Tricycle Talks
"A Buddhist Guide to Understanding Emotion"
Episode #145 with Maria Heim
March 25, 2026

Maria Heim: Happiness is a sort of thing that you can't chase. By desiring it, it's already outside of you, so you can't demand that you're going to feel happiness. True happiness sort of sneaks up on us, if you will, or it appears, but it's not something I can manufacture by some kind of fiat of will or something. And so the texts are aware of that, right? You're not just going to go and insist that it appear. And so what it looks like, how it comes to emerge, is getting rid of stuff, getting rid of, at the grossest level, immoral actions that are going to distract you and cause you anxiety and problems. Getting rid of stuff, other states will naturally kind of emerge. And so it sort of seems like happiness is not something, they use the language that you don't need to have an intention for it because it will come about to the extent that you've gotten rid of other stuff.

James Shaheen: Hello, and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I'm James Shaheen, and you just heard Maria Heim. Maria is a professor of religion at Amherst College. Her new book, *How to Feel: An Ancient Guide to Minding Our Emotions*, presents new translations of essential early Buddhist teachings on emotion. Drawing from the Pali canon, Maria argues that the Buddhist psychology of emotions can offer us a different way of observing and relating to our feelings—and, in the process, bring a sense of freedom. In my conversation with Maria, we talk about the misconception that Buddhism encourages the complete elimination of feeling, the paradoxical relationship between pleasure and pain in early Buddhist texts, how language can describe and shape experience, and how noticing our feelings can fundamentally restructure our behavior. So here's my conversation with Maria Heim.

James Shaheen: So I'm here with Maria Heim. Hi Maria. It's great to be with you again.

Maria Heim: Hi, James. It's always a pleasure.

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James Shaheen: OK, Maria, we're here to talk about your new book, which is called *How to Feel: An Ancient Guide To Minding Our Emotions*. So to start, can you tell us a bit about the book and what inspired you to write it?

Maria Heim: Oh, thank you James for having me on. Yeah, so the book is the second little how-to book I've been involved with for this series for Princeton University Press. So Princeton has these quite beautiful little books that they've been putting out the last few years that are sort of how-to or self-help books for modern readers that involve translations of ancient texts from a variety of different philosophers and thinkers. And so the first one I got involved with, I think maybe, I can't remember if we talked about this or maybe you talked about it with Jay Garfield, but I was one of the translators along with Jay Garfield and Bob Scharf. It was called *How to Lose Yourself*, and that was the first of these little volumes that Princeton did that was non-Western material. So they'd been doing a lot of Stoics and Aristotle and the Western classics, and so they were starting to turn to the non-Western classics, I guess you could say.

And so when we finished *How to Lose Yourself*, I thought, wow, I was really working a lot on these questions about emotion and *vedana* and feeling and psychology in the early Buddhist texts. And so I was working on this anyway, and I thought I might as well do a little *How to Feel*. I think I had a different title in the beginning, but that's what they wanted. And so it was a good opportunity for me to think through some stuff that I've been working with on emotions and then also provide what I hope is an accessible and lively translation of a collection, that these are excerpted materials from the Pali canon that readers can use to either think about Buddhist psychology or even perhaps as some kind of guidelines for thinking about first-person introspection.

James Shaheen: OK, we'll get to the word *vedana* in a moment, but you begin the book with your translation of the four noble truths, which might surprise listeners since you point out that

the Buddha frames the truths as being "for one who feels." So what did the Buddha mean by this, and how are the four noble truths centered on what it is to feel?

Maria Heim: Good, thank you. Yeah, so as we know, the four noble truths come up a lot in different kinds of contexts, and this particular context where I sort of noticed it is that he prefaces it by saying, "It is for one who feels that I proclaim the noble truths: *dukkha*, the causes of dukkha is craving, the end of dukkha is nirvana, and the eightfold path.

And so I just really liked that for my purposes, that it's just making a kind of beeline for all of us, is that identifying yourself as a person who feels, who is sensitive to the world, who is vulnerable to the world, who is grappling, like we all do, with your feelings, is where he's locating the most central of teachings. So I liked that as a kind of introduction, and also it helped orient us into the broader issues of the four noble truths that in their own way these texts are sort of coming to.

James Shaheen: So we get to the word vedana, and I should note that that's the term that you're translating, and it can sometimes be translated as feeling tone or sensation. So can you tell us about this word vedana? Why do you choose to translate it as feeling?

