

Jerry:

Hello my friend.

Koshin:

Hello dear Jerry.

Jerry:

It's so wonderful to be with you and to see you and look at your smiling face and it's a delight. Hey, before we get started, take a moment my dear friend, and just introduce yourself.

Koshin:

So my name is Koshin and I am a husband and a monk and a friend and with my beautiful husband, we co-founded the New York Zen Center for Contemplative Care where we are located in New York City, but serving the world through zen practice and contemplative medicine for physicians and contemplative foundational programs for anyone who wants to learn how to bridge the gap between their values and what they're actually doing in their day to day life. And so I feel like my life is really one of service and love or maybe service through love.

Jerry:

I love that introduction. I remember our earliest encounters, and I should warn the listeners that we're friends, we're deep friends and we're like soul brothers. And we figured that out from the minute we both started talking and we would throw the occasional Yiddish word at each other and your Yiddish is much better than mine. So I'll say that. But I remember thinking about some of the earliest conversations that we had and thinking about the work you and Choto do and the whole zen center. And part of what I carry is that in addition to helping people be with the transition, aka also known as death, you really are caretakers of suffering. In my experience, part of the work that you do is you help so many people understand what it means to be with suffering. And I just want you to know that I am deeply grateful for that work that you do.

Koshin:

Thank you.

Jerry:

One of my teachers, and I think a mutual friend of ours, Parker Palmer, likes to say that violence is what we do when we don't know what to do with suffering. And what you and Choto do is help us to know what to do with suffering. So I'm grateful for that. But we are here to talk about and celebrate in some ways and yay, the hard copy just came. Your newest book, your latest book, which is called *Untangled*. And I read an early draft of the book and was deeply moved by it. In fact, I said something about it being a love letter with a brokenhearted 'cause that's what it really felt like.

And my first question to get us going is having reread it over the last couple of days, I was struck by even some of the quotes that you open up with. And so I'm going to read a quote and then ask you to tell us a little bit about it. So the first quote is "The inner tangle and the outer tangle, this generation is entangled in a tangle. And so I ask of Gotama this question, who succeeds in disentangling this tangling"? And that was by Samyutta Nikaya, is that right?

Koshin:

Yeah, yeah. It's a heartbreaking, and to me what is required in this life is to allow our hearts to not just break but also be a companion to our own brokenheartedness and to be able to... One of my teachers, Bernie Glassman, would talk about the importance of bearing witness to suffering. That we're not just in our suffering but also witnessing it so that we can also witness the suffering of the world. And I know for myself, coming back from generations of people who endured and immense suffering in Eastern Europe, and I also grew up with grandparents who are constantly telling me to never trust your neighbors because one day they could come for you as their parents had experienced their own neighbors in Eastern Europe turning on them and in incredibly violent ways and killing a lot of our family.

And so that tangle and so just to appreciate the generations of tangle. And for many years I thought about that the last decade or so, people talking about epigenetic trauma and how trauma's handed down and how that caused so much of the trauma of my own childhood, of the sexual abuse and physical abuse and verbal abuse and bullying and cetera. But also I've been thinking about when you think about that teaching about who's going to untangle it, it's also to realize, I began to think about, oh those ancestors of mine, I also come from a lineage of people who notice that something is wrong or scary and take action.

And so most of my extended family were all slaughtered and murdered. But I also come from the people in the family who said, "This is scary". And everyone thought that they were crazy. They're like, that's not going to happen here. People are good. People are not going to do that. And they said, "That's maybe so, but we have to get out of here". And so I also realized that I come from an epigenetic courage. And so to me that's also part of the bearing witness of our own suffering.

And so lately, just in the last really couple weeks, I've been really feeling into and the gratitude towards my ancestors who said, "Hang on a second here. We have to find a way to escape and to get out of here". So to me, the who's going to untangle the tangle is it's up to each of us to learn how to pause, learn how to reflect, and the only way to really do that is by being awake and receptive and connected to others. And if we're not connected to others, that's our prescription to fill, is to how do we learn how to connect to others.

Jerry:

So you've anticipated some of my next questions, but I want to take it back a little bit and what I'm hearing is the tangle, as you describe it, is in a sense, perhaps a piece of the tangle is the how we relate to the suffering. And you're identifying the suffering that your ancestors experienced as well as your own and the relationship between those two. And I feel compelled. I just want to pause for a moment and acknowledge something very, very important and powerful that you said, which was that so many of your ancestors were slaughtered and you know me well enough, my dear brother and friend, that it's hard for me to look away from suffering.

