episode #105 with Cristina Moon
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Cristina Moon: I think more than anything, I wrote *Three Years on the Great Mountain* because I wanted people to know not necessarily that Chozen-ji exists and that this specific way of training exists but that this kind of approach to life and Zen and Buddhism and one's self-development is possible. There is just such a diversity of traditions that are out there, and what I happened to find at the back of a valley in Hawaii was the one that was unmistakably for me and my spiritual home. I just wanted people to have the sense that they could go search for it and find something that was also theirs.

James Shaheen: Hello, and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I'm James Shaheen, and you just heard Cristina Moon. Cristina is a Zen priest based at Chozen-ji, a Rinzai Zen temple and martial arts dojo in Honolulu. Her new book, *Three Years on the Great Mountain: A Memoir of Zen and Fearlessness*, follows her first three years at Chozen-ji as she learns ferocity and grace through swordsmanship, ceramics, and the rigors of all-night training. In my conversation with Cristina, we talk about the importance of learning to face challenges directly, why the highest directive of a Zen priest is to give courage and take away fear, and how she's learning to take herself less seriously while remaining entirely sincere. So here's my conversation with Cristina Moon.

James Shaheen: So I'm here with Reverend Cristina Moon. Hi, Cristina. It's great to be with you.

Cristina Moon: Thank you so much for having me, James.

James Shaheen: Oh, it's a pleasure. So Cristina, we're here to talk about your new book, *Three Years on the Great Mountain: A Memoir of Zen and Fearlessness*. But first I'd like to ask you a bit about your background. How were you exposed to Buddhism?



Cristina Moon: The very first exposure I had to Buddhism was through my grandparents on my mother's side, who were both in Korea, and quite a few of the things that I encountered when I would go to visit them I actually didn't recognize as Buddhist at first, and I don't know that I could even specifically point to them today, but knowing that was their religion and their spiritual practice. I understand now that it was not just Korean—I thought it was just culturally Korean—but actually Buddhist. But I do write about in my book how I was introduced a couple of different times through Goenka Vipassana and then the very first time through my ninth grade biology teacher, Mike Brown, up in the Berkshires.

James Shaheen: Oh, really, he was a Buddhist?

Cristina Moon: He was a Soto Zen Buddhist, and when I was 13 years old, he gave me a copy of Shinryu Suzuki's *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, which I've tried to read as an adult and I still can't understand.

James Shaheen: Oh no, I don't like to hear that because somebody who asked what a good beginner's book was, I gave it to him. So we'll see what happens to him. So at the age of 26, you sat your first ten-day silent meditation retreat to prepare for possibilities in Burma. Can you say more about what brought you to that retreat and what it was that you were preparing for?

Cristina Moon: From my first year in college, I'd been really active in the Free Burma movement, working with exiles and dissidents and refugees and former political prisoners from Burma or Myanmar. In 2006, I was planning to go to Rangoon inside Burma to interview a number of leaders of the democracy movement, all of these dissidents, all of whom had actually spent time as political prisoners at one point or another. When they found out that I was Korean American, so basically that I looked like them and I could pass for Burmese, they became really concerned that in the same way that they lived with the danger of being picked up by the police,



being interrogated, being imprisoned and tortured, they were really concerned that I might face that as well if I was spending time with them.

Very naively, I asked around if there was anything that I could do to prepare for that possibility, and I had two friends who were just the toughest people I had ever met. One had biked by himself across Southeast Asia and been in this Marines youth program, and another one had solo hiked all of the Appalachian Trail. So these were just really tough folks. And out of all of the things that they had done in their lives, they said going to Vipassana retreat was actually both one of the most challenging and one of the most rewarding.

Specifically, they talked about how you do a retreat and you sit there for long periods of time, and they have in Goenka Vipassana these sittings of strong determination where you're not allowed to move for one hour, and how it was just incredibly painful, but at the same time, at the end, they were able to transcend their pain to some degree. So in my remarkably immature 25-year-old mind, I said, ‘Oh, that sounds like a great idea.’”

James Shaheen: Yeah, I did meet and interview Goenka once, but I never sat a retreat with him, but I've heard of those infamous vow sits for an hour without even twitching. One friend of mine said she used to just immediately move to get it over with. So on the retreat, you say that you discovered glimmers of a different way to see the world, and you say that you were confronted with your own narcissism. Can you tell us about that realization?

Cristina Moon: It really surprised me. I was really focused on whatever it was that was happening at that moment. I think it was some physical pain or some discomfort. We had just started doing the body scans after the period of time where you're just focusing on the in- and out-breath below the nostrils. And all of a sudden I had a flashback of the past three years of my life and of one relationship in particular. It was just like watching a documentary on super fast forward because it really did happen in the blink of an eye. I just got this perspective on myself that was very different from how I had understood and rationalized my own behavior and how I



had framed who I was, and it was surprisingly unsavory. I got a sense of myself that felt quite narcissistic, unwilling to take responsibility for the harms I'd caused to other people, projecting and blaming those harms and those hurts to others, making it their fault, and just really looking at the world like through my own solipsistic lens of what I needed and what I wanted first.

