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James Shaheen: Hello, and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I'm James Shaheen, and you just heard Noelle Oxenhandler. Noelle is a writer and longtime *Tricycle* contributing editor based in northern California. Recently, she has been thinking a lot about what it means to be ready to die—and what will happen to all her belongings when she does. In her article in the November issue of *Tricycle* called “Everything Is Buddha,” she explores the sense of obligation she has toward the objects she has accumulated over the years, including a rubber zebra in a sailor suit and an intricately carved moose donning flannel trousers. Using the teachings of Suzuki Roshi as her guide, she asks what it means to treat everything around us as Buddha. In my conversation with Noelle, we talk about how to let go of an object without devaluing it, what we can learn from Suzuki Roshi's notion of everything existing in the right place, and what it means for things to be more than just things. So here's my conversation with Noelle Oxenhandler.

James Shaheen: So, I'm sitting here with friend and longtime contributing editor Noelle Oxenhandler. Hi, Noelle. It's great to be with you.



Noelle Oxenhandler: It's great to be here.

James Shaheen: So, Noelle, we're here to talk about your article in the November issue of *Tricycle*, “Everything Is Buddha.” To start, can you tell us a bit about the article and what inspired you to write it?

Noelle Oxenhandler: Yeah, the article is about my relationship to my belongings. At this phase of my life, I realized that I was feeling a certain pressure to be winnowing, downsizing, Swedish death cleaning, as some people call it. I was thinking about a friend of mine. I live in a part of northern California that's very susceptible to very severe wildfires, and a few years ago, when a friend of mine lost everything, his home and all its contents burned, he told me that he got tired at a certain point of everyone saying to him, “Well, it was just things,” just things that were lost. He said, “But things aren't just things.” He and I didn't get to pursue that conversation, but I found myself thinking about that. What does it mean to say that things aren't just things?

James Shaheen: You know, it's funny, we'll get to that again, but you start the article with a thought that keeps flashing through your mind when you think about being ready for death, as you say you are, and it's what inspired you to begin a Buddhist practice when you were very young, but what keeps going through your head is “But I have too many things to die,” which I totally relate to. So how have you come to understand this thought?

Noelle Oxenhandler: Well, what I came to understand was the feeling that I experience that my things exert a certain claim on me that I hadn't really been conscious of, and there's a sense that I can't let go of things until I have found their proper home. And so I was actually, as I wrote in the article, a little bit embarrassed that my sense of responsibility wasn't so much toward my offspring that I not burden them with my belongings, but it was a sense of responsibility to my belongings that I find the right homes for them before letting them go.



James Shaheen: Yeah, that's a funny thought that you would feel this sort of obligation to your belongings. Can you say a little bit more about that? What is this sense of obligation that you have to just things, to use a phrase you've rejected?

Noelle Oxenhandler: Well, I think it's that I also realize that much as when I was a child, I continued to perceive many of my belongings as quasi-animate. And so when I let them go, there's the feeling that much as with an animal in one's possession, I can't just put them in some big anonymous donations bin. I need to hand them on to the right home. Of course, many of my objects actually are representations of animals.

James Shaheen: Right, that's funny because you say at some point that you're a bit of an animist, and I think we all are, at least to some degree, and certainly when we're very young. But to give our listeners a sense of the animacy of the objects you're talking about, the animacy that you've imbued with them or not, can you tell us a bit about some of your belongings more specifically? They're photographed quite vividly in the magazine, and they're quite a hoot.

Noelle Oxenhandler: Yes, I didn't imagine when I was working on the article that I would actually be packing off some of my belongings in a box to New York City, but one of them I wrote about who's featured in the magazine is a rubber zebra in a sailor suit, who I think has got to be several decades old. I found him in a thrift shop. The other is a moose, a rather small plastic moose, who wears an elegant fringe plaid cape and plaid trousers.

James Shaheen: I mean, for our listeners, if you want to see these, you can go online and look up Noelle's piece, “Everything Is Buddha,” or you can look in your magazine if you're a subscriber. We had a lot of fun. The art director's wife photographed them. So in thinking through alternatives for what to do with objects with sentimental value—in other words, you don't want to just abandon them, you want to find a proper home from them, there's a sort of animistic attachment to them—you discuss their tradition of give-away ceremonies among certain Native American tribes. So can you tell us about this tradition? I found it very interesting.