I blame all my Buddhist teachers on that one because I feel it. I felt it as soon as you said that. And I know by my highlighting that I want our listeners to feel that, because it's not just the descendants of say, pogroms against Jews, but it's the descendants of the formerly enslaved. It's the descendants of the victims of genocide and that haunt the earth and are with us. We're a few days out from celebrating the indigenous of this land, which was a rising out of recognition of the genocide of the indigenous. And what I'm hearing is in that teaching, the inner tangle and the outer tangle, and I was stuck again by that phrase, this generation is entangled in a tangle. And I want to ask, which generation is not entangled in a tangle?

Koshin:

Well, that's so amazing about that teaching, which is about 2,500 years old. And it stays so contemporary. It's like that's just how it is. And yet to me the charge is like, oh, this generation like, oh, it's up to you and I, how do we work with it now, 'cause it's so easy to blame. It's so easy to create difference and to point the finger. And to me it's like, all right, it's up to us. It's up to us.

Jerry:

So you open the book... See this is how minutely I've read the book. You open the book dedicating it to your uncle. Yeah. Would you mind reading that dedication? I think you have a copy of the book in front of you.

Koshin:

I do, yeah. "For my uncle Victor Honigmann, who was the first person I heard speak openly of terror and trauma as the gate to walk through toward healing and love".

Jerry:

Yeah. What is it about Victor, uncle Victor? What is it about him or what was it about him?

Koshin:

I lived in a home that he came to live in for a time and in the home where very good people with deep values around justice and equality and civil rights and caring. And those same people allowed or inflicted such harm. And that's where so much harm was happening at the same time and such violence. And when I would raise it, I was always told that that wasn't what was going on. I was misunderstanding. I was just misunderstanding. And so that gaslighting was so unsettling and somehow as a young person, somehow I understood that that's what was happening, that understood that actually it was happening and there was something wrong with them.

And I didn't know what it was. And it was not until my Uncle Victor came and lived with us and he escaped concentration camp and he was very much caught in the trauma of it. And almost every day there was this retelling of the whole story, which I could probably tell almost verbatim today if we had a couple of hours because he would intricately retell the whole story. And it didn't really shift much, but it was just out of that was really, I'd never heard someone talk about terror and trauma openly. And it's like that's what happened. And it was awful and it was terrifying and it made me numb and he would just share the whole process of it and I would sit with him all the time to hear it because it felt like someone finally telling the truth.

While I was not in the same experience, of course, his was much more while he was in a concentration camp and I was in a home. But it's not about one suffering is better or greater or lesser, it's just that there were different forms of suffering and his were very extreme. And I just felt like that was the beginning of love and what you can do for someone and what he would just sit there and to then just look at me and said, "I see you".

Jerry:

Yeah.

Koshin:

And he's like, "I see what's happening".

Jerry:

And we'll just acknowledge that relationship as well. Because I can see how much it meant to you to be seen. And I want to offer to you that I think that you talked about Bernie Glassman, the great Zen teacher and his wish for us to bear witness. I want to offer to you that I think that as Uncle Victor bore witness to you and defer the truth of your experience, you write about it so eloquently. Really in the first page of the first book, one of the people lived in my house would often go into rages. Just one of the people in my house would often go into rages, he bore witness to what you were going through. But my friend, I think you bore witness to what he was going through.

Koshin:

We were healing each other. Yeah.

Jerry:

You were healing each other as you were loving each other, as you were bearing witness to each other, as you were possibly disentangling each other. Go back to that first teaching.

Koshin:

Yes. And that's just that spacious awareness and the bearing the witness. I think for me it's also the word bearing it, learning how to bear it. It's like what Sensei White was saying, just like to not move away from the pain, just to bear. It has a strength and a courage to it that I feel like is required and that there's also this beauty that happens. And just remember just looking at him and feeling the tears in my eyes and seeing the tears in his eyes and not having really to say anything at that point and just to really... And yet we were saying so much.

Jerry:

We were bearing witness in the silence. You were loving each other and healing each other in that silence.

Koshin:

And there's two of us. You know how few of us how really have those kinds of relationships where we slow down enough to actually do that for each other and with each other.

