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**Sallie Tisdale:** “Three thousand years ago, the Olmec of the Mexican lowlands wore mirrors made from iron ore around the neck. The mirrors were so polished they could reflect pictures and start fires. The Scythians, proud of their elaborate hairstyles and manicures, always carried mirrors. The Etruscans made mirrors the way Americans make hamburgers and game shows. Toddlers recognize themselves in mirrors. How? So do apes, it seems, and there is evidence that dolphins, whales, and elephants do, too. What does it say of the nature of a brain that it can recognize its own encasement? To look in a mirror is a profoundly human act, even when it is the orangutan doing it. One is forever haunted by the question of what one is.

We are not entirely in charge here. Even in our most intimate meetings, we are presenting a version of ourselves; to interact is to script. We are literally putting on an appearance every time we meet; there is a fragment of me that has never relaxed around another human being. How can we know, how can we be known, when all this knowing and striving to be known is done by fragile beings in the midst of arriving and departing? For the briefest of seconds we meet, and then are lost again. The immutable opacity of relationship is as rippled and broken as the pond into which our ancestors gaze. Self-consciousness is the human condition.”

**James Shaheen:** Hello and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I’m James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. You’ve just heard Sallie Tisdale reading from her latest book, *The Lie About the Truck: Survivor, Reality TV, and the Endless Gaze*. Sallie is a Zen teacher, writer, and *Tricycle* contributing editor—and she has seen nearly every season of the award-winning reality TV show *Survivor*. In *The Lie About the Truck*, Sallie brings her keen eye and characteristic wit to the series, which she calls “the greatest social experiment on television.”

*Tricycle Talks*

Episode #65 with Sallie Tisdale

“What Reality TV Can Teach Us About Surviving Ourselves”

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In today’s episode of *Tricycle Talks*, I sit down with Sallie to talk about the dharma lessons of *Survivor* and what it can teach us about perception, performance, and surviving ourselves.

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**James Shaheen:** I’m here with Sallie Tisdale, a Zen teacher, a wonderful writer, and also, as I’ve learned recently, a reality TV fan. Hi, Sally. Thanks so much for joining us.

**Sallie Tisdale:** Thanks for having me.

**James Shaheen:** So your new book is called *The Lie About the Truck: Survivor, Reality TV, and the Endless Gaze*. There must be someone out there who has not seen *Survivor*. Could you give us a brief description of what it’s about?

**Sallie Tisdale:** *Survivor* is one of the earliest and most influential of what are called elimination game shows or elimination reality shows. It begins with a group of strangers, anywhere from 16 to 20, taken to a remote place, usually a beach on a deserted—not really, but semi-deserted—tropical island, divided into two, three, sometimes four groups of people called tribes, and left to fend for themselves. They have to figure out how to make shelter, get food, take care of themselves.

But that’s only the underlying part of the game. The main part of the game is that one by one, people will be voted off, usually in a three-day cycle. First, they have a challenge where they can earn a reward, like food or fishing gear, and the challenges are many and varied. Then they have an immunity challenge, where the tribe—and later, individuals—can earn immunity to be safe on the island. And then they have Tribal Council, where supposedly all the secrets come out, they vote, and one person is eliminated.

That’s the basic skeleton, and then there’s a lot of variation. But one of the interesting things about *Survivor* is that it is widely popular around the world and has been franchised in



many, many countries, but you don't have to speak Bulgarian or French to understand what's going on. I watched an Israeli season recently and didn't understand a word they were saying, but I could figure out who was taking which role in the tribe and who was on the outs and what was going to happen.

**James Shaheen:** So you've seen every season, is that right?

**Sallie Tisdale:** No, I have three to go. I have three I haven't watched.

**James Shaheen:** Wow.

**Sallie Tisdale:** There are 40 seasons. The 41st season is about to start, and I've watched 37, some of them more than once.

**James Shaheen:** What do you think accounts for its popularity? You say in the book that it's franchised and it's everywhere in the world, and it just occurs to me, why is it so universally popular?

**Sallie Tisdale:** There's something very clever about weaponizing our fantasy of being marooned on a tropical island and also weaponizing our usually quite deluded belief that we would succeed in extreme circumstances. I think many of us have a very unclear idea of who we really are under stress, and people can watch this show and imagine how they would do without having to actually go through it. That's how I watch it. I can be judgmental and critical and superior to all these fools on the island without having to go through the duress.

But a great many people really want to play the game. I also find myself watching and thinking I'd love to play the game if it wasn't on television, if it was just a game, if we were just



doing challenges like having to dive down and untie knots underwater and then carry things across the sand and build a tower. I would love to engage in things like that. And there are what are called backyard *Survivor* games for people who will never get on the show and just want to do it, just want to play the game.