You describe it as a way of letting go of an object without devaluing it. You also mentioned Marie Kondo, and that didn't quite work for you to honor an object and then put it aside. It seemed to require something more. And that's when you talk about these Native American ceremonies.

Noelle Oxenhandler: Yeah, well, I do think that part of Marie Kondo's great popularity is that I think she is rather an animist herself to a degree that few clutterbusters are, the way she tells people that prior to letting go of an object, you should hold it in your hands and thank it for its service. It's just that I found for myself that often wasn't quite enough to help me sever the bond. And so I did find myself thinking back to what I had learned long ago about Native American give-away ceremonies, and my understanding there is that people would come together in a circle, bringing an object that had been of importance to them, and let it go to someone who might have greater current use for it. I think one thing that's special about such a ceremony is my understanding is it doesn't create a debt in the other person because they've also surrendered an object, so everyone is both a giver and a receiver, and that energy is in circulation. And I also like the fact that, when people say things are just things, you're offering consolation to yourself or to another person by devaluing what was lost, and I think that's what my friend was protesting. It's like, hey, you're trying to comfort me, but you're minimizing my loss by devaluing what I lost. And so I appreciate the idea that in a give-away ceremony, the value of the object remains fully intact. It's being circulated. And I think that's another aspect of it that instead of an object that's just been hanging on a hook or sitting on a shelf, now it's going into circulation in the community.

James Shaheen: It's interesting because you do talk about the nesting instinct when one is much younger and accumulating things, and then as one grows older, there's this sort of winnowing instinct, and yet there's a tension there that remains. In part, it's because these objects have been imbued with a kind of life, and it's really our own life, really, that we've put in these objects or the lives of others that we remember. You ask how you can find a way to preserve their life force



without having to physically possess them, and you turn to the poet Rilke's notion of praising things as a way of giving them another form of existence before letting them go, say, or before they're taken. His world changed very quickly, and so he was trying to hold on things, and his answer was to praise them. Can you say more about this practice of praising, as Rilke explains it?

Noelle Oxenhandler: Yeah. So Rilke, at a certain point in his life, was living in Paris across from this hospital that primarily served the poor, and both in his journals and in his letters, and actually this gradually made its way into his novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, he talked about a new way of seeing. It was a way of seeing in which everything was of equal value by virtue of its presence, and it became a way of seeing that gave a kind of another mode, a secondary mode of existence to things. He applied this to things that were precious to him and things that he felt were in danger of becoming obsolete, all kinds of handmade things, a house, a jug, a well, he wrote, things that he felt were in danger of being taken over by what he called sham, dummy things coming from America. All that time ago, he felt that it was the task of sensitive people, artistic souls, to see these things so intensely, in a sense, to memorize them and also to represent them through writing about them, through painting them, to give them another form of life. I think we have many examples certainly of artists who have done that.

James Shaheen: Yeah, you mentioned also in everyday life. The analogy you use is, say, a grandparent who's losing her sight and commits the faces of her children and grandchildren to memory.

Noelle Oxenhandler: Yeah, I was a little worried that Rilke's idea taken out of context might seem a little esoteric, and so I was trying to come up with some examples that I think we can all comprehend of people having to let go physically of their connection to an object. I think I also mentioned a refugee getting ready to flee their house, their garden, and inhaling the scent of the flowers that they won't ever smell again, committing things to memory.



James Shaheen: As we discussed before at the start of the podcast, photographing your items and having them memorialized in that way may be one form of praising them. I was delighted that you were so happy with the outcome.