That, for me, more so than being able to manage physical pain, which I was able to do, I just realized this was actually the real work of sitting and of Buddhism and Buddhist meditation. So that was actually the most eye-opening aspect of being on that first retreat, and perhaps, like they say, the first cut is the deepest, and it's always because you're not expecting it. So that was really impactful and made a very deep impression on me.

James Shaheen: It's funny how people think when we're on retreat, we're on vacation. When you describe an experience like that, it's real work.

Cristina Moon: Somebody said to me afterwards, “Yeah, that sounds so relaxing.” I just laughed.

James Shaheen: Exactly. Afterwards, I feel pretty relaxed. There are storms that come and go during the retreat itself. Eventually you end up at Chozen-ji, and you describe your arrival there as a homecoming. So what brought you to Chozen-ji? And first of all, tell us where it is.

Cristina Moon: Chozen-ji is a Rinzai Zen temple and martial arts dojo at the back of a valley in Honolulu. Technically, we're within the city limits of Honolulu. We're on the edge of the city, and yet we're surrounded by jungle. It's totally green, and it's very quiet, so you really feel like you're up in the mountains somewhere, but we're only fifteen minutes from an international airport, which is pretty impressive.

Chozen-ji was founded in 1972 by two individuals, Tenshin Tanouye and Omori Sogen. Omori Sogen was actually from Japan and was very high ranking in the Rinzai Zen institution, Rinzai-shu. Tenshin Tanouye was a high school band teacher in the public school system here in



Honolulu but very high ranking in the martial arts. He was a genius in the martial arts, and I say that very sincerely. He had achieved sixth- and seventh-degree black belts in seven different martial arts by the Dai Nippon, or main Japanese school of testing, which, for people who aren't familiar with Japanese martial arts, a person will get maybe sixth- or seventh-degree black belt in one martial art, and it's a lifetime achievement. Another way of thinking about it is what he did is the equivalent of getting seven PhDs in a ten-year span because he did that all between the ages of 22 and 32.

I found Chozen-ji in 2017, or rather it found me. I had heard about it previously, but I was on my own path doing the Vipassana stuff, doing insight meditation. I wasn't particularly interested in Zen and I wasn't looking for it, but at just the right moment in my life, an old acquaintance of mine reappeared and said, “Oh, hey, you remember how I've been training at this Zen temple in Hawaii for the past 15 years? They needed someone to move onto the grounds, and so they asked me and I did and I'm helping out the new abbot and we're trying to get new people to come and experience the training. If you're ever in Hawaii, let me know.” And remarkably, seconds before, I had just finished chatting with someone where I agreed, “OK, great. I'll meet you in Hawaii in January.” At that time I was in California. And so it just seemed to me a no-brainer—I couldn't not go. I had to go and check it out. The synchronicity was just too much in my face. And then I looked at the website, which my friend had recently redone, and it looked so slick compared to any meditation or temple website I've ever seen, and it talked about the martial arts, it talked about Chozen-ji's relationship to the Native Hawaiian community and Native Hawaiian spirituality, and it just felt so compelling. I was captivated pretty immediately. And then, of course, once I got here, it was only a matter of days before I was like, “I'm not leaving. You guys are going to have to drag me out of here.”

James Shaheen: Yeah, it's interesting that you mention the local culture because over time Hawaiian culture began to work its influence on the temple. So could you say more about that?



Cristina Moon: Yeah, Tanouye Roshi, our founder who was local, born and raised in Honolulu, his best friends growing up were Native Hawaiian. He had a really deeply ingrained intuitive understanding of Native Hawaiian understanding and philosophy and culture and cultural practice and spirituality. And then of course, by nature of being a local temple, our membership just reflects Hawaii, so we have people of Japanese heritage, Korean, Chinese, Portuguese, Filipino, and native Hawaiian. One of the wonderful things about Chozen-ji is that in reflecting Hawaii's demographics, it's had its fair share of very educated people, and it's also been a very blue-collar sort of place, and so you really have had a diverse cross section of folks. I will say that the Native Hawaiian culture is a part of it. The way that people tend to describe it here is just local culture. To be a local Hawaii person is to have grown up or to live with all of these different influences melding in one's life, so a fair amount of Japanese martial arts and philosophy and fine arts, Chinese philosophy, Native Hawaiian spirituality, and of course a European influence and American influence as well.

James Shaheen: Chozen-ji sounds very unique in this way. One thing you say is that it incorporates many forms of training, from manual labor to martial arts to ceramics, and in your very first day of training, you went from learning the way of tea to moving heavy rocks in a jumpsuit. Can you say more about how these different aspects of training work together?