Maria Heim: This is a super central term. So most of the excerpts that I'm providing in the book are from a whole chapter in the *Samyutta Nikaya* called the *Feeling Sutta* or *Vedana Sutta*. So it's just a very central category both in the Abhidhamma, the kind of texts that are really working through first-person introspection, but also just as a kind of category to watch and learn from your experience.

So the way it's coming up in the text is you're really being invited to watch your experience and notice its tones, its hedonic tones, or its valence, right? So every moment there is a valence to our experience. And we could see it at the most basic level. You could notice the pleasurable valences in your moment-by-moment experience, or your painful ones or your neutral ones. And

so that, as you know, just keeps coming up in the text. So they keep bringing us back to watch the valence or the aspects of your experience that are painful, pleasurable, or neutral.

So at its most basic level, it seems to be this kind of experience will have valences and tones, and watch that. But then, because so many different kinds of experiences have valences and tones, and when they're interested in trying to talk about those experiences in their aspects of having these pleasant, painful, or neutral tones, then those things will often be clustered in the category of vedana. So it gets looser when we use it as a category of analysis that might include phenomena that have those tones.

James Shaheen: OK, so you point out that terms for emotions vary widely across languages and cultures, and neuroscientists are increasingly demonstrating that emotions are socially constructed categories. So in this context, you say that Buddhist frameworks around feeling can provide an alternative model, one that gets around some of these trappings. So can you say something about this?

Maria Heim: Yeah, so this is where a lot of my interests lie is the difference between modern Western psychology and the kind of categories that we have in English and this incredibly sophisticated and granular vocabulary we have in ancient India for this terrain that we would say would include emotions and feelings and really all aspects of our experience. And so I'm interested in that difference.

I think so often because we're English speakers and English is so much the language of modern scientific work that folks tend to think that English sort of carves nature of the joints, or that English categories are basic fundamental realities in some way. But that ignores a certain kind of history where even the word *emotion* is not that old, even in English. Before that, English speakers would've spoken of sentiments or affects or other kinds of phenomena. And the English

word emotion itself is rather contested. There's lots of disagreement about what it means and what its essential features are.

So I like the fact that we have in the ancient Pali sources an incredibly sophisticated technical vocabulary that just operates ground up differently and describes and shapes experience quite differently around this. And I think that can kind of shift a little bit some of our sense, almost a metaphysical reading of English terms, that these are somehow fundamental when they are historically conditioned. And so I like just that fact itself, but I also like that the Pali psychology, if you will, really gives us a whole new way to watch and observe experience and a whole different set of categories. I don't know if it's better than modern psychology, but it's different. And I think getting a handle on how differently you can watch and observe the very constructions of your experience, I think that itself helps you get some distance from assuming that things are sort of baked in.

James Shaheen: Seeing an entirely different framework, as we see in Buddhism for understanding emotion, gets at the notion that there's not a finite set of universal emotions. In one of the passages in the book, the Buddha is asked how many types of feelings there are, and he keeps giving different answers. It's like two, three, five, six, eight, thirty-six, even one hundred and eight. So can you briefly tell us about this teaching and the significance of the Buddha's refusal to give a definitive answer?

Maria Heim: Yeah, I really love that teaching because it's so counter, as you say, to so much of the modern thinking about emotions that we get from Darwin or someone like Paul Ekman or the movie *Inside Out*, where there are these basic, universal six or eight or whatever number of universal emotions, and that's been really in some ways a dominant kind of conception of emotions in the West for a while, although it's getting sort of dismantled, I think, by the work of someone like Lisa Feldman Barrett and so on. Some neuroscientists are not finding the support for that.

But what I like is that the Buddha is resisting that kind of idea. And so the passage that is in the book and that James is referring to is a passage where people are arguing. It looks like it's a monk and then a layperson who's a carpenter, and they're arguing about, you know, "I heard the Buddhist say that there's two emotions, or two vedanas, two feelings, pleasure and painful," and then the other guy says, "No, three, pleasant, painful, and neutral." And they keep arguing about this. And so the point of this kind of analysis is to arrive at some kind of ontological reduction of the basic elements, the basic emotions, or something. And so they can't resolve their debate. And so they take it to the Buddha, and the Buddha says, "Well, sometimes I teach in a way that it's helpful to talk about two of them, and sometimes in a different context to a different purpose I talk about the three of them, and sometimes I talk about five different kinds of emotions or vedana, pleasure, painful, neutral, happiness, and distress, and sometimes I talk about six, and sometimes I talk about a different collection of six, and sometimes I talk about eighteen, and sometimes . . . "

So he's very pragmatic in his teachings about these kinds of experiences, that it's not drilled down to what's fundamental. It's more what are your different contexts when you would want to start to notice different aspects of your experience in certain kinds of ways. And so that kind of pushback on those more reductionistic or even essentialist modes of thinking, of course, that's something we often see in Buddhism, but here we see it very directly around this question of feelings.