But I think a lot of people have this fantasy of being swept out of their life, taken into a completely blank slate kind of environment, and imagine building a new society. That was always one of the conceits of the game, semi-seriously portentously repeated by the narrators over and over, that they were building a new society together. Americans in particular have this fantasy of the frontier and the wilderness and the idea that we can start anew. I think it partakes of all of that and then adds the wonderful trope of killing other people and voting them off the island. So you get to have this wonderful blank slate of a new beginning and then, one by one, eliminate the competition. They found a really great formula for human fantasy.

**James Shaheen:** Right. So about the book’s title, what is the lie about the truck?

**Sallie Tisdale:** One of the things about *Survivor* that interests me is that in the first season, there was a lot of very serious talk about integrity and honesty and authenticity and telling the truth when in fact the entire game depends on deceit. The producers claimed to be shocked and dismayed that people lied and made deals with other people. There’s no other way to play the game. There’s no other way to win the game. You have to make alliances and then break them.

One thing that fascinates me about the show is watching how people manage deceit, and the lie about the truck is one of the most famous examples of deceit in the game. It had to do with somebody making a deal with another player. He would take the guy’s truck that he won in a challenge, and in exchange, he would give the other guy immunity at a certain point in the game. Well, for one thing, you’re not allowed to do that. It’s in the rules that you cannot



exchange anything of value to get ahead in the game. But they went ahead and made a whole season about it.

So then when the time came for the young man to hand over the immunity, he couldn't do it. He couldn't bring himself to do it. And what you see play out over several episodes is this young man's very difficult encounter with himself. Who is he going to be? He's on record in front of the world as making a promise, and he needs to break this promise. The fascinating thing, James, is that he manages to find a way to explain how he breaks the promise that makes the other guy the bad guy and himself the victim.

I think in our current culture, in our current sociopolitical system, we see this kind of projection going on all the time. The final really fascinating part about the lie about the truck is the way the producers responded. The host, Jeff Probst, actually says how unfortunate it was that people criticized this young man for this decision and that they should have just given him a second chance and he was just a naive young man in a very difficult situation. This is the guy who put him there saying this.

So we have projection upon projection upon projection. When I talk about the endless gaze, what I'm really talking about is when are we really seeing each other? Are we ever really seeing each other? *Survivor* is just an example of how our culture works, which is they show up, they pretend to be somebody, they're really being somebody else, they're seeing each other pretending to be other people. The cameras are capturing all of this and then editing it into a story, which is not really what happened.

And then we watch it and respond ourselves with new ideas and new judgments and storylines. And then when it's over, you wouldn't believe the fan base *Survivor* has. It's very passionate. It's very engaged, and it's more than any one person can take in. The story continues long after the season is over. People still argue about things that happened 15 and 20 years ago on the show and what it meant and who did what and what really happened. So I'm really interested in these layers and layers and layers of projection, deceit, appearance. Erving



Goffman, the great sociologist of the mid-20th century, says that we are always making first impressions.

**James Shaheen:** Right, in fact, you quote him a few times in the book. In a quote that you sent me recently, he says that being present in the world is “potentially an infinite cycle of concealment, discovery, false revelation, and rediscovery.” You know, I initially wrote down self-revelation instead of false revelation, maybe that says something about me, but I found that very interesting.

**Sallie Tisdale:** I think there’s a great deal of false revelation as well. As people of practice, we are openly agreeing to make self-examination a central part of our life. When you come together in a sangha with other people, that’s kind of the foundational agreement, that we are all trying to show up as ourselves in an authentic way, and that’s why we want to do this. We want that self-revelation. And then we spend 20, 30, and 40 years discovering how difficult that is and how many layers of false revelation there are, how many ways we show up in front of a teacher, in front of our community, and in front of the wall in our meditation as a false self.

**James Shaheen:** You describe reality TV as a genre of performance in which people “pretend to be real, think they’re being real, are challenged to be real, and maybe fail to be real—and, in the process, uncover something real they would never have shown us otherwise.” So I have two questions. What does it mean to fail at being real, and what does it mean to sort of inadvertently be real? I was very intrigued by this.

**Sallie Tisdale:** Oh, I think I do both of those things every day. We have so many deeply embedded patterns in our interrelational selves—and in our solitary selves as well, but let’s talk about the relational selves. From the time we are born, we are conditioned to respond in



particular ways to particular triggers. We develop very complex and very deeply embedded patterns of response and reactivity and protection. Remember that at the base of everything is the fear of the extinction of the self. And here we are engaged in a practice in which we are investigating whether it's true that there's a self at all. Is there a self? If there is, what is it?

We have this fundamental fear about the falseness of the self at the same time that we're trying to let it go. It can be very tense. So I think that false self is the one that repeats itself over and over out of repetitive, habitual conditioning. A person may be trying to be truly authentic, but a trigger which is not even conscious stimulates a repetitive response pattern, which is also not even conscious, and they're hidden behind it.