Cristina Moon: One of the first things that a Chozen-ji teacher said to me when I arrived, because I had done so much seated meditation, was, “It's easy to stay calm and centered when you're sitting on a cushion and nobody's talking to you and you don't have to do anything. But how does that hold up when you have a sword at your throat? Or when you have a calligraphy brush in your hand?” And he meant that quite literally as someone who trains in kendo, or Japanese sword fighting, and who teaches Japanese calligraphy.

It's a nice shorthand, a way to understand that in order to take the skills of breathing and posture and concentration that we learn in zazen and make those applicable more readily in your everyday life, you have to stress test them. You have to apply them in novel and challenging and



stressful situations. And so moving heavy rocks and doing manual labor is a great one. And it's in particular great Zen training because in essence, you can't think about moving a rock and have it move. You just have to do it.

Tea ceremony is the same but also an interesting counterpoint where the martial arts, the manual labor, there's a certain aspect of intuition and physicality and then just getting out your power, learning how to take out all of your strength and your power without hesitation, without restraint and holding back, but in a way that's totally relaxed. The fine arts and especially something like Chado or the way of tea, which is so physical, has an aspect of that, but the fine arts also really are about refinement, and so you can take that raw material of someone who can really get the power and strength out and then, almost like focusing a laser beam, really refine it so that it can create an equally potent but very different feeling.

We talk about in the martial arts, especially in kendo, how you want to envelop your opponent with your *kiai*, or your energy. And in tea, it can be enveloping people with your *kiai*, but in a totally different way that makes them feel no matter what they were experiencing before they came into the tea room that they feel welcome, warm, calm and relaxed and taken care of more than anything. But it's the same, it's essentially the same mechanism, and it's the same skill and the same raw materials of your breath, your posture, your concentration, and your *kiai*, but just expressed in a more refined way.

James Shaheen: That's an interesting connection you make there. It's the question of refinement of the power or the energy that you're releasing. But you say that many Western dharma centers emphasize practice, and Chozen-ji felt like training to you. So how do you view the distinction between practice and training? And what do you feel like you're training for?

Cristina Moon: I love the use of the word training and in some respects, it is just semantics. And at the same time, it really feels to me like it brings such a different feeling to what I'm doing. I write in my book that I played the piano for twelve years when I was young, and so

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practice to me always evoked memories of practicing the piano. At some point as I got older, there was a lot of creativity, and I describe it as being able to play in the currents of musicality. But most of the time it felt like I was just repetitively practicing one section or scales over and over again.

The word practice had that feeling for me, but I think more the issue that I took with it, once I got some perspective on it, was how the concept of practice and the word practice had been co-opted into a that same dualistic framework and way of seeing the world where it was “me” and “my practice.” And so in that relationship, they're two separate things: there's a me that owns the practice because it's mine. There was the sense of missing the mark. And that often coincided with a certain syncretic spiritual approach of taking a little bit of this and a little bit of that. When we do that, when we cherry-pick different practices, individual practices, or aspects of different traditions, and then we bricolage them together, there is a way in which it can keep us from truly feeling challenged in the ways that are required to uproot the ego. When you truly force yourself to accept or subsume yourself to a tradition in its entirety, oh boy, I mean, it'll get to that part of the attachment and individual agency and all of that stuff really quickly. It's terrain that needs to be navigated skillfully, but at the same time, it's incredibly effective at really getting to the root.

As far as what training means to me, it also just has a sense of urgency because we often understand this word training as we're training for something. And the way I understand it or think about it is I am training to be the best person, the best version of myself that I can be, the most transcendent, to realize my true self. I'm doing that knowing that the worst day of my life and the best day of my life may be in front of me or behind me, and when I'm presented with that moment I want to be the best version of myself that I can be. I think the more esoteric or religious way of talking about it in Zen is preparing for one's own death or preparing to die the Great Death. The way I think about that is simply that we know that we're all going to die. That's something that none of us can avoid. And if that's the one thing that is truly certain for all of us, wouldn't we want to meet that moment with complete resolve without any loose ends? There's a



sense of urgency for me, and not just necessarily being able to meet my own death and be prepared for that moment. One reason that I shy away from that is because it sounds so dramatic, even though it's very mundane and it literally is universal. But I think about being in Hawaii and being at Chozen-ji, I am in such an intergenerational environment. Every Saturday, I'm sitting in the dojo with 6-year-olds and 86-year-olds with every decade represented in between. Spending time with our *kupuna* or our elders has been a really great reminder that at some point your habits do get pretty ingrained, and they get harder and harder to change. And so I really feel this urgency that I've got some stuff I have to figure out, and I better do it now because I don't think I can wait until I'm 75 or 85. It's only going to get harder, I think.

James Shaheen: Yeah, I'd like to ask you about agency. You mentioned the relationship to the practice: I do the practice. I own the practice. But another difference between Chozen-ji and the previous dharma centers you practiced with is the attitude towards striving and intensity, because certainly there's a lot of intensity to your training. So you say that over the years you had internalized the message that you were too big, too loud, too sharp, and you worked to make yourself softer and smaller, yet at Chozen-ji you encountered a path that celebrated vigor and intensity. Can you say more about this?