James Shaheen: So one of the threads of the book is the way that these teachings are first and foremost practical and therapeutic, and I think that what you just said is a very good example, and they can fundamentally shift our relationship to our own feelings and in the process bring a sense of freedom. So can you talk about meta-awareness and how noticing and categorizing feelings can actually restructure our habitual patterns and change how we feel?

Maria Heim: Yeah. Good. So, of course there are really good Buddhist answers that I'll turn to in a second on this. But the neuroscience also seems to be suggesting this. There's some

evidence, and they're not sure about the direction of causality, but the more granular your emotional vocabulary is, which would involve a certain kind of presumably meta-attention to your experience, the more it seems to be associated with well-being. So that's a kind of interesting discovery, I think, in some of the neuroscience.

But with respect to Buddhist thinking, I think you see it right away in some of the early passages in the book that I've translated, that the Buddha will sort of decide even before he has become the Buddha, was a bodhisattva, to just talk about this, "Before I was even enlightened, I sat down and started watching my experience and dividing up my experience into different piles. Whatever was associated with ill will or cruelty or desire, I put in one pile, and then whatever I noticed in my experience that didn't have those things, I put in a separate pile," or he'll talk about, "I watched my feelings, and I noticed the pleasant, the painful, the neutral." So he keeps coming back to just stop and watch what unfolds.

And so that right there is an interesting move in terms of the study of psychology is that we are always experiencing the world through our emotions, through our valences, through our feelings, through our perceptions. And so we're sort of in them, if you will, but it's an interesting move then to turn them around and say, OK, now I'm going to look at them as objects so they're not just a part of my subjectivity, the way I'm perceiving the world, but they now become objects of my scrutiny. And so that's what he's doing there is saying, "I'm not just going to experience the world enmeshed in them, but I'm going to pull out of them a little bit and see them as objects." And so that's mindfulness. That's this close observation of experience, and even that much, it seems, if I'm reading this material correctly, even that can be therapeutic, because you step out of them and you see where they go, and you step out of them and you see what's causing them and where they lead. And even that ability to observe that is already to gain a little bit of distance from them. So I think that's some of the practical therapeutic work that these texts are describing and also enacting.

James Shaheen: Yeah, because so often we seem to be trapped in a kind of reactivity or repetitive behavior, or even addictive behavior, so this methodology could easily help break those patterns or reactivity or even addictive behavior. Is that right? Is that what people are finding?

Maria Heim: Yeah, and I mentioned in the book the work of Judson Brewer and others who are actually using some of the Pali material to describe some of that and to test it out. Yeah, there again, I'm not a scientist myself, but apparently it does seem that when people turn with curiosity to their experience and turn it into objects of observation, that can be the first step toward beginning to break down some of those cycles of gratification and addiction and all of that.

James Shaheen: Yeah, you mentioned curiosity. I think that's so key because without curiosity, we're just going to be responding to pleasant or unpleasant or boredom. And I think curiosity is so big in bringing about the kind of investigation that would allow us to objectify these things and have a kind of meta-awareness.

Maria Heim: Yeah, I like the curiosity piece.

James Shaheen: Yeah. So you also point out the paradoxical relationship between pleasure and pain, where part of the progression is coming to see that even a pleasant feeling can be a kind of pain, yet the subsiding of dukkha is also said to be a state of sublime pleasure. So can you tell us a little bit about the paradox at play here?

Maria Heim: Yeah. So I think that there's at least two paradoxes of happiness in the material that they're very aware of and they're working with. So this one that you're referring to, I think, is the fact that they're using the same word for two quite different meanings. That's really I think the playfulness that's dealing with that paradox.

But the idea is that even our pleasurable moments, our pleasurable valences, when we snatch a bit of pleasure in this life, and this is the larger teachings of dukkha in the first noble truth, we're

also aware at some level that it's fleeting and it's going to be lost or or that we are going to shift in our desires. And so the kind of desire-based gratification and pleasure has an element of dukkha in it, according to so many of these sources. It has an element of loss even in the experience of it. So they're just sort of aware of that as they're watching that kind of experience.

