

The Garrison Institute Presents: Inner Works Podcast Transcript

Roshi Joan Halifax: Impermanence and Interdependence (Episode 27)

[Please note: Although the transcript is largely accurate, in some cases it may be incomplete or inaccurate due to inaudible passages or transcription software errors.]

[00:00:00] **Roshi Joan Halifax:** What we have here is not just the culture of medicine, it's culture. How our society actually understands what it means to be with the truth of impermanence, to work with the muted and unexpressed grief that comes about because we're in the constant experience of loss, greater and lesser losses that are completely unacknowledged by most.

[00:00:37] So, you know, it's mortality, it's the truth of impermanence, it's understanding also what in Buddhism we call codependent arising, that we're not separate from the context of our lived experience

[00:01:03] **Gretchen Steidle:** Welcome to the Garrison Institute presents Inner Works. I'm Gretchen Ki Steidle, Director of the Garrison Institute's Spirituality and Social Change Program, and founder of Circles for Conscious Change. In this series, we explore the impact possible when contemplative practice, spirituality, and inner work are integrated as essential elements of social change programs.

[00:01:28] We'll hear personal stories of transformation, explore innovative models shifting systems around the world, and learn how the inner work actually works

[00:02:02] Today I'm joined by Roshi Joan Halifax. Roshi Joan Halifax, PhD, is a Buddhist teacher, founder, and head teacher of Upaya Zen Center in Santa Fe, New Mexico, a social activist, author, and pioneer in the field of end-of-life care. In her early years, she was an anthropologist at Columbia University and University of Miami School of Medicine.

[00:02:28] Roshi Joan is director and founder of the Project on Being with Dying and founder of the Upaya Prison Project that offers programs on meditation for prisoners. She's also founder of the Ohai Foundation in California and Nomads Clinic in Nepal. She's lectured on the subject of death and dying at academic institutions and medical centers around the world.

[00:02:51] She continues to work with dying people and their families and to teach healthcare professionals and family caregivers the psychosocial, ethical, and spiritual aspects of care of the dying. Today, we'll explore the role that contemplative practice, our sense of impermanence, and our embrace of our interdependence have had in changing the ways we care for the dying.

[00:03:11] Welcome, Roshi Joan.

[00:03:13] **Roshi Joan Halifax:** Thank you so much, Gretchen.

[00:03:15] **Gretchen Steidle:** Thank you for being with us.

[00:03:17] **Roshi Joan Halifax:** Yeah. It's really a joy and an honor to be sharing with you today.

[00:03:23] **Gretchen Steidle:** Well, you are a Zen master and engaged Buddhist, and I'm wondering if you would be inclined to offer a short practice to invite our listeners into greater presence as we begin our conversation.

[00:03:40] **Roshi Joan Halifax:** I'm happy to do that, but also to simply say, I'm just a human being. So, um, titles don't mean so much to me as, you know, you get to a certain age, and it's just more baggage. Let's see if we can put down some baggage right now. And, friends, I'd like to invite you to notice where you are. What is around you?

[00:04:13] What is your experience at this moment internally?

[00:04:25] And on the next in breath, notice your experience of your inhale, of that in breath.

[00:04:35] And of the exhale.

[00:04:44] And maybe at the end of the exhale, notice that gap...

[00:04:52] before the next in breath arrives.

[00:05:01] It's like this precious territory of openness, neither coming nor going, that's just space.

[00:05:20] And relax there.

[00:05:26] And because we're alive, the next in breath will naturally arrive.

[00:05:41] And for a second, I invite you to remember really why you're here, why you've stepped into this space of listening, of attending.

[00:06:02] And my sense, knowing a little bit about what the Garrison Institute is doing, is that you're here because you're deeply motivated to engage the world in a way that mitigates suffering.

[00:06:31] Let yourself sense this...

[00:06:38] a kind of unspoken vow.

[00:06:48] And allow that sensibility to be present for you.

[00:06:59] If you can.

[00:07:09] Thank you. Thank you for your practice, and Harrison and Gretchen for giving me the opportunity.

[00:07:20] **Gretchen Steidle:** Thank you so much. What a gift to have that pause. Um, so Roshi Joan, when did you first discover Buddhism in your spiritual path?