Cristina Moon: I think I still have issues with sometimes being too coarse and too loud and too sharp in certain situations. But oftentimes when we do have a challenge or a habit, perhaps it might be for a lot of people just having internalized anger or rage or sadness, so often our mainstream Western society tells us that antidote to that is to do the opposite: put yourself in calming situations, try to be more calm and peaceful. Another way to approach it is to go straight into it and realize all the attachments that come up, become more familiar with it, get to know it. Almost like a scientist in a laboratory, you can really start to understand the bounds of it, poke around in it, push yourself.

I was told early on, and I read this somewhere as well, that after World War II, Japan was so poor and the people were so impoverished that there were often riots for food and there was a lot of



violence, so the Tokyo riot police were actually required to spend the first three years of their training living in a martial arts dojo and training every day. The reason was not so that they could go be a riot policeman and use their martial arts skills to put down a riot. It was because the only riot that had to be put down was the one inside.

And so there's an aspect of the training and the value placed on *kiai*, or energy and intensity, and the martial culture that's been really valuable to me because I've learned a lot more about how to refine, control, and navigate my own intensity not by shying away from it and trying to be small but by being more authentic and going straight into it and putting myself in situations where it was like, “Oh, you think you're tough? How about you put on the kendo armor and fight some guy who's six foot four. How tough are you then?” It pushed me to really hit and then I think transcend my own boundaries, and I realized that some of my sense of how tough I was, some of my sense of aggression, my own anger and frustration and those habits that would come out and get expressed, they were rooted in a false confidence and a deluded way of seeing the world, and only by really challenging those, by putting myself in those aggressive situations that were safe and bounded because they happened in the context of training, only by doing that was I able to actually see where my perception was falling short, where it was wrong, and then how to actually bring out real power.

James Shaheen: One of the pillars of Chozen-ji training is the Hojo. So what is the Hojo, and how does it rid practitioners of all their habits since the day they were born?

Cristina Moon: The Hojo is a 500-year-old sword form created by a gentleman in Japan who said that it came to him all at once in a dream. The way that one does it is with a partner. One partner is *shin*, or the mind, and the other is *kage*, or the shadow. It's a kata, which means it's a choreographed set of movements. Since you're partnered, you do them together in sync. There are four movements to the Hojo, and they each embody the feeling or the *kiai* of the seasons, so there's spring, summer, fall, and winter. All of the movements are synchronized with the breath.



When Tanouye Roshi first saw Omori Sogen demonstrate the Hojo, and this is at a time when he was sixth- and seventh-degree black belt in seven different martial arts, he said that he saw the secrets of all of the martial arts in the Hojo. Not being an expert martial artist, I don't know exactly what that means, but it was getting to something more transcendent. It was not just a set of techniques; it was also a sort of spiritual vehicle to do the Hojo.

To actually learn it, you start with just doing this very awkward walk called the Hojo walk. There are four principles to it: your shoulders and your belly button don't bounce up and down, your belly button doesn't go side to side, your feet are always touching the ground, and your movements are always coordinated with the breath and a very particular kind of breathing that's called *nio* breathing. It's very intense in and of itself. It's hard to do because you have to overcome a lot of your self-consciousness, and you're making a very ferocious face while you do it. When you're doing it with a partner, you're looking them right in the eye while you do it, and that can be very unnerving and take some practice for a lot of people.

Historically, when people were learning the Hojo, they would have to just do the Hojo walk for months before they were allowed to do anything else. So it is something that really is approached very seriously, and it doesn't feel fanciful when you do it. It really does feel like, “Wow, this is showing me all of my habits.” And that could be as simple as when you're stepping forward, you can see it in people, they're taking a step forward, they're doing the walk, and they're getting ahead of themselves because you're supposed to breathe in, take a step forward, pause, set your breath, set yourself, and then exhale, and the back foot starts moving forward to meet the front. So often, you'll see people, when they're starting out, they start losing their focus and concentration, and that back foot is stepping forward and they're taking off before the breath. It's not controlled and in sync anymore, and people reflect on it later. They're like, “Yeah, I'm always doing that in my life. I don't finish the last thing before I move on to the next one. I'm losing track of where I am.” Or when you're starting to incorporate the *bokken*, this heavy wooden sword, and you're doing sword cuts with the Hojo walk, you'll see a lot of people's physical and



psychophysical habits coming out there as well in how they grip the sword and how they cut. When you're doing it correctly, you raise the sword up above your head and then you cut and it comes to stop at the height of, if you were standing opposite someone your same height, three inches into your opponent's head. And the number of times that people overshoot and they're almost like brushing the ground, you can just get the sense of overreaching sometimes, of overextending oneself, of bringing too much brutality into the cut that's unnecessary but because you think it's supposed to be there. People really reflect on this often and say, “Oh, I see some version of this in other places in my life, and it's not just a physical habit, it's actually also psychological and emotional,” Or as my teacher, Sayama Roshi, would say, it's psychophysical.