Jerry:

Yeah. I thought you brought forth something really powerful where you talk about the Covid-19 pandemic tightening the suspicion, often unnamed but still lurking under the surface of everything, that they'll never be enough to meet what life brings them and that the vulnerability or our fragility was exposed. And then I think you gave this beautiful image. You said, "We try to hide the tangles we're caught in under fancy clothes. We pretend that the lopsided way we're walking through life as a swagger". Amen brother. Amen. In a sense, I connect two thoughts and I think that one of the ways of we are tangled, even though the book is called *Untangled*, which is a way as a call to action, what we're talking about is the condition that exists that needs attending. And it's that tangled nature. And one of

the ways that a lack of bearing witness, a lack of knowing what to do with suffering, one of the ways it shows up is in that tangle. Am I getting that right?

Koshin:

Yeah. And I think it's just actually learning how to honor it. I think that goes back to the book is structured around the four noble truths and that there's suffering in this life. And one of the reasons I wanted to write this book is because I wanted to go more deeply in my own study of the four noble truths to really spend time with them and some of the other books that I was reading about it, quickly go through the first three and then spend a lot of time, because the last part is the path, the eightfold path, which is beautiful. And yet I felt like wow, we really need to spend time with the first three, the one of the nobility of our own suffering. That there's suffering and it's noble. And I just love how some people translate it in a different way or like, oh it's not really noble, it means this or that.

But there's something about the nobility of our own suffering. And I think that almost saying it provides the witness to it. And so as I began to write and actually looking at my own life and life itself and finding the nobility of that suffering, of the struggle, of the tangle, the hurt, the fear, all of it, and saying all of this is noble, noble strength. It takes noble strength to meet our suffering and to say, "I see you". I'm with you, fear. I see you, terror. I see you, confusion, anxiety, whatever that is and all the things that I've experienced in my life. And to really take time to unpack just that.

But I'm just also realizing that that moment with Victor was also in that time with him in particular, when he was living with us, to where there was that nobility, it was the space between us of just saying yes, this is true. It reminds me of that incredible poem by an Anna Akhmatova, which is called Instead of a Preface where someone finds her in a crowd and this is during this terrible time in Russia and another terrible time in Russia and where this woman turns to her and recognizes her as this poet. And she said, "Can you describe this"? And she said, "Yes". And she feels like she sees something that looks like a smile on the woman's face. And so that kind of nobility of yes, this is real, and I feel like we live in a world where we always are trying to cover that. Cover what's hard. Cover what's real.

Jerry:

Yeah, I think it's that movement towards the swagger that you identified. We are going to mention the first three noble truths so that we can get to the promised land of the fourth noble truth. And I think that movement, which is so human and so common, actually is either consciously or unconsciously so disabling, so dishonoring of those who are of both the suffering and those who are carrying the suffering. And so we were talking before the recording started and I was mentioning the new book I'm working on, which is around the responsibilities leaders have to belonging, and one of the points that I make is that there's this phenomena that goes on when we deny the reality of the experience of our ancestors.

When we describe our ancestors as, for example, resilient European immigrants and we deny what their experience was that caused them to leave in the first place. Famine, oppression, it cuts off our ability, not only does it dishonor the fullness of their experience, but it cuts off our ability to empathetically connect. So in my case, some of my ancestors came from Italy and when we don't acknowledge that they were leaving a land ravaged by famine and prejudicial oppression from northerners, then it's possible to deny the humanity of immigrants on the southern border of the United States who are seeking exactly what my grandmother sought.

And I love the way you're framing this, this notion of this bearing witness. The bearing witness, which is the movement is, well that's painful. I don't want to look in that spot. Let me get to the promised land, the eightfold path. In my experience and you're the teacher here, but in my experience, the bearing witness to the first three noble truths makes the fourth noble truth true.

Koshin:

Correct.

Jerry:

It makes it powerful. It takes it out of the intellectual realm of okay, what are the eight things I need to do? Got it.

And I'm cutting my cholesterol and I'm lowering my carbohydrate intake. So I live a good life, i.e. no pain. And I think that attitude, that progressive forward outcome orientation attitude actually increases suffering. It's a form of violence if you will. Do I have that right?

Koshin:

I think for me in my experience it's deeply true that I feel that, I think we all do, our cats feel that desire to say they're trying to get something, trying to get it. They want their treats or they want their cookies or they want. We want. We want. And learning how to slow down with that wanting creature and which is of course the second noble truth of the giants of greed and rage and delusion and oh yes, I have this greed giant in me that can take over and squash people and elbow people so I can get what I want and it makes me not see you and it makes me not see anybody.

Jerry:

Makes me not see me.