[00:07:34] **Roshi Joan Halifax:** You know, in the mid-'60s, I had the opportunity because I was working at Columbia University in the Bureau of Applied Social Research, and it was a radical time.

[00:07:50] And Thich Nhat Hanh, this young monk from Vietnam, was giving a talk. I went to the talk, and I heard him speak in his very quiet voice, but with great strength, urging us in his way to stop bombing his country, Vietnam. And of course, like so many young people of that time, I was deeply involved in the protest movements of that era related to the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement.

[00:08:32] And I was experiencing a lot of moral outrage. And I came to recognize when Thay was speaking that I was suffering a lot. In a way, it was justified. The government was doing bad, bad things. Racism in our country had been going on for centuries. But my own suffering became apparent to me, and I recognized that I could be a social activist or an activist and a contemplative at the same time.

[00:09:17] And, you know, as Thay was speaking and unfolding as well perspectives on Buddhism, I found Buddhism very practical, and it was very aligned with my own kind of pragmatic personality. And so I started practicing without a teacher. Few books were available at that time. Alan Watts was around, so he was a kind of resource.

[00:09:48] But I was so completely moved by Thay. And though I did not become his formal student for another twenty years, and I explored various other religious and spiritual orientations as an anthropologist and as a young person on the path, the existential path, I kept coming back to the value of two things.

[00:10:17] One was the value of, contemplative practice or meditation or zazen, not as a self-improvement program or to fix me up, a morally outraged young person, but as a means to encounter reality in an unfiltered way, and that reality is right now, just this moment as it is. And the other thing that meant so much to me personally was vow, what it meant to live by vow.

[00:10:56] And since Thich Nhat Hanh was a Mahayana Buddhist, the bodhisattva ideal was, you know, part of his teaching then, of course, continued to be throughout his life and after his death, still with his followers. What it means to live in a way that is really about benefiting others. You know, a life that is fundamentally unselfish and open. So that was the moment, if you will, that in Zen we call it the taste that turns you around, that opened up the treasure house of Buddhism.

[00:11:43] But of course, you know, my own spirituality had other roots as well, deeper in my history. But in terms of the Buddhism that I have threaded through with now since the mid-1960s, it's well over a half a century. And, I feel grateful to have encountered the dharma and to have been able to share with others who have encountered the dharma the beauty of practice and the necessity of practice in terms of what it means to be a good human being.

[00:12:26] **Gretchen Steidle:** And then how did you come into working with death and dying?

[00:12:34] **Roshi Joan Halifax:** You know, probably this has a deep root. I just thought about it now. When I was young, I was very sick as a child, and when I started to get better, my parents gave me a dog, a little terrier, and, uh- His name was Terry, of course. And-

[00:12:58] you know, as a kid, we called him Tiny Terrence the Terrible because he barked a lot. But, um, I think his his barking precipitated the neighbor poisoning him.

[00:13:10] **Gretchen Steidle:** Oh, no.

[00:13:11] **Roshi Joan Halifax:** So, you know, that was my first experience of loss, and it really hit me hard as a young person.

[00:13:20] **Gretchen Steidle:** Do you remember how old you were?

[00:13:21] **Roshi Joan Halifax:** You know, I don't.

[00:13:22] It would have to have been after I was six 'cause I was very sick before that time.

[00:13:29] **Gretchen Steidle:** Still so young.

[00:13:31] **Roshi Joan Halifax:** And, you know, the power of grief took me, and, you know, I still remember the feeling, and I say feeling 'cause it's not about thoughts or concepts. It's just this feeling in the body of deep ache. When people lose a pet, that's-- we sort of don't consider it, if we haven't had pets, to be significant.

[00:14:01] But often, our relationship with a pet is the most undefended relationship that we have. And then the second great loss came on the death of my grandmother. And I don't wanna say she was like a pet, but in a way it was a very undefended relationship with this remarkable woman. Elizabeth Bandy Halifax, who lived in Savannah, Georgia, was in a way a kind of village woman, who herself took care of people who were dying.

[00:14:41] **Gretchen Steidle:** Hmm.

[00:14:42] **Roshi Joan Halifax:** Who herself, upon their death, would go to the home of a neighbor and would take care of their bodies, dress them, take care of their hair, prepare them for the funerals, the funeral. And as a child, I would be in my grandmother's bed sleeping when we'd go to Savannah to visit her, and she would speak about being with dying.