James Shaheen: I just have to ask, when you breathed in, there was a certain ferocity to your expression. Wherefore the ferociousness? I mean, you say you do it with a ferocious look, and it seemed to almost come naturally to you. Is that part of the training, this ferocity of spirit?

Cristina Moon: It is, and that's part of the breathing. So if listeners want to Google nio, in Japan, the nio are these guardian demons or guardian deities. Usually a huge statue of them will be positioned at the front of a temple, and they're supposed to in a parallel sense, like in an analogous sense, put the fear of God into you as you're walking into the temple.

James Shaheen: Like gargoyles.

Cristina Moon: Like gargoyles, yes. They're the Japanese version of gargoyles. And they're also supposed to be repelling bad intentions, bad spirits. So when we're breathing, the nio are actually in a pair, so one is breathing in, and then the other one the lips are clamped shut while breathing out.

James Shaheen: Our listeners won't be able to see that but it looks great. You also talk about the importance of learning to face hits head-on rather than duck or turn away. Can you say more about this aspect of your kendo training, the swordsmanship training?



Cristina Moon: I think similar to what I was talking about before, I thought I was a very direct, precise, person coming into my Chozen-ji training, and then I started training in kendo and very quickly realized that in the face of an attack or something that caused me stress or frightened me, I often had the tendency to actually freeze, get small, duck my head. The problem with getting small and ducking your head in kendo is that even when you're wearing the *men*, or the helmet, there's very little protection at the top of and on the back of your head. So if you face the hit head on, actually your opponent's sword will hit this metal grate that's protecting your face, and so it really doesn't hurt. It's a bit jarring, but it doesn't hurt. But if you duck your head, it hits you on this part where there's only this thick cotton sort of padding. And so very quickly I had a lump on the top of my head, which was a very clear reminder of this habit that I had to duck and get small and to freeze. For many beginners in Kendo, the challenge is to figure out how to keep your chin up and how to face the hit coming forward.

I've never trained in Kendo anywhere else, so I don't know how true this is in other kendo dojos, but particularly here we don't do any of the *waza*, or techniques for defensive movements. Our only defense is attack, and so in the face of an attack your job is to attack and to be fast enough where you're hitting the opponent first or taking the center so that they can't hit you but not just to block the hit but to hit your opponent.

It was a really incredible lesson for me. As I kept training, it manifested in other parts of my life. I don't think this got into the book, but I did have one sitting, one zazen, maybe three months into being here at Chozen-ji where I was really ruminating on a difficult situation. I was on the board of a nonprofit, and there was a lot of conflict happening and I was just rolling around in it in my head. And then without consciously intending to, all of a sudden I had the feeling of kendo, of leaping forward, yelling at the top of my lungs, and cutting right through the problem. And all of my rumination just fell away in this instant, all at once. I couldn't describe it as anything else except that it had been the *kiai* of kendo, the psychophysical memory of doing kendo. I had been able to bring it through in that moment, and that was one of the first moments that I could truly



see more clearly as well Tanouye Roshi's intent in incorporating the martial arts into the training as a means to accelerate and bring some vibrancy and vigor into these traditional monastic practices like zazen that already create so much transformation, but we can enliven it so that it does it stronger and faster. And then hopefully, especially as a younger person doing serious Zen training, you can achieve the same wisdom and perspective that one gets with age, but you could get it so much younger in life and then have so many years to bring that wisdom to bear to make the world a better place.

James Shaheen: Yeah, that description and the nonprofit board is interesting. I love it when the fruit of your practice all of a sudden appears in your everyday life, so that's an interesting story. So one turning point in your time at Chozen-ji was your first all-night training. So can you tell us about all-night training and the emotional breakthrough you experienced? Because I've been advised a few times to do all night training, and I have yet to do it.

Cristina Moon: I love all-night training. I was really nervous about it the first time here at Chozen-ji, and part of the reason was because I had been advised to do it and attempted several years before when I was in the insight meditation tradition, and it didn't work. I didn't have the resolve. I didn't have the will. And there wasn't also the structure to support it on one of these insight retreats.

In contrast, at Chozen-ji when we do it, everyone's doing it together, and there's no question—with a few exceptions. For people who are working in the kitchen, for example, the cook for a sesshin, or intensive training, you probably want them to get a little bit of sleep because they're responsible for giving nutrition to everybody, and if they fall apart, the whole sesshin is going to struggle. But aside from that, everyone's in it together. You're all up, and that's wonderfully supportive and creates a lot of accountability.