Noelle Oxenhandler: Absolutely. And I think this is related. I think one of the reasons it can be hard to let go of things is because of the connections that we feel exist among them, the way we've come to understand the way plants, or I don't know if you saw that beautiful movie about fungi, and we've come to understand the way these plants are communicating with one another through their root systems under the ground. I think many of us experience that our belongings have connections to one another. They create a kind of world together. Fiction writers will talk about the importance of creating a world when they write a story or a novel, or in LA when they're filming for TV or films, I mean, I've had friends who get paid a lot of money to have their houses filmed. People want to come in and film in their houses because it's actually hard to create from scratch that sense of belonging together that you find in somebody's actual house. I think too often when we're just focusing on clutter busting, we're not taking that aspect of interrelationship to heart. Just think how interesting it can be. I've never been to Freud's study in Vienna, but I've seen photographs of it, or Frida Kahlo's Casa Azul. It can be very moving. Where I live in Glen Ellen, we have the home and the study of Jack London preserved, and as many times as I've seen it, I just look and press my face against the window, and I see these little notes that he had, little pieces of paper with clothespins pinned over his bed. He made a little clock for his wife that said, “Wake me up,” and he would move the little needle around. There's something about those preserved worlds that I think is very moving. There definitely are artists, photographers, who paint and photograph these worlds of belongings, and that person might not be there. You may be looking at the studio of an artist who's been dead for a long time, but you feel their presence through this interconnection of their belongings.

James Shaheen: Right, I have a confession to make. After I read your piece, the editorial riffs off the piece, the editorial that I wrote, it was something called “Are Things Just Things?” or



something like that. But anyway, it prompted me to start going through my things, and it occurred to me I really do need to write a will, and then I had to start going through my things, like who's getting what. It's like a walk through my life—all of the things collectively create a narrative. And there's this urge then, as you said, what do you call it?

Noelle Oxenhandler: Swedish death cleaning.

James Shaheen: Well, I had an urge to do that, but in your piece, you end up saying it's OK to leave that world, at least in part, not to make it too onerous, but to leave that world for your heirs or loved ones to see or go through themselves. There was this desire to have everything cleaned out and perfect, and now you've come full circle and said, “I'll get rid of the junk, but I'm willing to leave for them this representation of my life.” Is that a fair reading?

Noelle Oxenhandler: Yes, it really helped me to be working on that essay, because I started out thinking, well, maybe there is a natural urge to winnow later in life, just as before the birth of a child, there can be an urge to nest, but when I really thought about it, for me, the impulse to winnow was nothing like it. I experienced the urge to nest as an absolutely powerful biological drive, very, very intense. I'd read about it, but it's a different thing to experience. With winnowing, for me, the sense of an innate drive is much subtler, and I feel much more a societal pressure, and so I had to differentiate those things. I felt that the pressure was keeping me from having a better understanding of my relationship to my things.

I mean, I just think we live in a weird culture that on the one hand, as we all know, is extremely materialistic. We're constantly being urged on all sides to buy more things. You can't even look at the news without having ten thousand ads tailored to you pop up. But then almost instantly, it seems like all those things that we've been urged to consume, to acquire, are then denounced as clutter, and then there's a feeling of *What's wrong with me*, that I can't get rid of these things that are just things. But if you start to ward that off a bit and ask yourself to drop more deeply into the issue of, *What are things? What is my relationship to them?*, although it does make the whole



project more complex and more fraught, it also makes it much more interesting, mysterious, and in the end, for me, it's been helping me to let go of things.

James Shaheen: Yeah, it's funny, I've done a lot of thinking since I read your essay about this, and I'm one of those neurotic people who, when I leave for a trip, I make sure everything's in order and clean in case I never come back again. This is how I want them to find it. And I realized that when I started getting that winnowing instinct, I realized I wanted to control and organize, and it became almost a little bit obsessive, the opposite of hoarding. I wanted to get rid of everything. But I was concerned with, OK, in my absence, what are they going to find? It's a very strange, strange thing. And I relaxed a little around this idea of, yeah, get rid of the junk that's going to be a hassle for them, but let them see your life this way. It's fine. Someone comes in and sees a desk you see as cluttered, but they see as, “Oh, that's Noelle.”

The article takes a bit of a turn, or another approach at least, when you look to Suzuki Roshi, who wrote, and this is a quote, “When body and mind are in order, everything else exists in the right place, in the right way.” So how have you come to understand this statement in the context of living among things of this world?