But then you have these passages that say nirvana is happiness or pleasure or *sukha*, the same word. And so then someone else will say, "Well, how can it be that nirvana, which is beyond these feelings and the sense of desire-based gratification and repulsion and pleasure and pain, that kind of stuff, nirvana is beyond that, so it should be without feeling. So how can that be described as sukha? How can that be described as happiness?" And so they're going straight for this paradox, using the same word to describe being beyond that notion of pleasure that's based on gratification. And so then the Buddha will say, or Sariputta will say, just the fact that there is no more of this hedonic treadmill of pleasure and pain, that's what we mean by happiness. And so they're trying to get at a kind of happiness nirvana that is beyond the gratification-based bouncing around between pleasure and pain, and they're choosing to use the same word for it because I think there are other words they could have used or they could have invented. There's so much rich vocabulary in these texts, but they're using the same word for it, which makes it really striking that they're inviting us to see getting beyond the ordinary conception of pleasure as the highest pleasure.

James Shaheen: Yeah, so I guess the way we would understand sukha, depending on whether it's the sublime happiness or ordinary everyday pleasure, is through context in the texts. How do you decide to approach this challenge in your translation?

Maria Heim: Yeah, so of course it's a huge problem when you have a word that's so pregnant with meaning. So this word sukha, and you can hear it's almost like the opposite of dukkha, if you know dukkha, which a lot of Buddhists will. Sometimes it's just describing this pleasant valence, and so I really just kept it to pleasure or pain, or pleasant valence in those contexts. But then when you have these other kinds of passages that are saying that nirvana is sukha, where

they're using the same word, I could have either said something like bliss and just switched meanings entirely to indicate that difference. But then I would've lost the fact that they're using the same word, which I think itself is a kind of playfulness, and the Buddha is sort of forcing us to think about these questions. I can't remember, but sometimes I would use happiness, sometimes I would use pleasure, but I would also then try to explain a little bit to the reader what's going on. So yeah, I don't know. It's hard to be a translator. We have to make choices.

James Shaheen: Yeah. Maybe you can help me here. I'm trying to remember where it is in the Pali canon. I mean, there are so many analogies and metaphors used to express, say, pleasure and its empty promise in the ordinary sense of the word pleasure. And I think there's one point where they talk about chewing on something that is delicious and flavorful and juicy, and after a while it becomes like a dried-out husk. It very much described our pursuit of pleasure in that repetitive, reactive, sort of addictive way. And I'm trying to remember, I can't remember where that occurs, where you're chewing on something that is juicy and then it becomes leathery and a dried-out husk or something like that. Or maybe I'm mixing metaphors that are in the canon, but it's such an interesting approach to pleasure in the canon, that it is something ultimately that is a false promise. It is not sublime happiness. So what about sublime happiness or nirvana? It's beyond pleasure, pain, and neutral. How did you understand that idea? It's something that we are often told we can't really even refer to or talk about; we can only point to.

Maria Heim: Yeah. So again, the Pali texts, in some ways, are really trying to describe the whole gamut of pleasure and happiness, and so toward the end of the chapter that I'm doing with vedana, we get into more and more really refined and quite rarefied understandings of sukha. And so they'll be describing the *jhana* meditations and how the different states develop, and after the four jhanas, these additional experiences that you attain that are correlated with realms in the cosmos, actually, and different kinds of heavenly states. And they get incredibly rarefied, like the realm of neither perception nor nonperception that is described as a kind of blissful realm. So I mean, those are hard to translate. They're very inaccessible. The language is just more evocative,

at least for me, than something I instantly recognize as an experience. But I did want to include those in the translation, because even if you're just trying to imagine what it is to be in a state of blissful awareness that has no subject and object or no conceptions of perception or what those beings experience or the fact that you could achieve those while sitting on your meditation cushion as you get into these more and more refined states. To me, it was just evocative for the imagination, I think.

James Shaheen: The nice way it's described, you take us a little bit through the jhanas in the book, or the states of concentration, and it's a progression, but it seems like it's a progression of reduction or subtraction. This falls away, then this falls away, and then there's neither this nor that, it's all sort of negatory. Is that right?