My first all-night training here, I think, because I'd been training really hard up until then and I had created a lot of anticipation for myself, I don't know, I blew myself out really early on. It was



the first sitting of the night, and I was in tears and heaving sobs, and then we went straight from two back-to-back sittings, 45 minutes, no moving, and then we went into kendo class, and by the time we were in kendo, everything excess had already been drained out of me, and it felt like I was just existing in that kendo class. And then the rest of the night felt relatively easy. It was remarkable. We were very tired, and I struggled to stay awake. And also because of my exhaustion and tiredness, that led to my first encounter with the *keisaku*, the stick of encouragement.

James Shaheen: After the sword blow though, that seems pretty mild.

Cristina Moon: Getting hit on the back with the *keisaku* is different from getting hit on the head. That's for sure. Essentially, looking back on it six years later, it feels really melodramatic. I wouldn't say it's a little embarrassing to look back on, but it does have this feeling of, oh my gosh, I was being so dramatic sitting there and crying through the sitting and something that I couldn't imagine myself doing now.

James Shaheen: You must have some affection for that person too.

Cristina Moon: I do. I do.

James Shaheen: So eventually you became a formal student of Sayama Daian Roshi. Can you tell us a bit about him? How did you know that you had found your teacher, for instance?

Cristina Moon: There were some logical things that pointed to, “Oh, this person's a good fit for me.” We felt very well matched in intellect. I really respected him. In addition to training really seriously in Zen for more than forty years at Chozen-ji, he had also been an executive in the healthcare industry. He had really contributed to local Hawaii politics and the community. And so I had this feeling that we were a good match. I really enjoyed the intensity with which he approached his own life and his training. And then, more than anything, I really liked that he wanted me to train hard, and he wanted to push me to do that. Very early on, I discovered that



one of his chief traits is that he's very mischievous, and he loves poking at people. After I could get over myself sometimes because he would have very effectively poked at me, I realized that that too was also really fun.

But it was mostly a sense of Sayama Roshi as being a reflection of the training and of Chozen-ji's method of Zen training itself as someone who had done the training himself and also as someone who carried the lineage forward. That was a very stark contrast for me from other Western Buddhist circles that I'd been in where that sense of lineage was a lot less present. So in some senses, Sayama Roshi as a person, as an individual, clearly I accepted him as my teacher, but it was also just that he was the embodiment of Chozen-ji training. That caused me to really accept him as my teacher, whereas I think in the other traditions I had been in previously, that sense of lineage was a little more obfuscated, and it was more about the individual. So I think that might stand in contrast to a lot of your listeners and readers.

James Shaheen: You say one of the biggest lessons that Sayama Roshi continues to teach you is how not to take yourself so seriously but to still be totally sincere. Could you say more about this? I love that.

Cristina Moon: His phrase is “Take it sincerely but not seriously,” and he really loves to repeat that. What he means is a very Japanese understanding of the word sincerity, which is quite nuanced. One way of describing it is that you approach everything that you do as if it's a matter of life and death. But to not take it seriously means to not be self-serious, essentially to not take yourself too seriously. I think it requires a certain self-awareness of OK, what part of this is my ego? And then also what about my ego would make me maybe hesitate or not fully embrace the lessons that are being given here, subsuming my small self and my ego to the lesson that's available and the wisdom that's there. At the same time, what about my self-seriousness and ego might be making me do what's called *muri*, meaning void principle or without principle. One could, It could be understood as going against the grain, cutting against the grain, and it means overdoing it, usually out of ego and attachment. So that's that aspect too, that taking something



completely sincerely but not seriously means giving it everything that you've got but not to the point that it is muri, against the grain, unprincipled.

James Shaheen: You also describe your first sesshin, or intensive week-long training, and how you learned to work with the physical exhaustion of prolonged rigorous training, as you mentioned in the all-night training. So how did you learn to let go of your tiredness?

Cristina Moon: How did I learn to let go of my tiredness? I just did it.

James Shaheen: You described this as realizing that sometimes two minus one equals three, which I like.

Cristina Moon: That is a specific formulation from one of the teachers here at Chozen-ji, Kangen Roshi, and that was his way of trying to get me to understand that it is a matter of adding energy sometimes, but oftentimes it's actually about what you take away.

For me in that moment in that first sesshin, it was letting go of that little voice that kept on saying, “I'm so tired. I don't know if I can do this. I'm just so tired. I can't.” And once I dropped that voice, and at first I had to be very intentional about it, and every time I heard it, I would cut it off: Nope, we're not going there, not doing that. Just cut it off right at the root. And eventually then I was able to drop it. And in dropping it and letting go of that narrative of “I can't,” then I realized actually how much energy I had been wasting circling around this false narrative of all of the things that I could not do.

It was truly that I believed it, that it was physically impossible to be tired and to have one's brain feel like it's not going to work. That felt like a biological fact to me. And then to just drop that and let it go, it's not something that I recommend that people try to just do because you truly have to have the right conditions and be in the right condition. I had been living and training every day for six months already at Chozen-ji. I was surrounded by people. I was immersed in a method of training hundreds of years old that's been time tested through so many people. And I



was within the forms of the sesshin as well, all of the zazen, all of the sittings, all of the training. So I was really in the right condition to be able to let that go. In the absence of that it's pretty hard to just let it go—then it gets into the territory of toxic masculinity where we're just saying, “Just push through it. Just let it go. Don't let it bother you.” It's much harder said than done, but it is possible.