Noelle Oxenhandler: Well, I have always absolutely loved that quote for as long as I can remember, for ages. I've always thought of that book as my desert island book in the first place, and then something about that in particular, and I think it tends to arise for me when I am getting into that state that you just were referring to when I am feeling as though I need to control things. I mean, I remember years ago, I think I was just in my 20s then, I started a piece of writing that I don't think I ever finished. It began, “Sometimes when I think that the sheets that I am lying on will have to be washed after I am dead, it is more than I can bear.” I mean, that's a confession of how extreme it can be to feel that you want to get out without any loose ends, of leaving a perfectly tidy nest behind you. And so to acknowledge that there is something just utterly inexorably human, that there's some kind of inherent mess in our very existence, and I think that's partly what Suzuki Roshi's quote means to me is that, on the one hand, it's a profound



surrender of the attempt to control our world; on the other hand, it's an exhortation to practice to see in a way that opens us to the perfection of things as they are. So I guess in a way it's that beautiful coming together of effort and grace that I hear in that quote.

James Shaheen: You know, the best advice I ever got, the best work advice and probably life advice I got from my predecessor, was to get used to the loose ends. Life is a lot of loose ends, and living with the loose ends because there really isn't anything but loose ends. But in this quote, I'm also hearing that loose ends are perfect too.

Noelle Oxenhandler: Yeah.

James Shaheen: You know, you say you had a startling experience of the rightness of the world in the way that Suzuki Roshi describes while running a garbage composter, which I loved. Can you tell us about this experience?

Noelle Oxenhandler: It started out being one of the most uncomfortable experiences I ever had in my life. It was a very, very hot day in northern California. I was given the job of running this huge garbage composter. You had to feed these huge buckets of garbage into it that just came spewing out of it, I mean, honestly, like this hot vomit in the sun, and I just thought I was going to die. I really felt on the brink of fainting. And then, mercifully, we had a lunch break. And as it was time for me to come back, I felt this kind of excitement. I felt like I couldn't wait to get back to it, and I felt kind of in love with it. I think what it was was an extraordinary sense that that garbage pit had become the means, the medium of freedom for me. There was such a sense of freedom. It's like, wow, if I can be happy doing this, I could do anything. I'm not afraid of anything. So yeah, it was just a very wonderful experience losing all preferences.

James Shaheen: In my late 20s, I think it was, I was on a rustic retreat in the Delaware water gap, and at nighttime it was so cold, and in the daytime, too. It was a tough retreat. But one of my jobs was to empty the barrel underneath the outhouse, and that's what I thought of when you



talked about this. And I can't say I got to the point of joy or acceptance or equanimity. The worst, however, was when it froze, So, I can relate, but I don't think I quite accomplished the absence of preference. I was a 20-something, slightly angry, and it took me a while. But you quote Zen Master Hakuin who wrote that, “The Great Way is not difficult for those who do not pick and choose,” yet you suggest that letting go of distinctions is often what enables hoarding. Can you say more about this seeming paradox? How do you let go of distinctions and see everything as equally precious without falling into the trap of hoarding?

Noelle Oxenhandler: That did become a really interesting question for me as I was working on this because as I confessed in the piece, I went through a period of somewhat compulsively watching those horrifying reality shows about hoarding, and what you tend to see is a complete loss of distinctions, where everything is felt to be equally valuable, and there's also no sense of where anything goes, so you have bathroom supplies in the kitchen and kitchen supplies in the bedroom. And so I really had to sit with that question of when Hakuin tells us to let go of preferences, how does that relate to the pathological loss of distinctions?

And, of course, what I came to feel in working with that line, that very poignant line of this little boy in one of the hoarding episodes I watched, where the cleaning crew was trying very hard to make an attempt to get some order in his bedroom, and at one point he cried out, “But that's my favorite cotton ball!” And so he really helped me see that the issue is really the degree of personal attachment that in hoarding adheres to each and every thing and what people experience as a threat to the self, if any object is removed. So I think that's the key.

James Shaheen: Yeah, in the essay, you describe the field of neutrality that arises when you're able to stop seeing things through the lens of meaning and usefulness to yourself, which is what you are getting at. So can you tell us a bit about this field of neutrality and how it gives rise to a deeper appreciation of things as they are?