Now, that's maybe a little bit of psychobabble there, but I think you know what I'm talking about. I've got my mind on something else and my neighbor calls me over to talk about something and I engage in a little social intercourse, and I'm not even really there. My mind is elsewhere. But I have all these patterns that respond. We can smile, and I can talk about flowers in her garden, and it has nothing to do with she and me. That's a false self that has just shown up to have a little interaction while the real self is elsewhere.

And that's a very small thing, but when we're actually challenged emotionally, that's when those patterns become hard to resist completely. As a teacher, I see it when students come into the interview room all the time. They come in ready to present themselves in a particular way, what Trungpa Rinpoche called showing up in your Sunday best. He had this great explanation about how students want to come and be seen as their ideal student self as they want to come and be in their Sunday best, but the teacher knows they're naked.

I've always really appreciated that, and when I read that as a student, it was really scary. It suddenly occurred to me that maybe my teacher was seeing through some of my presentation. And now that I'm in the other seat most of the time, I realize I am seeing through a lot of presentation that people are not even aware that they are engaged in.



**James Shaheen:** Right. Hannah Arendt, and you sent me this quote too, talks about the urge to self-display, and so with that goes a whole series of play-acting episodes through our day, say, but sometimes something else breaks through that we sense is authentic. I don't like to use that word since it's become something that I repeated again and again and again. But actually, you have a sensation of something that feels real. What about that?

**Sallie Tisdale:** You're right. There is a sensation actually. The Zen phrase that's sometimes used for that is arrows meeting in mid-air, that something in me that is true recognizes something in you that is true, and you and I, as conscious, identified selves, may not have anything to do with it. What's happening is we're just getting out of the way. The ego is for just a moment out of the way of what is true.

My own experience of when that honest self, that true self, arises is something is moving through me. It's not this conscious me that is doing it. I can't tell you, "Well, this is the real me right now," because even engaging in that conscious awareness is a layer of presentation and is a layer of self-awareness of a self that is continually changing. But when I can let that conscious urge to manipulate the environment fall away, when I can just be present, something true will meet, can come out and meet.

But yeah, I think Arendt is onto something when she says that what is that fundamental human condition? This urge to self-display, that's the fear. We self-display in order to protect ourselves. We self-display what we think others want to see, need to see. What is the safest self I can be with you right now?

**James Shaheen:** Right, and sometimes we retreat altogether.

**Sallie Tisdale:** Right, and all of us are conditioned in childhood that there are certain circumstances in which we're going to retreat. Love, to some extent, really honestly felt love, is



the ability to let another person through that. And I felt for a long time that when you do see through that, when I see through your self-presentation or my self-display drops and you see me, love is the only response we can have because what is true in me meets what is true in you and it is the same. It is the same. And our natural response to that is love.

**James Shaheen:** It's interesting, on *Survivor*, those moments start to occur, but the players say, “Well, I have to put that aside for this game because I can think about that later.” Are there moments in the show where this starts to happen? I haven't seen as many episodes as you have.

**Sallie Tisdale:** Oh, I think it happens all the time. I think it's quite inadvertent. And what you see on the show that's interesting is an expression that goes across a person's face when they suddenly realize that they've revealed something, that for just a moment they were seen. The expression that goes across people's faces is “Oops, that wasn't what I intended.” The only way to survive in this environment is to be conscious and deliberate all the time, and then suddenly something spontaneous occurs.

**James Shaheen:** Something real.

**Sallie Tisdale:** Something real. But also, as I point out in the book, for all the layers of deceit and presentation on the show, people actually do say these things. There is, underneath all of this, a real intention to be this person. I have a chapter on “Worst Person Ever.”

**James Shaheen:** That was very funny.

**Sallie Tisdale:** Many people have come onto reality television with the deliberate intent to be a villain, so to speak. They're cast as the villain, or they just decide to play as a villain. There's a



lot of acting involved. Some of it is even good acting. But I ask, can you really be a villain if you're this awful a person in the first place? I don't know. It fascinates me that people would want to be filmed doing and saying what they do and say on television. It fascinates me that you would choose not to try to be your best self on camera.

**James Shaheen:** You know, a question that comes up more than once in the book that's kind of koanic is who's in charge? People have a sense of agency that ends up at best fleeting, but sometimes they make big fools of themselves like we all do thinking that they're in charge.

**Sallie Tisdale:** Well, I think one of the biggest delusions that people display on the show is the idea that they're in charge of what's happening. They may think they're in charge of the whole tribe or they're running the game or they're a locked-in winner. People will often say, "I've got this thing sewn up," and you're watching going, "No, you don't." So that's a very common delusion. But I think it becomes quite small, too, which is the idea that at any given moment, any of us is in charge of how we are acting, how we are behaving, how we are responding, what we are saying.