Maria Heim: Yeah, and I think, I mean, back to what I would say is a second kind of paradox of happiness that the texts are also thinking about and then dealing with in precisely this way is that happiness is a sort of thing that you can't chase. By desiring it, it's already outside of you, so you can't sort of demand that you're going to feel happiness. True happiness sort of sneaks up on us, if you will, or it appears, but it's not something I can manufacture by some kind of fiat of will or something. And so the texts are aware of that, right? You're not just going to go and insist that it appear. And so what it looks like, how it comes to emerge, is exactly what you described. It's a kind of reduction, getting rid of stuff, getting rid of, at the grossest level, immoral actions that are going to distract you and cause you anxiety and problems, getting rid of problematic states, greed, hatred, delusion being always the big three, but all of their affiliates.

Getting rid of stuff, other states will naturally kind of emerge. So as we know, getting rid of anger and hatred, loving-kindness will emerge. Getting rid of immoral action, then you don't have to feel remorse and you can feel a sense of relaxation or delight as a result of that. And so it sort of seems like happiness is not something, and they even used the word in I think the passage, the upward spiral that you have put on on the website, they use the language that you don't need to have an intention for it because it will come about to the extent that you've gotten rid of other

stuff. So that's happening in the jhanas, as you say, and then it's happening in some of these other passages in different ways.

James Shaheen: You mentioned the upward spiral. There's something I like about that. There's this sort of self-generating momentum. One leads to the next, and they are synergistic. So you're pushed upward once you eliminate things, beginning with ethics, like you eliminate the bad behavior. Can you say something about that natural momentum that develops that's described in the canon?

Maria Heim: Yeah, it's a very striking passage. I think it's actually one of the most subtle and most important passages in the whole Pali canon. And it just slides right in there. It's called something like *No Need for an Intention Sutta*. It's in the *Anguttara Nikaya*, and it starts just with this.

For one who is practicing morality, so not stealing, not lying, not committing sexual misconduct, not harming beings, not taking intoxicants, so basically the usual five or ten moral precepts, for one who's practicing that, there's no need to have the desire to have a lack of remorse. So just the fact that they put it into negative terms, you don't have to wish that you didn't have remorse; non-remorse, it says, will just naturally arise. So I love the idea that there's something called non-remorse that would pervade your experience, just a lack of all the anxiety and worry and regret that might come along with having to fret about bad things you've done.

So the state of non-remorse, I think it goes from there, I should make sure I have the text in front of me, from non-remorse, you don't have to have the intention, you don't have to manufacture the idea, "May delight arise in me." And then it says, "For it is the nature of things, monks, that delight arises in one free of remorse." So that delight will just emerge. It's the way of things. It's a natural part of how we work.

And then he goes on from there, "For monks, for one who is delighted does not need to have the intention, "May joy arise in me," for it is the nature of things, monks, that joy arises and those who are delighted," and then it keeps going. "One who is joyful doesn't have to intend the idea, "May my body calm down," for it is the nature of things, monks, that one who's joyful has a calm body." And so it goes from that if you have a calm body, then you can feel happy. So again, watch how many different terms we're getting for joy and delight. Now we're back at happy. So there are these multiple kinds of pleasant feeling that, you know, they've got a really rich vocabulary of happiness that's emerging.

And then we have, if you feel happy, you don't have to manufacture the intention, "May my mind become concentrated," because if you're happy, your mind can naturally concentrate. And if you can concentrate, then you can come to know and see things as they truly are, and then it's the nature of things that one who is concentrated knows and sees things the way they truly are, and then it moves on from there. One who knows and sees things as they truly are does not have to have the intention, "May I become disenchanted and dispassionate," because if you truly see the way things are, you will become disenchanted. And so then, we have this: Monks, one who is disenchanted and dispassionate does not need the intention, "Let me realize for myself a way of knowing and seeing that is free," for it is the nature of things that one who is disenchanted and dispassionate realizes for oneself a way of knowing and seeing that is free. And so then he kind of goes back through the whole spiral again, just reminding us that these states flow one from the other very naturally, but the whole thing starts with removal. Get rid of the bad stuff, and then you find yourself in this spiral.

James Shaheen: You know, I'd like to go back for a moment to the word *sukha* because it's so central to all of this, and the idea of ordinary pleasure is something that we want to extract or get or find. I mean, we're constantly looking for the next pleasurable experience, whereas in the upward spiral, it's just a natural consequence of the practice beginning with ethical behavior. So in that way, there's the sukha that you can try to get, like pleasure, a pleasant feeling, and there's

the kind that almost appears out of nowhere as you're doing the practice. So it's not an acquisitive sort of relationship to that pleasure. Rather, it's a natural consequence of, say, beginning with right behavior. Is that right?