Noelle Oxenhandler: Well, what I find is that I can more easily experience this field of neutrality if I'm among other people's possessions. I can just appreciate whatever assemblage of objects they have gathered around themselves, and because I'm on their turf and not mine. I'm not tugged by feelings of emotional significance. But I find that in my own surroundings, if I as an actual practice start just looking at things as they present themselves in themselves without my stories of how I acquired them, who gave them to me, whether or not they need to be swept or raked or repaired, that is something one can actually do. And it does bring about pretty quickly a greater sense of detachment than I normally have towards my belongings. And it's also related to something big that happened for me while working on this essay, which was how moving from that sense of many of my belongings being somewhat animate, I began to be able to see them as having a certain autonomy that I had never seen before. I think that is something that can happen as you get older. There's a funny power shift that happens. When we're younger, I mean, yes, our belongings can get old and cracked and weathered, etc., but for the most part, we pretty much have control over them. But then at a certain point, when you get older, you begin to realize that many of your belongings are going to go on beyond you. Of course, where I live, everything I own could go up in flames. But there's also a good chance that many of my belongings will go on beyond me, and it's almost a certain power that they have. But I began to feel something comforting when I thought of my belongings as having a degree of autonomy that I hadn't appreciated before. I can more readily see that they have their life stories that will go on beyond me. Many of them had life stories before they got to me, and those will continue.

James Shaheen: So the moose and the zebra will be fine. I don't know about us, Noelle, but that moose and zebra, I'm sure they will be fine. So Noelle, you say that you're able to summon that field of neutrality more easily when you're seeing others' things they don't belong to you, you haven't imbued them with a history or a certain animism, but when you're in your own home, you've also managed to do that, at least at times, and therefore you say it's much easier to make



the very distinctions that we can have so much difficulty making when that field of neutrality arises. How is it so that it's easier to make distinctions?

Noelle Oxenhandler: Ah, yeah, well, because there is a certain detachment, then, from the story of my connection to these belongings. There is a recognition that the objects have their own life stories that will go on beyond me. And so, for me, there's a lessening of that anxiety to find precisely the right homes for them and also less shame about continuing to have them. I've been thinking also about how in our culture we say all the time “You can't take it with you,” but of course there are a lot of other cultures where they don't see things that way, and there are long traditions of people being buried with favorite possessions or relatives going on a very regular basis to bring food and so forth to those who have departed. So just another way of trying to not get so stuck in our particular culture's attitudes toward things.

James Shaheen: Noelle, can you say a little bit more about the objects manifesting a certain kind of autonomy? What exactly does it mean that these objects have autonomy? And what does it mean to treat your belongings as autonomous in this way? How does that actually play out?

Noelle Oxenhandler: Well, I think with many of the objects, it involves recognizing that they had an existence long before I acquired them and that they will have an existence that is likely to go on long after I am no longer around. So there's partly a temporal aspect. They have their own relation to time, and they have their own fates, in a way, because many of the objects I have were owned by other people, before they got to me.

James Shaheen: You know, it's, it's so funny. I mean, you mentioned earlier in our culture, getting things, and it's not just our culture. In many cultures, getting things is very important, and accumulating things is very important. Yet everybody then agrees, despite that, that things are just things, a notion we've just challenged. So it's interesting because if you take Suzuki Roshi's view, say, everything is in its right place or you look at Hakuin and say, OK, no preferences, you're holding that on one side while at the same time acknowledging that things are more than



just things. So it seems to me the tension in the article is balancing those. How are things not just things? And at the same time, they're fine as they are. There is some tension in the essay that is beautifully resolved, and I'm not sure exactly how to put it, but you began with a question, and I think the answer to that question may be the title of the piece, which is “Everything is Buddha.” Why don't you tell me about that?

Noelle Oxenhandler: Well, yeah, I mean, of course, my whole intent, I think it's actually fine that you found yourself stumbling a little bit because I am trying to open up—I feel like we need to have more ways of thinking about our belongings, more ways of understanding ownership than our culture really gives us. And so I think there are ways that if we start with the premise of ownership, things aren't just things, then we can begin to ask, well, what, what, what are they? Then what is the source of their meaning and of their value to me? And as we begin to refine our understanding, I think that gives us more choices as to how to live with and also dispense, live with and also let go of our objects that where we end up with is a wider range of ways of relating to things than if we just summarily tried to ease the pain of losing things by saying they're just things.