There's no there there, so to speak. There is no "I" to be in charge, really. But we also are driven much more by conditioning than we really want to admit. I mean, I've been doing this practice for a long, long time, and it was only the last few years ago that I kind of relaxed something and was able to say, "You know what, I just react that way." Now, it's up to me how I work with that and try not to cause harm, but I can't just keep fighting it. These are the tools I was given. These are the tools I'm going to have to work with. I have these patterns.

**James Shaheen:** You know, you mentioned earlier that with a lot of editing, the producers construct a narrative, and for a few moments I was thinking they're in charge, but then they're



dogged by a whole sea of superfans out there, and they're battling them all the time or trying to keep control of something that seems to have gotten beyond them.

**Sallie Tisdale:** They're also dogged by their own stuff, James, because I saw a picture recently of the edit team, the post-production team. Lots and lots of people who look exactly the same. It's white men of a certain age. And it's like, oh, that explains a lot right there. They're dogged by their biases. Everybody on the show is dogged by their biases. When I watch somebody on the show behaving foolishly and thinking they're in charge, I have been manipulated to see them as foolish, and I have been given the opportunity to see that they think they're in charge.

The person next to them may be exactly the same, but I'm not shown that. This person has been created, this character has been created for me to respond to that way. And then, lo and behold, I respond exactly the way they want me to respond. And then I go on the fan blogs and everybody's arguing about why that person was such a fool. It's one of the points I want to make is that we like to fall into stories. We want to be manipulated. We love stories, and we love characters, and we love to fall into this fantasy, so we let it happen. We go along for the ride quite willingly.

**James Shaheen:** Right, if ever I sat in judgment of characters on reality TV, this book cured me of that habit because I realized I too am being fed a story and I am being manipulated. Like I told you earlier before we started, that one character, Sean, drove me crazy. I thought, "Get him off the show." But I was totally taken in, and he was presented to be a maddening character.

**Sallie Tisdale:** Yes. As he was presented on the show is really nothing like who he was off the show. What amazes me is that 20 years later, they have more people applying to be on the show than ever before. People apply for 10, 12, 15 years, year after year, trying to get on this show and



they train for it. People have said it was the high point of their lives. They're standing next to their wife and children, and they're saying, “*Survivor* was the best thing I ever did.”

People know that they will be turned into characters. They know that they might get what Colson Whitehead calls the “loser edit.” There's a loser edit on every tribe, and they know it might be them, but they still want to get on the show so much, it's worth it, whether they're going to be are they going to be the femme fatale? Are they going to be the lazy one? Are they going to be the good guy? And they know they're going to get cast, but people are really passionate about playing.

**James Shaheen:** They sign away their public identities.

**Sallie Tisdale:** I think in the research for the book, the contracts for reality shows was one of the most shocking things for me. That was probably the most eye-opening thing. In the contracts for *Survivor*, people actually sign away their entire life story *for life*. They are never allowed to control their biography, and their image can be used in any way CBS sees fit, including fiction. I would be allowing people to take my name and image and use it any way they wanted for the rest of my life, and people just line up to sign these contracts.

**James Shaheen:** An early chapter of the book is called “Perception Is Reality,” and it's a phrase that's repeated in the show kind of like a mantra. Can you say something about that and how this shows itself in *Survivor*?

**Sallie Tisdale:** Jeff Probst, who is the host, known to fans in some cases as Jiffy—I like to call him Jiffy—Jeff likes to say that. What he's saying is you watch people make judgments about other people instantaneously. At the very beginning of the show, the very first episode, they are brought in having not spoken to each other. They have to stay silent when they're not being



recorded. Part of the contract of the show is that you're not allowed to have side conversations. Everything has to be recorded.

They're brought in silently, but they're making judgments about each other without a word being exchanged. A single glance from somebody is like, “Oh, she's a bitch. Oh, they're lazy,” and so suddenly that's the reality. That perception becomes the reality, and that person is treated that way, judged that way, critiqued that way. So Jeff likes to say it because he's like the therapist and the God and the demigod and the referee, and he takes all these different roles. But sometimes he's the therapist, and he's telling people, “Well, you may not be lazy, but they think you're lazy. Therefore, you are lazy. Perception is reality on this show.” And when he says that, I always think perception is reality in life.

**James Shaheen:** Right, Ivanka Trump said, “Perception is more important than reality.” And of course, her father was a reality TV show star who became the president.

**Sallie Tisdale:** But, you know, a lot of people agree with her. I think there is a large segment of the population that really cares about this, about how they are seen. I love Project Runway. It's probably my favorite reality show. I could care less about fashion. I could care less about fashion design. I don't know anything about it. I watch the show because I like to watch people be creative and solve these weird problems, and I recognize that little “aha” moment of a solution.