Maria Heim: That's right. So we spend most of our time trying to chase down pleasure. But the true happiness here is precisely the thing you can't chase down and acquire. It will come to you in this other kind of way.

James Shaheen: Well, maybe you can't answer this, I don't know, but whether it's from the point of view of neuroscience or the canon, why do we fall for it again and again and again?

Maria Heim: Well, you can get pretty far with Buddhism by just reminding yourself how greed, hatred, and delusion reinforce each other. So they say this is the heart of our human problem, is that we're full of desire, we are constantly repelling and having aversion toward pain, and we're ignorant time and again about how those work. And those three things are really involved together to keep us from seeing this.

James Shaheen: Yeah. And so in other words, anger, greed, and delusion are basically the downward spiral. It's the reverse, which takes me to the word dukkha, because we haven't talked a lot about that. You mentioned it for a moment, and it's translated as suffering, as anxiety, as stress, all sorts of different understandings. Like sukha, it has many different meanings. You know, it's translated as suffering or a painful state depending on the context. So can you talk about these different meanings of dukkha in the way that we talked about sukha and how you approached translating that word?

Maria Heim: Yeah, good. So dukkha, you know, these terms are so full, but dukkha can mean, just as we've been talking about starting with sukha, is that when he is just saying, OK, I'm going to watch the valences of my experience, pleasant, painful, and neutral. So the painful thing is dukkha. So dukkha can be anything from stubbing your toe or burning your tongue on the

morning coffee that's too hot to the existential, you know, or to the terrible searing pain of losing someone you love or being fired from your job. So dukkha is just a negative tone, the painful tone or valence to any of the countless ways that human beings can suffer or find pain or experience pain. I mean, it's just huge, and some of the text and the commentary texts, Buddhaghosa I do a lot of work on, and he'll say stuff like, there's no way to get to the bottom of all the different kinds of dukkha that there are, just the pain, the different kinds of pain that human beings can be subject to. So it just means that painful valence at one level. But of course, you know, I think when it's being used in the context of the first noble truth, it's that deep existential dukkha, that you need that insight, which is more than just, "Oh, there's gonna be some painful scrapes along the way." It's that suffering is baked into being a contingent being with these desires in a world that's impermanent, that is going to cause us dukkha over the course of human lifetime. And that then becomes the central problem of what these Buddhist texts are trying to address.

James Shaheen: You know what I found very helpful with this, back to the upward spiral for a second, and then the anger, greed, and delusion and what I'll just call the downward spiral, there is no such description. It's funny because it seems very clear and binary, but in fact, the practice itself sometimes can fall prey to those desires for a particular mind state. So you have a lot of people who are trying to achieve the jhanas thinking of it in terms of a positive mind state rather than these things happening or simply occurring as a result of the practice. So, when you were talking about nirvana and let's call them higher states for want of a better description there still remains that sense of conceit or self. So how does this notion of self play into sometimes even hijacking our practice and taking us back down the path of "I want to feel this state, I want to feel these things," because it's very blurry.

Maria Heim: Yeah, that's a problem. And it's one that's in the text, the text spot, none of the ones that I've translated here, but there are some sutta passages where you need to even. I can't remember exactly how they go, but the Buddha will instruct a disciple that to the extent that

you're saying, "I did this," or "I've become that," you've got to get rid of what is called *ahamkara*, manufacturing that sense of I, because as long as there's that residual "I" and the first-person pronoun that is naming or acquiring, you're not there yet. So he'll say that. So they spot this problem: You just haven't got it yet because you still see yourself as owning these or acquiring them. So there is that acknowledgment in the text that probably the hardest conceit or the most residual hindrance, if you will, to letting or having these states emerge naturally is that sense of self, which, as we know in Buddhism, is the real problem.

James Shaheen: Yeah. You know, Sarah Fleming, our podcast producer, whom you know now, she and I often like the same things when we read a text, and we both jumped on the upward spiral. That's why, if our listeners want to have a look at it, it's at tricycle.org. But we also really loved the *brahmaviharas* chapter. That was really wonderful. Do you want to talk about the brahmaviharas and how they fit into all of this?