James Shaheen: Yeah, I never really believed it when people said things are just things. I understand why it's a consolation—if somebody's lost everything, it's understood as a consolation. But it doesn't ring true for that person, because they've just lost everything. Say it once you've lost everything. But you close the article with a quote from Suzuki Roshi, which I alluded to: “We treat things very carefully, and we respect things very much. Everything itself is Buddha, so we treat it as Buddha.” So as one last question: What does it mean for everything to be Buddha, and how does that change how we treat the things around us?

Noelle Oxenhandler: Well, I think it comes back to, again, to me it's a practice, and it's explicitly taught as such. If you're in a Buddhist retreat of some form and you're working in the kitchen, you're taught that everything you're handling is equally important. When you take the knives out of the knife block and cut off the stems off things, you're actually practicing that



equality of vision. And it's that same kind of practice that has led people that leads people to these peak experiences. I wrote about a woman who was a dharma friend of mine who went for a walk in the middle of the retreat and just found that the trash strewn by the side of the road was shimmering like jewels. Of course, when we're practicing seeing in that way we're not seeing things in their relationship to us. I hope that most people have had an experience of just everything shimmering around them.

The first time I ever meditated, it was a twenty-minute session with a monk from Thailand who came to my college. When I walked back into my dorm room, I had a little rubber art gum eraser sitting on my desk, and it was just illuminated by a ray of sunlight. I think that's what Suzuki Roshi is saying when he says everything is Buddha. I do believe the wonderful thing about this is that this is something we can practice. You can practice seeing in this way. My own experience is that when I practice seeing in this way, it then makes it easier for me to decide what to do with these objects that I have a special connection to and a more complicated history with.

James Shaheen: That was so nicely said, Noelle, thank you. Anything else before we close?

Noelle Oxenhandler: One thing that was interesting to me just getting ready to talk to you today, I looked up the word clutter, and I saw that etymologically, it's believed that it comes from the same root as clotting, and I thought that that's interesting to think about and an interesting approach to clutter, because I think there is a form of clutter that we can experience as a kind of clotting in a negative way, clotting and clogging, and they talk about this in feng shui, the way it traps the energy, and energy kind of stagnates. But I think there are other kinds of clutter, collections of objects that create a kind of creative reverie and sense of fertile connection, and I think you can feel this when you walk into certain artists' studios or writers' studies, and so I think it's another place where maybe we need to be more discerning when we use the word clutter and ask ourselves, Is this a clotting kind of clutter or a flowing kind of clutter?

Tricycle Talks

“Everything Is Buddha”

Episode #117 with Noelle Oxenhandler

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James Shaheen: Yeah, I remember reading a book by the writer Louis Auchincloss. He was describing a woman's desk, and there were two very sharpened pencils and a blank pad of paper. It was so tidy, he said, it's clear that no work is done here. Well, Noelle, it was lovely talking to you. Anything else?

Noelle Oxenhandler: No, I'm just tickled that reading my article with its photograph of my rubber zebra in a sailor suit moved you to get your will written.

James Shaheen: Yes, it did. I sign it on Friday if I make it that far.

Noelle Oxenhandler: Thank you. Great to talk with you, James.

James Shaheen: Yeah, Noelle Oxenhandler, it's been a pleasure, and thanks for joining. For our listeners, be sure to check out Noelle's article in the November issue of *Tricycle*. Thanks again, Noelle.

Noelle Oxenhandler: OK, bye.

James Shaheen: You've been listening to *Tricycle Talks* with Noelle Oxenhandler. To read Noelle's article in the November issue of *Tricycle*, visit tricycle.org/magazine. *Tricycle* is a nonprofit educational organization dedicated to making Buddhist teachings and practices broadly available. We are pleased to offer our podcasts freely. If you would like to support the podcast, please consider subscribing to *Tricycle* or making a donation at tricycle.org/donate. We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at feedback@tricycle.org to let us know what you think. If you enjoyed this episode, please consider leaving a review on Apple Podcasts. To keep up with the show, you can follow *Tricycle Talks* wherever you listen to podcasts. *Tricycle Talks* is produced by Sarah Fleming and the Podglomerate. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!