But then I watch it and I remember a lot of people really, really care. They care passionately about fashion and clothing and appearance and makeup. I'm really not in the Instagram world. I'm not in the TikTok world. I have to remember how disconnected I am from what is very important to a lot of people.

And I do want to make the point because there are probably people listening to this who react to this subject of reality TV the way a lot of people I know do, which is, “Oh, it's all stupid. It's all garbage. It's junk. Why would you watch that?” And that interests me because usually



people haven't actually watched very much when they say that. They're making snap judgments. They consider themselves discerning and curious people, but they instantaneously reject this extremely popular thing. I'm always curious why we would do that. I may not care about fashion, but it's fascinating to me that it's important to people. It's fascinating to me that people take *Survivor* so seriously and consider it very important.

Whatever it is that I think is not important, I have to be careful not to judge people who see the world differently. For Ivanka Trump, perception is more important than reality. She has a lot of company in that idea. I may not agree with it, but I don't want to just reject that whole segment of humanity as wrong or stupid. That's how we got in the current trouble we're in now, these kinds of snap judgments and instantaneous rejection of people's points of view.

**James Shaheen:** I think all of us, we may not live that way all the time, but we have experienced that where it was so important to us to appear a certain way, and we thought it was more important, in fact, than the way things were. So I'm far less judgmental having read your book. I began watching it again. I hadn't seen it in years, and I look at it very differently now. Throughout the book, you write about the construction of self on *Survivor*. People play themselves and act out multiple versions of themselves and, like all of us, are constantly creating and performing a self. In fact, you quote a fan who says that “if a contestant on *Survivor* learned anything, it would be the constructed nature of reality.” That all sounds very Buddhist to me. Do you want to talk about that in the context of your role as a Zen teacher and writer?

**Sallie Tisdale:** Well, it's actually called structured reality. When *Survivor* wins an Emmy, for instance, and it has won many, many Emmys, it wins an Emmy for Best Structured Reality Show. But also one of the players says, “We're not really evil. That's just who we play on television,” which would make more immediate sense if they were playing a fictitious person. But this is a person playing themselves. This is just how we are on television. But in that sense,



James, we're all on television all the time. You and I are, too, because every time we appear in front of another person, we are appearing in a certain way.

I mean, what I put on in the morning before I go to work is constructing reality. How I say hello to people when I get to work is constructing the reality I'm going to be in. The moment we open our eyes, we are constructing our reality. My teacher used to—he didn't actually hit me in the head, but it felt like he was doing this, and he would say, “The whole universe lives in your own bony skull,” which is an old Chinese saying. I did not want to believe that for a long time. I didn't want to be responsible for the reality that I was creating. But I really get that now, that how I respond to the conditions I find myself in is the construction of my reality. That doesn't mean I don't get to choose conditions to the extent I can or that we shouldn't try to create the best conditions that we can for ourselves and others. But it is from inside here that I'm constructing my reality.

**James Shaheen:** You quote Walter Benjamin on how this constructed reality or structured reality takes on a whole new dimension once it's filmed or videotaped. Do you want to say something about that?

**Sallie Tisdale:** Yeah. So Walter Benjamin was a historian, a really accessible, interesting historian, and he was fascinated by the arising of film and the difference between a live performance on stage and a filmed performance. We're so used to that that we may not even have raised that question: Is there a difference between a live performance and filmed performance? He was there at the time when he could really question that, and he felt that the filmed performance was a kind of enslavement of the actor. It turned people into objects.

He was very skeptical of how film would be used, and he then watched the rising of fascism in Europe, and he made very clear connections between the rising of fascism and the manipulation of the image that film allowed. Very early in film, we suddenly saw special effects,



and we suddenly saw images, moving images of reality that were not true. It happened very quickly. When you and I watch a play together, we are together watching this play. We are the audience. And with filmed performance, it's often an audience of one. Even if you and I are sitting next to each other, we are taking it in in a different way. Film has a different relationship to the individual than live performance.

**James Shaheen:** And live performance can vary. On one night, it can skew this way, another night the other.

**Sallie Tisdale:** It's never exactly the same, and that was really what bothered Benjamin the most was that it's captured by film, and that is what turns the actor into an object. They are captured, and they are made to repeat themselves over and over and over. They can never escape that image that has been captured.

But we are so, like the subtitle says, the endless gaze—that is the endless gaze that we are in now. There are cameras everywhere. Everything we do just about is recorded in some way, and we participate in it very willingly. As I say in the book, we've become each other's cameras. We can't get through a day without somebody capturing our image, whether we know it or not. I may be sitting at a traffic light, and I'm on film. I may be walking through a grocery store, I am on film. I step outside my front door and my neighbor takes my picture. And then I willingly participate by asking my friend to take my picture or by capturing, “Oh, there's a beautiful cloud up there.” What's the first thing I do? I reach for my phone. We have really become a surveillance culture, and we have clearly colluded in the creation of a surveillance culture.