[00:15:10] And in a way, that experience normalized dying for me. You know? It wasn't like something that wasn't gonna happen. I saw, you know, as a fairly young person, the inevitability of death as inevitable. And then I worked at the University of Miami School of Medicine as a medical anthropologist, and it was there that I encountered, in working in the medical school, how poorly prepared clinicians were for encountering people who were dying.

[00:15:55] In fact, this was in the early '70s, and dying were the most marginalized people in the hospital system. And then after that work, I married Stanislav Grof, who is a psychiatrist. He's

still alive. A very interesting person. Our marriage didn't last, but his impact on my life did. And he was a psychiatrist from Czechoslovakia who had, in the early years, done LSD research with various individuals in Czechoslovakia.

[00:16:35] And he came to the United States and joined Walter Pahnke, who worked at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center in Baltimore. And that project, which was actually related to various demographics, if you will, and that includes people who had addiction issues, was one population. Another population were clinicians, and people who were spiritual or religious.

[00:17:07] But another population was people dying of cancer. And I joined Stan in that work with dying cancer patients. And that was very profound for me because using very high doses of LSD as an adjunct to psychotherapy, I had this really extraordinary experience of watching, if you will, the so-called human unconscious come into the conscious awareness of these dying people in the course of their LSD sessions.

[00:17:46] And it was earth-shaking for me, because I realized we had so profoundly underestimated the way that we perceive the human mind in relation to, you know, what is real and true. So this work was life-altering in so many ways. And in the course of that, Stan and I, actually, after a few years, we decided to divorce, and it was amicable.

[00:18:22] But needless to say, that work had shifted something very profound in me, and it had opened this aspiration to continue to work with dying people, which I did and still do after many years since we divorced, in the mid-'70s somewhere. And so it's been quite a long road starting, you know, with my dog, my grandmother, working in medical school, and then working with Stan and then continuing that work, first primarily with people who were dying.

[00:19:00] But then, I had discovered at the medical school where I saw that young doctors were not prepared to work with dying people or sit with dying people or come alongside dying people. Particularly around, you know, the profound existential issues that come up as people are dying related to pain and meaning, afterlife, and so forth.

[00:19:30] **Gretchen Steidle:** And what did you see in terms of their inability to be prepared?

[00:19:36] **Roshi Joan Halifax:** Well, so that lack of preparation, you know, was in part a result of, you know, the medical training, but also the ethos in our culture. And, that caused clinicians to suffer too.

[00:19:51] **Gretchen Steidle:** Mm.

[00:19:52] **Roshi Joan Halifax:** So thank you for your question 'cause it leads me to the thing that became a big part of my life, and that has been the training of clinicians.

[00:20:02] **Gretchen Steidle:** So you were the founder and director of the Project on Being With Dying, and it was in the 1970s that you began teaching caregivers those essential capacities. What do you think is needed to be prepared for being with and caring for the dying, and how did the dominant medical establishment handle it instead at that time that you wanted to change?

[00:20:31] **Roshi Joan Halifax:** You know, first of all, I'm not so sure that we have had such an important impact on the culture of medicine, but in some ways we have. Because this really means changing our view around mortality.

[00:20:50] **Gretchen Steidle:** Hmm.

[00:20:51] **Roshi Joan Halifax:** And that change is not just conceptual, it's experiential. It means that people-- Just as I began this time with you, we stopped, we became aware of where we are.

[00:21:06] We came to our breath. We remembered really why we are here together, which is to mitigate suffering. Not just pain, not just mental suffering, but the suffering in the world as well. And so what we have here is, it's not just the culture of medicine, it's culture.

[00:21:32] **Gretchen Steidle:** Hmm.

[00:21:32] **Roshi Joan Halifax:** How our society actually understands what it means to be with the truth of impermanence, to work with the muted and unexpressed grief that comes about because we're in the constant experience of loss, greater and lesser losses, that are completely unacknowledged by most.

[00:22:01] So, you know, it's mortality, it's the truth of impermanence, it's understanding also what in Buddhism we call codependent arising, that we're not separate from the context of our lived experience. And we're influenced by multiple causes and conditions, and also stopping when the landscape of our own subjectivity through the medium of practice, of meditation practice, becomes more available to us.