James Shaheen: Yeah, during a later sesshin, you had a similar breakthrough in working with physical pain where you realized “Well, I'm alive, aren't I?” Could you say more about how this changed your relationship to pain?

Cristina Moon: I realized in that moment, because, again, the voice in my head was saying, “Oh, it hurts so much. It hurts so much.” And. And then, I mean, I was saying that to myself. That was my monologue. And then, I don't want to make it sound too mystical, but out of nowhere, my own voice shot back at me like “I'm alive, aren't I?” And it was just this sort of flash of realization of acceptance of, yes, suffering is a fact of life. It is a facet of human existence that we can't really avoid this discomfort or pain, but how we relate to it can change. And in that moment, my physical pain, my experience of it, became this symptom, this indicator that I was alive, and that here I am living this very precious human existence, and rather than treating it like it wasn't something valuable or it was something that I would rather be rid of because I was devaluing it, to actually just appreciate it as a symptom of being alive, as an aspect of being alive.

That led over time, and this continues to evolve for me, of really feeling like the things that are challenging in life are such opportunities to grow and to develop oneself, not in a masochistic way and also not in a defeatist way but almost scientific. It's just this is a fact of the human experience. I think it was Victor Frankl, the Holocaust survivor and psychologist, who said that essentially if I'm to believe that life has meaning, then suffering also has to have meaning because it's such an inescapable part of life. And so in that moment, I think I felt something



similar where it was like the pain is a fact of my existence and my experience, and I better make the most out of it.

James Shaheen: Yeah, it's interesting dealing with being tired or dealing with pain. I mean, there are different ways of doing this. In my case, if I was tired, I would say what part of me is tired, and I'd start to get curious and wake up a little bit more. With pain, it was to look into that pain and where is it and what type of pain is it and so forth. But I find this really inspiring your story about this. So eventually you decided to seek ordination as a priest. Can you say something about that? It's a big decision.

Cristina Moon: Yeah, I think I didn't really know what it meant to be a priest, but I had the sense that it was an important part of one's training. That is actually maybe the best way to understand it from a Chozen-ji perspective. There's not a whole lot we do in the sense of traditional sort of pastoral work or care. We don't do lecturing. We don't give sermons. We don't teach Sunday dharma school. That's not part of the landscape of Chozen-ji training. But what it means to be a Chozen-ji priest essentially is that you're committing your life that you're going to train in Zen for the rest of your life, you're going to train in this way, and you're going to make the training available to others. And so I had a sense that I was training really hard. I had done sesshins. I wanted a sense of what came next, and I wanted to infuse my own training with some more energy to keep going. I think that was part of the idea that my teacher Sayama Roshi had as well, where he said consider it aspirational. Becoming ordained as a priest wasn't, as it might be for some other people, a recognition of everything they've already done. Sometimes someone who's been training for a really long time, they've essentially been operating in that role as a Chozen-ji priest already. For me, it was to invigorate my training so that I would keep going forward.



James Shaheen: It's funny, in the Catholic church, when one ordains, one likens that to a marriage, and you say that said ordination resembles a funeral. I liked the distinction there. So what are some of the parallels?

Cristina Moon: They're relatively superficial, but you wear a white kimono, a very plain white cotton kimono, and that's the same garment that when a Japanese person has passed away, their corpse, their body is dressed in a white kimono. It's a symbol of purity but also just of simpleness, plainness, a receptivity to whatever comes next. Another aspect is that in Japan, if you are Buddhist, you don't get a Buddhist name until after you've died. At a priest ordination, you receive your Buddhist name, and you then go on to use half of it while you're still alive.

So those are more superficial aspects, but what it really does feel like the way it feels like a funeral, the way it feels like dying is that the small petty individual egoistic concerns that one has, they're not things that are taken for granted anymore. They're not taken for granted as necessary parts of one's life because of the commitment to life as training and training as life. And I don't mean that in the sense that I have to sit and swing a sword and sit zazen and live in a monastery every day, but in the same way that we're using the martial arts, the fine arts, and manual labor as ways of bringing training into everyday life, making everyday life training. I mean it in that sense.

James Shaheen: So you were given the ordination name “Mysterious Peace Arising from Green Water.” Can you tell us more about this name? How have you come to relate to it?

Cristina Moon: My full Buddhist name is *ryoku sui myo an*, and *ryoku sui* is the green water, the same characters as *midori* and *mizu*. *Myo* is mysterious wonder, and *an* is peace. My Zen teacher, Sayama Roshi, and his wife, who is my tea teacher, came up with the name together, and I think the green water part to me feels evocative of that old Buddhist parable, “No mud, no



lotus,” the water that the beautiful lotus grows out of is kind of murky, maybe green, but it's also a metaphor for tea, for matcha.