**James Shaheen:** So you're talking about cameras. Let's talk about mirrors. You sent me an essay that you're working on very related to all of what we're talking about, and you talk about the existential crisis of looking at yourself in the mirror, meaning all of us looking at ourselves in



the mirror. Can you say something more about this existential crisis? Like, what do you experience, Sallie, when you look in the mirror?

**Sallie Tisdale:** Most of the time, it's a practical matter. I actually brushed my hair before I came on this show because I was going to be looking in a mirror because I'm on camera with you. So most of the time, it's a practical matter. Did I brush my teeth? Does this shirt fit? It's simple stuff like that. But every once in a while, and it's usually by accident, I catch a glimpse of myself in a store window as I'm walking by. That's shocking. I'm shocked by the unexpected reflection.

I know what I'm going to see when I go in my bathroom and look in the mirror because I see it every day. But when I catch myself sideways at a glance, it is shocking. It's shocking that I've gotten old. It's shocking that I look this way. It's shocking that I exist. It's sort of shocking to be reminded that I'm embodied.

Humans have looked in mirrors as long as they've been humans. It's one of the first technologies that became commonplace. People desperately wanted to figure out how to create a reflective surface. And so ancient civilizations created mirrors early on, and the perfection of the mirror has been an ongoing technology. The camera is just our newest mirror.

**James Shaheen:** Well, it's interesting because you talked about just now catching yourself unaware. I've done that. I'm walking down the street. I think it's somebody else at first, and so for a moment I'm shocked, too, when I realize it's me, and I think, is that how I'm seen by others? Because when I look in the mirror, I'm prepared. I gear myself up. I look at myself in a certain way. I might even hold my head at a certain angle. But not then. And all of a sudden I capture a glimpse of myself as others might see me.

**Sallie Tisdale:** And what is that? What do they see? What is the shock?



**James Shaheen:** The shock is, well, I'm 62. That's one shock because when I look at myself in the mirror at home, I don't know that that's what I am. You say in something that you wrote that you feel like you're 35.

**Sallie Tisdale:** I always feel 35 inside, 35 to 38 or so. I sort of solidified around that age. What's happened since then is I've just gotten more comfortable, more confident, more settled in that. But I feel lively. I feel energetic. I feel curious. I feel filled with ideas. And then I catch a glimpse of this woman who is fat and old and slow and stiff.

**James Shaheen:** Oh Sallie, you're being too hard on yourself at this point.

**Sallie Tisdale:** Well, you know, it's just a glance. It's just a glance, and it's a stranger. And it's like, oh, I'm embodied in that.

**James Shaheen:** Well, you know what I realized when that happens? We talk in Buddhism a lot about remembering that we will die, or in Catholicism you have memento mori. You're aware that you're going to die. But when you catch yourself like that, when I catch myself like that, I realize how unaware I really am because I'm not seeing what I see when I take myself by surprise.

**Sallie Tisdale:** How we forget, how we forget. For sure. And I've asked lots of people, “Are you surprised by a glimpse of yourself?” And it's pretty universal. Everybody is surprised that they're as old as they are. We all think we're less fat than we are. But back to that Instagram TikTok culture, that mirror is not a sideways glance. That mirror is an extremely carefully constructed image. I mean, there are tutorials on how to hold your head and move your lips to achieve a certain expression for an Instagram photo. There are tutorials for all of this, and there's

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another layer—there are people making tutorials on YouTube to tell you how to present yourself in a particular way.

**James Shaheen:** It’s structured reality.

**Sallie Tisdale:** Yes, there are tutorials on how to structure your reality, how to create the character that you would like to be.

**James Shaheen:** You know, Ruth Ozeki was recently on the show, and she wrote a book called *The Face: A Time Code*, and it was on this very topic of the mirror. She’d sit in front of the mirror for 3 hours and record her thoughts and reflections. Have you ever done something like that?

**Sallie Tisdale:** Yes. There is a kind of meditation called mirror meditation, which was popular at the women’s monastery in Japan in the Middle Ages, actually more like the 1700s I think. In mirror meditation, you put a mirror in front of you as you do your meditation, and that is your wall. You look at your reflection as the wall. I’ve done this with people at retreats a few times, and people find it extremely uncomfortable, like distressingly uncomfortable. People get quite upset doing this. I’ve had people just simply refuse to do so, and they have a difficult time articulating why. Why is it so distressing? Why is it so uncomfortable? We’re there in the room. Everybody else can see us, but we really don’t want to see ourselves.