[00:22:41] And the effect on us when we discover that we've been caught in a machine that we ourselves have constructed with the help of the corporate world, of distraction, that disallows us from going deep into the life of this world. I always like to think of a line from Wordsworth that was composed above Tintern Abbey, that one piece of the poem, one line from that poem is "seeing deeply into the life of things."

[00:23:22] And I think this is what practice can allow us in the right circumstances. Practice can take many forms. Meditation can take many forms, including concentration practice that really aids a sharpshooter in hitting his target or her target or their target. So motivation is really critical here, and underneath motivation, of course, stands our values.

[00:23:51] And our values, you know, needless to say, are conditioned, conditioning or conditioned, by our culture and society. And so sometimes we have to swim against the stream of our society to retrieve or activate values that are deeply pro-social and that are related to love, including love of this very planet.

[00:24:43] **Gretchen Steidle:** Why do you think we are so afraid of death and dying in Western culture?

[00:24:52] **Roshi Joan Halifax:** You know, Gretchen, I think it's not only Western culture, it's also true in other cultures, but not necessarily all. Death is a kind of mystery. As often as I have thought about death, sat with dying people, borne witness to death, I can't really say what happens at the moment of death.

[00:25:16] Though, of course, it's been described in various, uh, religious texts, including particularly in the Vajrayana tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. But I think even in that tradition, death is a mystery. And we like to know things. We're very concrete, most of us in Western culture. Not all, but many. And we also like to control things.

[00:25:45] And knowing things allows us to control things more easily. And there is something that is completely out of control around dying and death. And even with medical aid in dying or physician assistance or euthanasia, where people-- I remember during the AIDS crisis, sitting with people who had decided to take control of their lives because AIDS just felt so totally out of control. by facilitating their own deaths. Or having friends help them facilitate their own deaths. Where there's some kind of agency.

[00:26:34] But ultimately, we have no control over anything if you look at things deeply. You know, you don't really know what's going to happen in the next moment. We can have this, you know, this sort of sense of agency. But without agency, there's fear for most people. And so the issue that I encounter around working with dying people, and also with people who care for dying people, is an underlying dread or fear in some individuals (not all) of what it means to encounter dying and death.

[00:27:18] And that is pretty normal and understandable because we're not really comfortable with not knowing.

[00:27:29] **Gretchen Steidle:** And how have you seen contemplative practice help us move into greater acceptance of that lack of control and our own impermanence and to be able to face that fear as people are either caring for or facing their own end of life?

[00:27:53] **Roshi Joan Halifax:** Well, all you have to do is sit on a cushion for enough time, and there you are. You're watching phenomena arise, and the experience is after a while that, you know, I really can't control anything. I'm here, in an environment in which I am embedded. I also have been conditioned by the frameworks and structures within our culture and in our society.

[00:28:29] And how do I stop and come to a place of rest or ease or openness, instead of being a kind of puppet to the causes and conditions that have given rise to my sense of identity, who I think I am? So what's-- it's wonderful, and it's kind of very uncomfortable. And, you know, people bolt out of these meditation halls not uncommonly because you're confronted with this grave misunderstanding that there is a separate self, that there is a me.

[00:29:14] And that is a very profound ontological shift that is being asked of us that is non-conceptual but is experiential, recognizing that we inter-are with all beings and things. And that we're in this kind of multiple wave experience of arising and passing away. And at a certain point, as Thich Nhat Hanh says, "A cloud never dies, but a cloud is always changing."

[00:29:50] You know? A cloud will become rain. It won't be a cloud anymore. The rain will become a river. The river will become nourishment for mosses and trees and so on and so forth. When you practice deeply, you begin to see yourself in a very different way, not as an individual, but really as embedded in the landscape of deep mutuality. And in that context then death is just, you know, it's just part of the exhale, so to speak.

[00:30:40] **Gretchen Steidle:** Hm. I, um, I haven't had many opportunities to intentionally be with someone at their end of life except for once. But I recall a time when I went to serve after the massive earthquake that hit Haiti in 2010, and I was part of the recovery effort. And I was sitting with a woman who had been waiting to hear word of her husband and her child, who had been likely lost in a building that had collapsed.