Maria Heim: Yeah, so I love the brahmaviharas. And by the way, I've just finished another book. It'll be out in December, in September, I think, *How to Truly Love*, which will be in the same series where I'll be translating Buddhaghosa, the main commentator in the Pali tradition on his chapter on the brahmaviharas, so it's something I've spent a lot of time thinking about at the commentary level.

But the way it comes up here, and the part that I've translated here, is this just kind of beautiful thing where there's a young man who wants to know basically the road to heaven, the pathway to heaven, and so he asks the Buddha, and the Buddha says, "Well, where are you from?" And he names some village. And he is like, "You would be able to find your way back to that village, right?" And he is like, "Yeah." And the Buddha says, "I can find my way back to the brahmaviharas because they're thought to be heavenly states, and I know those states really well, and I know this place is really well." So many of these states of mind are also cosmological heavenly places, so that's just a beautiful, interesting thing about how they're describing the genre of meditations, but so many other meditations too. It's both something you can achieve on

your meditation cushion, it's like visiting heaven, and it could be a place you achieve after death if you're reborn there.

So that's how he's thinking about what are called the brahmaviharas, which means the dwellings of these brahma gods that are thought to be loving and gentle in this way. And so from the beginning, we get it as a kind of framing of it as these are states or places to go that your mind can take you. But what are they? So they seem to be, again, this logic of removal so that to the extent that you get rid of, in the case of loving-kindness, you get rid of hatred and anger, you become more spacious. And so he'll talk about, you know, try it out in one particular direction, wanting all beings in that direction to be happy. So for loving-kindness, the content is, May they be happy." And so you wish that for all the beings in one direction, and then you try it in another direction for all the beings you might encounter going that way, may they be happy, and then you keep trying it in every direction. And so as you do it more and you rid yourself of any kind of prejudice or anger or resentment or dislike of the beings in each direction, your mind has less barriers, less blinkers, less constraints and constrictions, And so your mind becomes more spacious and you move around in the world in a really spacious, free way because you're never encountering somebody that you have a bias or a hatred or a grudge against that you throw up against the world. So you get more spacious and more free, and the language of it is so important. So it's basically freedom of the loving heart. I was back and forth about whether I should translate it as mind, but also mind and heart are sort of the same in some ways. So I wound up translating freedom of the loving mind.

The connection between this kind of love where you become more spacious and you don't have any barriers against anybody is actually an extraordinary kind of freedom that they're seeking and spaciousness. And so that's how they're talked about. And so the same too with compassion, which is the second brahmavihara, and then sympathetic joy. So compassion is getting rid of cruelty, sympathetic joy is getting rid of envy and equanimity, and in each case, you're creating a spaciousness in your experience that allows you to take in more of the world and be more free

because you're free of the worst kinds of constraints, which are the usual barricades and hatreds that we throw up against other people.

James Shaheen: You know, there are so many strategies that come up in the Pali canon, and I was working with a meditation teacher once, and I was having a particular thought and he said, "I'll give you a very secret, esoteric teaching." And I said, "What's that?" He said, "Cut it out." So that was pretty funny. But there's also in the teachings the strategy of cultivating those brahmavihara states, cultivating a different state of mind rather than repressing or eliminating. Can you say something about that, this process that you just described of, say, cultivating other states as an antidote to, say, anger, greed, and delusion that beset us?

Maria Heim: Yeah, so again, I mostly know about this from what I've read in Buddhaghosa. But I think that word cultivation, even though it's not exactly cognate with the Pali terms in question, but that word cultivation is the ticket to this again. So what are you doing when you're cultivating land or making a garden or something? Most of what you're doing is removing the bad stuff, right? You might be watering the plants a little bit, but you're removing, you know, you're making a nice field by removing the stones and the grid and the weeds, particularly the weeds, so that something else can grow. And so Buddhaghosa's whole techniques for developing loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity are in large measure removing stuff. And again, with this, I think it's very deep in the Pali thinking that you get rid of the bad stuff and the good stuff will come. They cut it out.

James Shaheen: So the word that you're referring to, you're a translator, so I'll ask you, is *bhavana*, which is often translated as cultivation or cultivating. What is some nuance there? Where do you see it as not entirely cognate with cultivation or to cultivate?

Maria Heim: Well, it's not cognate in terms of the agricultural metaphor, but it is something more like bringing into being. And then I think that's where we've gotten this English term cultivation, like how we emerge, right? I think that, again, in light of what we've been talking

about, maybe something like helping emerge, helping something come into being is what it is, probably. But that's a term we often just translate as meditation, cultivation.