**James Shaheen:** Do you think that reality TV is that mirror too?

**Sallie Tisdale:** Well, I think with reality TV, I can pretend that I’m looking in a mirror and not have to actually see myself.

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**James Shaheen:** That’s interesting.

**Sallie Tisdale:** I get to be on the high seat. I get to be in judgment of these people, which is a much more comfortable place than looking simply at myself.

**James Shaheen:** I found myself saying I would do this or I would do that. No, I wouldn’t. I don’t know what I would do. In fact, I would not have all those pieces of information that I’m basing what I think I would do on.

**Sallie Tisdale:** Right, I think I would actually do very poorly on *Survivor* because I don’t suffer fools very easily. I’m not terribly patient. I have a very snarky sense of humor.

**James Shaheen:** That comes through in the book, which is very enjoyable.

**Sallie Tisdale:** I had fun being snarky and funny in the book, but it would not get me very far on a tribe. I also am one of those older, stocky women that wants to get the chores done and would be very impatient with the young women sunbathing instead of gathering the food. So I think I’d probably be one of the first ones out, and I’d probably be like, “I’m out of here. You can’t fire me. I quit.”

**James Shaheen:** Right. Just to talk about *Survivor* a little bit more, there are rules of the game and a kind of shared reality there.

**Sallie Tisdale:** “That’s not how you play the game.”



**James Shaheen:** Right, exactly, that’s what I was going to say. They often say, “That’s not how the game is played” or “That’s not how you play the game.” What is the game’s ethic, and what type of person is likely to win?

**Sallie Tisdale:** “That’s not how you play the game” is a trope that happens every season over and over, and it usually has to do with people who are not participating in the constructed reality. They are refusing to go along with the reality that the tribe is creating. So refusing to join an alliance, that’s not how you play the game. You’re never going to win that way. And turning on your alliance too soon, that’s not how you play the game. But the worst one is refusing to participate in a challenge or not going along with the tribe. That’s a really important mistake that people make. That’s not how you play the game.

Who wins? People win by being very, very good at a couple of things: being very middle of the road for a while, meaning they get along with people, but they’re not dominant, but they’re not too passive. They do some work; they don’t do all the work. They rest when it’s time. They help, but they’re not super helpful. They just find that middle place. You find that middle place, and then you are a really, really good liar.

Loyalty really counts as long as people are very clear that loyalty has a limit. So the people that have done really well on the show are intelligent and charming without being overbearing and are always aware that they’re playing a game. They never forget.

**James Shaheen:** Maybe this is because I’m a Buddhist reader, but I kept looking at it like it’s its own self-contained samsara. I thought of it like a tropical setting in a snow dome, and all of the rules of Samsara are at work.

**Sallie Tisdale:** Absolutely. I like to call it the realm of the titans, the realm of the ashuras, which is the realm where ambition and production and work and competition take place. But it’s all the



worlds. There are little bits of heaven, and there are little bits of hell, and there are a lot of hungry ghosts coming on the show, and you certainly see the animal realm playing out. I'm fascinated by the use of hunger, of real physical hunger in a reality show, usually in a country where people are actually hungry. It's one of the really distressing parts of the game. So all the realms are there, and it is a little microcosm of greed, hate, and delusion, but also of the occasional moment of grace and the occasional moment of kindness and real caring.

**James Shaheen:** I never know what to think when Jeff Probst starts to use religious language to describe the show. He talks about a chance to experience spiritual death and rebirth and to realize something deeper about yourself. What do you make of this? Is he being ironic? Is he trying to imbue it with some sort of spiritual significance?

**Sallie Tisdale:** Well, yeah, that's what we call kumbaya *Survivor*. I never forget that Mark Burnett, the producer and creator of the show, and Jeff Probst are both gazillionaires. They have experienced a spiritual renewal through this show, James: they became extremely wealthy. A million dollars can do that for you, and they have many billions of dollars. So in that sense, it's ironic. I don't know how much he believes his own script because these people are not going through a true spiritual renewal. He usually says things like that when somebody has been tearful and another person has put their hand on their shoulder and everybody's hugged and made up. Then we're suddenly in group therapy.

**James Shaheen:** He's not much of a therapist, but momentarily, he'll say something comforting for a moment before he starts stoking the rivalries.

**Sallie Tisdale:** He says, “Oh, we're going through real spiritual renewal. And now it's time for the vote.” But what I particularly like is the way Jeff continually manipulates people's perception



of each other. Talk about constructed reality. He’s constructing it all the time too. He’ll look at them, and he’ll say, “So now it’s time for us to really be honest.” That’s a very silly thing for him to say. “Let’s be really honest. Don’t you think Ramona is lazy?” And I’m just watching this, and my jaw just drops. It’s like we can see the editing in real time. Constant constructing.