[00:31:21] And I didn't really speak her language, and there was nothing that I could do. And I remember the discomfort of, of being in that moment, of having nothing that I could do but be present. And I think it was the experience with practice that was in service to being able to just be with that discomfort and to be present together in a moment of deep uncertainty and apprehension and grief and loss and fear.

[00:31:59] So I learned a great deal about the benefits of practice, and being with discomfort and uncertainty. But I can also understand intellectually, but perhaps with practice, a more embodied sense that the more that we can accept and practice being with that deeper connection with each other and the impermanence that exists, that these transitions of life become part of that greater process and mystery that we don't have to fear so much.

[00:32:42] **Roshi Joan Halifax:** I, I'm curious, Gretchen... what do you feel was the main lesson or gift that you brought away from that experience?

[00:32:55] **Gretchen Steidle:** For me, it was that being present is the most important invitation. And from there, we can bear witness. We can be in the presence of our shared humanity. We can be open to what needs to arise, and that sometimes that's all that's needed. And certainly, there's much more to learn from those moments of practice and presence.

[00:33:34] **Roshi Joan Halifax:** I was just curious, what more might you have done? Or not.

[00:33:40] **Gretchen Steidle:** Yeah. I don't know. And I'm wondering, as you teach caregivers and those in the medical establishments how to prepare for those moments, where do you start?

[00:34:03] **Roshi Joan Halifax:** I'm not sure I teach anyone how to do that. I think it's more that I and the people I work with create a setting where people teach themselves.

[00:34:15] **Gretchen Steidle:** Mm.

[00:34:16] **Roshi Joan Halifax:** Because those skills are always-- they're there for everyone, even the most disordered person. But the setting and the sort of set of where this discovery experience is happening does make a difference, and I think that is important.

[00:34:36] You know, Upaya, our Zen center, is really an extraordinary place. It's beautiful physically. It's extremely peaceful. Many trees, the buildings are cool and intimate and inviting. And at the same time, the lessons that I've learned there are equal, at least, to the realizations that I've had with sitting with dying people or going to Auschwitz with my late teacher, Glassman Roshi, or going into the prison system and working with men on death row, which is a setting and a set which is really horrifying.

[00:35:22] Set and setting are important, but actually it's in a way the set and setting of your own heart or your psyche.

[00:35:29] **Gretchen Steidle:** Mm.

[00:35:30] **Roshi Joan Halifax:** And that, you know, Upaya or Garrison or Insight Meditation Society, Plum Village, these wonderful places where we can step out of the upregulation of our everyday lives and begin to let our nervous system settle down, it's great.

[00:35:53] But what I learned from Glassman Roshi, and also really in, in the arc of my life, is the power of going to where suffering is intense, what Bernie used to call charnel grounds, and to sit, you know, come alongside, be present for suffering in a way that allows you to be taught about your own capacities to meet suffering in a way that is honest and open and unafraid.

[00:36:33] **Gretchen Steidle:** You wrote this beautiful book in 1997 called Being With Dying: Cultivating Compassion and Fearlessness in the Presence of Death. One of the things that struck me in reading it was that it wasn't just an instruction guide of how caregivers might be able to care differently. You really present in such a clear, accessible, and practical way invitations for each of us to do just what you're describing, to consider through their own reflection and personal journey how they might consider their own impermanence, their own journey, their own fear, and what they can learn from those moments of intensity and suffering.

[00:37:40] And I find it such a powerful orientation to teach us about ways we can be in the world with others in service, but through our own personal reflective work. You came from an activist orientation early in your life, and so much of that work is, and service work and tending to suffering, is very outward-facing.

[00:38:09] How did you come to recognize and to teach from this more inner-driven approach of bringing a contemplative lens to ourselves?

[00:38:22] **Roshi Joan Halifax:** Well, there's a kind of paradox here, and that is, it is not just this focus on one's own experience. It's actually the experience of relationship, of mutuality.

[00:38:38] **Gretchen Steidle:** Mm.

[00:38:38] **Roshi Joan Halifax:** Otherwise, in an interesting way, and we know contemporary culture's been deeply interested in meditation, and there are all kinds of meditation practices, and they brought a lot of benefits to many people.

[00:38:55] But the kind of meditation that we're involved with, for example, it occupies a somewhat different landscape, although it can include many of the benefits of meditation associated with well-being. And it's interesting because zazen is not primarily a method for relaxation and certainly not stress reduction or, or emotion regulation, not self-improvement either.