For me, I reflect on how when I started training, when I came to Chozen-ji, I was coming here expecting this warrior Zen training, swinging a sword and fighting with the guys, and then one of the first things Sayama Roshi told me to do was to train in tea ceremony. And I was like, “You're kidding. That's not what I came here for.” I did not have the understanding and the knowledge that tea ceremony was something that samurai trained in, and in particular men, and the role that it played in their resolving themselves to death because that was a fact of and part of their existence and their job. I didn't understand that it had a relationship to Zen. And I didn't know that the *kiai* that could come through tea could have that very martial budo feeling, and so I had succumbed to the stereotypes that it was a thing that Japanese housewives did for fun and that it was very demure and about serving other people and very domestic. But I learned pretty quickly that wasn't the case, beginning with having to sit *seiza*, or kneeling on the ground on the tatami the whole time. That was a very profound wake-up call that there was more to it than I had previously thought. It wasn't as dainty and simple as I thought.

James Shaheen: No. So you say that the highest directive of a Zen priest is to give courage and take away fear. What do you mean by that?

Cristina Moon: This idea comes from a story about Yamaoka Tesshu, a really famous samurai in Japanese history and a master of kendo, and a young man coming to him and asking him what the secret of kendo was. Yamaoka Tesshu told him, “The answer you're seeking is enshrined in the Asakusa Kannon, or the temple for the bodhisattva Kannon, the goddess of compassion, the bodhisattva of compassion.

And so he went, and I got to visit this temple in Tokyo when I was there last year, actually, and there's a huge calligraphy that says *Se Mu I*. It means the giver of fearlessness. And then the translation “fearlessness” is interesting because the characters are *mu* and *i*. *Mu* is void, and it's a



negating term, so it can mean no or not, but in essence, it's void, so it's not just no fear, it's void fear, which gives it a much deeper dimensionality. And so he came back to Yamaoka Tesshu and said, “This was the calligraphy I saw, is that the answer?” He said, “Yes.”

And when Omori Sogen relayed this story, our other founder of Chozen-ji, he said, “If that's the case for kendo, it's also very much the case for Zen.” So kendo and Zen in that sense must be the same. And it's paradoxical or it's confusing because it's maybe not what one expects, to create this sense of void or no fear through Zen training or through a martial art. But as a Chozen-ji priest, it's not just an idea, it's not something that one can intellectually wrap their heads around, but it has to be an embodiment, that you bring that quality of no fear, void fear into everything that you do. And that's the quality that affects the people and the situations around you. I wish I could say that I understood it with a lot more nuance, but I'm four years in, so I'm still a baby priest and I'm still figuring it out.

James Shaheen: One question you're asked is what a Zen priest does. So how do you answer that question now four years in?

Cristina Moon: I think about what a Zen priest does as, again, coming back to approaching life as training and that I've made a commitment to do this training for the rest of my life, to treat my life as training, and then to make the training available to others. There's a sense of humbling myself to whatever that means. It could mean that I pull the weeds at the dojo every week. It could mean that I cook the meals for the dojo workdays. It could mean that I set up the bookkeeping software to keep the office going in the same way and just as much as teaching the ceramics class and teaching people zazen and doing the sesshin with them, whatever is necessary and required to continue to make the training available for others in the same way it was made available for me. That, for me, is what it means to be a Zen priest, a Chozen-ji priest.

Tricycle Talks

“Warrior Zen”

Episode #105 with Cristina Moon

June 26, 2024



James Shaheen: OK, Cristina, thanks so much. It's been a pleasure. Anything else before we close?

Cristina Moon: I think more than anything, I wrote *Three Years on the Great Mountain* because I wanted people to know not necessarily that Chozen-ji exists and that this specific way of training exists but that this kind of approach to life and Zen and Buddhism and one's self-development is possible.

And I think I had struggled for so long because again, like you were asking about, I had been trying to make myself small, I had been in a different tradition. There is just such a diversity of traditions that are out there, and what I happened to find at the back of a valley in Hawaii was the one that was unmistakably for me and my spiritual home. I just wanted people to have the sense that they could go search for it and find something that was also theirs.

The mainstream of what's being offered and what we see more commonly isn't the whole world. Buddhism is not that monolithic, and there's more out there, and particularly the sense of vigor and rigor and intensity with which we can approach life and we can approach our spiritual self-development and realizing ourselves that's a possibility too. That feels like one of the most important contributions that I can make, and I just felt that the best way that I could do that was just by sharing my story.

James Shaheen: Thank you so much, Cristina. It's been a pleasure. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of Cristina's book, *Three Years on the Great Mountain*, available now. Thanks again, Cristina.

Cristina Moon: Thank you so much, James. Have a great day.

James Shaheen: You've been listening to *Tricycle Talks* with Cristina Moon. 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

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