Koshin:

Yeah. Well because you're so big. That's why I love thinking about them as giants and giants are these incredible mythological, across the world they are these mythological giants and in most cultures and it's like this exaggerated form of something that's uncontrollable and yet-

Jerry:

You know how obsessive I am about reading. And I read constantly and all and I've read so many different books. And I remember being struck when I was reading *Untangled* because you showed up in a way that I find deeply admirable, deeply noble. You spoke truth about your own experiences and the impulse, the way I think many of us try to manifest our body sufferer bowel, are vow to alleviate suffering to for stall enlightenment and freedom from rebirth in order to support the freedom from suffering of all beings. The way I see so many folks trying to do that is to rush ahead like that cat and get to the promised land of the eightfold path.

Here it is, here's the path. But what I saw you doing in this book is actually pausing and acknowledging the terror and the trauma that Uncle Victor acknowledged in you. And beautifully connecting the relationship between what your ancestors were going through, still carrying and in a sense passing along to you in that violence and with bravery and honesty, talking about your own experience of being bullied, your own experience of questioning your worth. And you did something that I think those of us

who hold a seat of power, I know it may feel weird, but I think as a teacher one does hold that seat. You went first in the book.

Koshin:

First of all, thank you. That's part of where we really connect. I feel like that that's the tender spot I feel that is required. It's always been what has drawn me to teachers, the willingness to share, look carefully and to really have an acuity, a loving and tender acuity of attention to our own mind. And how do we take care of that? And to me, part of how I love to teach is to really dig in to how is this actually my experience? So I'm not just teaching about some concept, but to the concept is helpful insofar as it's lived.

That's why I've always loved Buddhism in general, 'cause it's just not interested in any dogma, even though people turn it into dogma. But it's really experience based. And so how do we just really... How do I share with you that this is so fricking hard and I understand that it's really hard sometimes and it really sucks sometimes. And it's really... And what else is it? It's also noble to go back to that. And to me, that's what I kept rediscovering in the writing and actually in the whole writing process itself was like this rediscovering and feeling into and having new insights.

And actually it was so interesting that then doing the reading of the book for the audiobook actually changed many things in the book, because actually somehow learned speaking it. I was like, "Oh no. I was kept learning". And to me that's also the beauty of path itself of living is that if we're paying attention, what is not an exquisite, strange, powerful adventure of actually learning how to feel the joy, which is to feel the full range from terror to great joy. The joy that you can actually feel it all.

Jerry:

I think that what you've done is beautifully articulated. A path, call it the eightfold path, but a path to the disentanglement and to the untangling. And I think that what we're both circling around is that that path begins with bearing witness to the terror and the trauma. And I want to be very precise here because I will get this question because I often get it, which is, must one experience terror and trauma to be disentangled. And I want to be clear, I don't believe that we should romanticize suffering. And I don't think that that's the teaching as much as it is acknowledging the existence of that suffering, in whatever form it takes for you or for your ancestors or for your descendants or for your neighbors and friends or your family.

Koshin:

Yeah, I think it's very... I often as a teacher hear a lot about, well my suffering's not like that. Or you get into this competition, a weird competition about suffering and well, I didn't have it so bad and my suffering was my suffering and my siblings would probably have a very different story. Because in some ways we all are growing up in different worlds. And to me the beauty is to be curious about tell me about your experience and I can share mine. And I feel like that's the beginning of such good medicine for the fear of loneliness and the fear in loneliness, I see again and again happens because we think that our particular discomfort or tangle or addiction to our anxiety or distraction is so unique and the form of it may be unique, but the fact of it rarely is.

Jerry:

Yeah. I think that what gets lost, and the metaphor I often play with is fingers on a hand. And each finger is individual and different, but they're all connected. And in reality it's hard to say where the finger ends and the hand begins. They're all interconnected and they reflect each other. And so part of the story I think we can tell ourselves is that my experience of the world, while it's suffering or not, is unique and it's either more than the world can bear, so I will say nothing, or nothing compared to what everyone else is, and so I will say nothing. And the result is we are alone with our experience and we then miss the opportunity to do what you and Uncle Victor did for each other, which is to bear witness to each other, to share each other's stories so that an empathetic connection can be made. And from that place compassion grows compassion. And to use your analogy, disentanglement grows from that moment.

Koshin:

And I think it's also the moment of, because neither of us are turning away.

Jerry:

Yes.

Koshin:

And I think that if we think about Sensei White, that's what also basically his teaching was to not turn away. So I think what is really important is just to remember that not turning away and staying connected to the person that you're with is the heart of it.

And that we don't need to do it alone. And that actually, that's the most important part, is that we can do it in relationship and build community. Take a risk in opening up.