[00:39:25] I also wanna say it's not concerned with unusual states of consciousness or acquiring spiritual experiences or cultivating a kind of more successful version of oneself. I mean, these kinds of things can arise in the course of practice, but they don't define the kind of practice that we're engaged in.

[00:39:49] Rather, zazen, you know, it invites us into this intimate encounter with reality as it is, things as they are. I mean, it asks us to sit down in the midst of our lives and meet experience without trying to improve it, or to manipulate it or reject it or possess it. And it seems so simple, but it's surprisingly difficult.

[00:40:23] And it's difficult because most of us have spent our lives trying to arrange experience according to our preferences. In other words, you know, we move toward what we like and away from what we dislike, and we continually construct narratives that reinforce our identities and support our sense of control. But this kind of meditation that I'm referencing, it's just sitting quietly that interrupts these familiar habits.

[00:41:01] So we can notice how relentlessly our mind organizes experience around grasping and aversion, and how quickly opinions arise and judgments and so forth. So the value of this direct, straightforward kind of plain rice practice is, is something I keep returning to here and in my life, and with my students again and again.

[00:41:33] This feeling of nothing extra, just being absolutely present in as unfiltered a way as possible. Now, I'm not sure I answered your question, though. Uh-

[00:41:47] **Gretchen Steidle:** Well, you inspire a new question, which is, if we are practicing being with what is in the simplest way, how can we also move towards the alleviation of suffering through social change?

[00:42:08] **Roshi Joan Halifax:** We're not apart from the suffering of our society. Just think about, you know, globally, climate change. And I remember Bill McKibben once said-- You know, somebody asked him, "Well, what can I do as one individual?" And McKibben said, "Stop thinking like an individual."

[00:42:27] **Gretchen Steidle:** Mmm.

[00:42:28] **Roshi Joan Halifax:** Which brings me back to the importance of community and of mutuality.

[00:42:35] I mean, you know, in Buddhism, the Three Treasures, the third treasure, and it's not the first or the second or the third, forget the numbers, but anyway, the third jewel is known as

the sangha, the community. And, one of the things that I keep emphasizing is this experience of mutuality, of interconnectedness, of what Thich Nhat Hanh calls interbeing, not just only with human beings, but with the trees, the butterflies, the very atmosphere that we breathe.

[00:43:15] You know, I just want to go back to what McKibben said, "Stop thinking like an individual." If we begin to see things from the perspective of sympoiesis, which means creating together, one has this opportunity to understand, as one wonderful writer wrote: "The oak tree isn't as a result of the acorn. The oak tree and the acorn come about because of air, water, fire, space, Earth, the whole environment."

[00:43:54] We're here because of multiple causes and conditions, and that realization begins to shift how we are in the world.

[00:44:05] **Gretchen Steidle:** Hmm.

[00:44:06] **Roshi Joan Halifax:** And we see ourselves not just as an individual, but really as a community of many beings and things. And as I keep saying, it's an ontological shift that has to be directly experienced, without which we will keep on our own individualistic, selfish ways extractive, corporate, and so forth.

[00:44:52] **Gretchen Steidle:** So if we are able to truly embody our sense of interdependence, then naturally the ways in which we exist and choose and act will shift the ways that our communities, our systems and structures shift too. Is that what you're saying?

[00:45:17] **Roshi Joan Halifax:** It has to be in our lived experience. It's non-conceptual. It's experiential. And I think this is something that people forget because we are so data-driven, and we think, you know, our mind or head or thinking process is where the rubber meets the road. But in actuality, it's the lived experience of interbeing, of mutuality, of sympoiesis, of codependent arising, you know, whatever word we want to bring to it, in this immediate sense of things.

[00:45:54] And again, the value of practice, particularly at this time, I just feel, you know... You can probably feel it in my voice, the importance of us sitting down and letting ourselves be deconstructed by stillness. An opening to the power of interbeing and of sympoiesis.

[00:46:25] **Gretchen Steidle:** Did you see those kinds of shifts take place in the communities in which you were working in medical establishments and prisons and other communities by the nature of people being able to do that through your teachings?