James Shaheen: Well, I like the agricultural metaphors because they really do work to describe what we're referring to. I just want to ask you one more thing about translation. And you do something that's very nice, I think. You keep some of the repetition, and often we think of it as a characteristic of oral transmission or an oral tradition. These people are reciting these things, and so these refrains can serve as mnemonic devices, but they also serve in another way. Tell me about the delight you take in reading the passages and keeping the refrains.

Maria Heim: Yeah, so part of that is an artifact of the chapter I'm translating from the *Samyutta Nikaya*, which is the nature of that particular text, one of the four main books, if you will, of the Pali canon, is that it's gathering teachings from other places and putting them under one in one chapter. So it's a little bit repetitive in that, you know, to gather everything up and put it in without pruning the redundancies or something. So it has that. And so I did leave some stuff out, just because there was so much, but you're right to say I did make a call to include, especially certain the reader will notice, you know, many of these texts come back to, OK, notice again three kinds of feelings emerged, pleasant, painful, and neutral. So that's repeated numerous times in the book. And as you say, I think that had a kind of power while I was translating it, and maybe I'm thinking of this book as both a kind of interesting study for those of us who are interested in emotions and this different kind of psychology, but it also could be a kind of manual for meditators, and the texts themselves were. How do you watch your experience? Well, you have these phrases in your mind, and you then know your experience. And so having them repeated in the kind of basic cadence that keeps coming up over and over again is enacting the meditations that they're not simply describing; they are actually creating. And so I think the book wound up—maybe, we'll have to see what people make of it—having that quality a little bit itself of inviting one into one's experiences repeatedly. Let's go back to that. What kinds of valence are you experiencing? You know, so just calling you back into that observation.

James Shaheen: Yeah. You know, I also found the repetition allows something to sink in at a deeper level. For instance, if I am, say, doing metta practice or maitri or loving-kindness practice, and the phrases are repeated, repeated, repeated, and I think this isn't working, whatever that could mean, and then all of a sudden I notice in an interaction with a stranger, I'm much kinder all of a sudden. And so it sank in. It sank in, it happened despite me, you know, so it was very interesting in that way. I find the repetition helpful in that way. But also as a kind of literary form, there's a cadence, is that right, to the texts.

Maria Heim: Yeah, yeah. I think so. I was just going to just say, back to the translation point, that I'm trying to figure out how to translate for a broader kind of audience. You're always trying to get something that's both accessible to the target language in English, but you're also trying to capture something that is strange and different. Right? If it were like completely all of the strangeness and difference, and you know, these are texts that are at least 2,000 years old and to a totally different context. So for me, I'm trying to make it as accessible and readable for an English speaker as I can, but I don't want to lose some of its strangeness and difference. And so some of that repetition and just the quality of the text were my wanting to hold onto that. And I don't mean strange pejoratively, I just mean difference and the distance. But that we could still somehow savor aesthetically, or appreciate or allow it to change us.

James Shaheen: Well, it allowed me to think, as something that you were trying to convey or have successfully conveyed, I think, and that's, wow, there's this possibility of an entirely different emotional life from the one that we're so familiar with.

Maria Heim: Yeah.

James Shaheen: You know, the interesting thing about this is that you're using the word feeling and so many people associate Buddhism with a complete repression or suppression or elimination of feeling. It turns out that's not so entirely true.

Maria Heim: Yeah, that's not true at all. We started the conversation, take a beeline straight for feelings. This is for one who feels, and it's not about repressing your feelings. It's about watching them and understanding them and seeing how they work. So yeah, and I think, too, especially sometimes the Pali gets saddled with that, the Pali Theravada sources get saddled with that assumption of things being very austere or emotionally distant or something. And that's not how I've ever experienced these texts. So, to the extent that that's coming through, that's a good thing. I think.

James Shaheen: Yeah. Well, that definitely did come through. So, anything else before we close, Maria?

Maria Heim: Not that I can think of, but thank you so much, James. It's always so much fun.

James Shaheen: Yeah, it's a lot of fun for me too. I really enjoyed this. So Maria Heim, it's been a great pleasure. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *How to Feel*, available now. Thanks, Maria.

Maria Heim: Thank you, James.

James Shaheen: You've been listening to *Tricycle Talks* with Maria Heim. To read an excerpt from Maria's book, visit tricycle.org. 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!