[00:46:47] **Roshi Joan Halifax:** Uh, that's a big and embarrassing question. You know, I have no idea if anything I have ever done has had a positive effect on anyone or anything... only other people can let you know that. You can ask them.

[00:47:08] **Gretchen Steidle:** Fair, fair, fair. So as you're considering your own end of life, what contemplations do you still hold?

[00:47:20] **Roshi Joan Halifax:** Well, you know, I had two open heart surgeries in less than a year, and almost died as a result of these experiences. I am actually still in recovery from the situation, the surgeries were only 12 days apart, and it was a very high-risk situation. And it was a... You know, of course my body was just slammed, so to speak.

[00:47:51] **Roshi Joan Halifax:** I'm still finding scars from various things that they did to my body in order to save my life, of course. I don't feel ungrateful. But I feel actually incredibly grateful for, in retrospect, reflecting on the experience of being at the threshold of death, for so many days, and having experienced just complete peace and acceptance and no fear whatsoever.

[00:48:24] And I think there are some reasons for that. You know, one of the reasons is, you know, I've been practicing a long time and sitting with dying people a long time, and so there's a kind of familiarity. You know, I've done a lot of work around this issue of mortality, of pain and suffering and death. But the other thing is that I realize that we're at a time when the benefits of being in your 80s are not necessarily extolled.

[00:49:06] And I will honestly say that having lived a very intense and demanding and loving and wild life, I don't have regrets. It's not like I have a bucket list. I'm just in that phase of life of deep gratitude for having offered my own life to life, to the extent that I was able, and so there's no sense of remorse or regret at this point.

[00:49:42] I'm not clinging or bargaining for more. I was given more, and I thank the Buddha that I have some more days ahead of me. So maybe I can continue to endeavor to benefit others. But, um, I also saw then that I was not afraid of death. And when death does knock finally at my door, we'll see, you know, how I show up to it.

[00:50:13] That's also, if you will, the reality of the present moment that I will be offered and will discover.

[00:50:25] **Gretchen Steidle:** A few years ago, you came out with a collection called In a Moment, In a Breath: 55 Meditations to Cultivate a Courageous Heart. And so I'm curious if there is a practice or two that you would most recommend for people to try to be cultivating such a courageous heart as your own.

[00:50:53] What might they consider?

[00:50:57] **Roshi Joan Halifax:** You know, I did that project during the pandemic. It was so beautiful, actually. And I did it not because I would recommend something to anybody. Really, it's more a medium. Those cards are a medium of discovery, where one can turn one's attention to the collection of these brief practices, and see what will serve in this moment.

[00:51:28] **Gretchen Steidle:** Hmm.

[00:51:29] **Roshi Joan Halifax:** And I think that's kind of where I live. What will serve in this moment? It's non-prescriptive, and that's something I hope has some-- makes sense for others.

What will really serve this moment? Because I remember Francisco Varela once wrote about compassion, and he said that compassion has no rules.

[00:52:01] And I would suggest that I'm aligned with that perspective. So turn to the collection without feeling that there's somebody telling you what to do. Discover what will serve you in any given moment.

[00:52:20] **Gretchen Steidle:** Thank you so much. And Roshi Joan, as we end our time together, is there anything else that would serve this moment? Anything else that you would like to share?

[00:52:33] **Roshi Joan Halifax:** Well, just thank you for having read my book and for looking at that wonderful collection, *In a Moment, In a Breath*, and also for the wisdom that you have brought to the interview and your careful questions. I'm so grateful, and I just-- I thank you personally and Garrison.

[00:52:55] So may you be well, and may this exchange between us serve in, in some way.

[00:53:05] **Gretchen Steidle:** Thank you so much, Roshi Joan. It is a true honor to have a chance to listen and learn from your experience and your wisdom. And I too wish you well, and may this conversation be of service to other beings who may be listening.

[00:53:23] **Roshi Joan Halifax:** Thank you, Gretchen. Bye-bye.

[00:53:30] **Gretchen Steidle:** Thank you to our guest, Roshi Joan Halifax.

[00:53:37] Inner Works is a production of the Garrison Institute, and is hosted by me, Gretchen Steidel. We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast. Please send us a note at podcast@garrisoninstitute.org and let us know what you think. If you've enjoyed this episode, please consider leaving a positive review on Apple Podcasts.

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