**James Shaheen:** You also write about the racial and sexual politics of *Survivor*, and Ramona might be a good example. They have racial stereotypes. They have sort of misogynistic stereotypes. They have all sorts of things like that that are in the culture. And this is also 20 years ago, and it might be more blatant to us now.

**Sallie Tisdale:** Oh, no. It was just the last season that we really started to see CBS taken to task. The Black Lives Matter movement stimulated a lot of Black former players of *Survivor* to come together in a group called Soul Survivors, and they worked hard to petition and get the attention of CBS. It took months. CBS didn’t respond at all to them for months but finally agreed that they would change the diversity on the show. Typically, the show is about 80–85 percent white, and that’s been true for 20 years. It’s not just 20 years ago. This has been true all along. There have been very, very few Black winners, very few Hispanic and Asian players and only a few winners. They finally agreed that a third to a half of the players would be people of color and Indigenous. We’ll see, and we’ll see if that changes the dynamics of the game.

More egregious to me even is the unquestioned appropriation of cultural motifs in such a way that are deeply stereotyping, from the music to the graphics to the fake idols. In one season, for the idol, they got a statue that they thought was a traditional statue, and it turned out to be a tourist thing. You could buy it in any souvenir shop.

**James Shaheen:** They just can’t get that one right.



**Sallie Tisdale:** They couldn't even figure it out. There's a lot of cultural appropriation, and that's what I call the “terrifying natives,” because you still hear phrases like that on the show. “Watch out for the sharks, the snakes, and the terrifying natives.” I get a little bit under the skin of the cultural appropriation. They are very good at covering their tracks. CBS is extremely proprietary about the show, and it's hard to know for sure what's happened, what's going on, but it's a golden goose to them, and they protect it very carefully.

**James Shaheen:** Maybe I should have asked this at the beginning, but now that we're at the end, I'll ask it. I read something you wrote and I heard you say on another podcast that you write about questions that you've been mulling over or considering or thinking about. What question were you thinking about when you wrote this book?

**Sallie Tisdale:** I like to say that I write about the problems, whatever problems are arising. I really don't like having my photograph taken. I really resist being in this surveillance culture. I'm not on Instagram or Twitter or TikTok or Facebook. I have a very strong sense of reserve and privacy. Too much, I think. At times I am too resistant and too reserved. So that's one is feeling like I'm going very much against the cultural stream of being on camera all the time. At the same time, I love to watch, not just reality. I love to watch. I love movies. I love television. I love to read. I love stories. I really like being the observer, not the observed. And I just realized that right here is an intersection of some really interesting questions.

**James Shaheen:** I've often wondered this because I love your writing and you've been writing for Tricycle for many years. You've written for Harpers, the New Yorker. You're a published writer. That's an uncommon breed. But I was wondering, how do you think about your writing, and how does it relate to being a Zen teacher? Or are they two separate things? And you're also a nurse. You do all these different things.



**Sallie Tisdale:** I’m a nurse because I have to pay the rent, James. Being a published writer doesn’t always pay the rent. I’m a Zen teacher, but primarily I’m a Zen student. Being a Zen student, being a Zen practitioner informs every moment of my life. There’s no way to separate it. That’s my language. That’s my gestalt. That’s my perspective and my point of view at all times. But it doesn’t mean that everything has to be in that language or in that particular form. The deepest way it informs me is to question everything, to investigate everything, to not assume, to not take things at face value, but to really question everything, especially my own point of view and my own ideas about what is true. I do have truths that I believe in, but I got there through investigating them, not just accepting them. So that informs everything, and my writing is largely centered on ambiguity, ambivalence, grey areas where there aren’t any clear truths that this is right and that is wrong. I’m really interested in that space between where we’re really not sure, where there’s much to see.

The other thing I would say is that just as we’ve been talking about layers of presentation and appearance, a writer is not the narrator is not the author is not the character, and I prefer being the observer to being observed, but as a writer, I am the observed, and people often mistake the narrator for the writer and vice versa. So I experience it from that side as well. I can hardly wait for the *Survivor* fan blogs to get hold of this book and start hating on me.

**James Shaheen:** You’ll enter the fray.

**Sallie Tisdale:** I will enter the fray, and I will be trolled, I’m sure, and I’m not looking forward to that, but I’m in charge of that. And one of the things that strikes me about the surveillance culture is how helpless a lot of people feel, like, “Well, I have to be on Facebook. I have to be on Instagram.” Question that. Question why. That’s what Zen has done for me. I question, and I’m

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willing to be wrong. When I first started practicing, I couldn't say, "I'm wrong. I'm sorry. I don't know. My mistake," but I sure can now. I am very willing to be wrong.

**James Shaheen:** Thank you so much, Sally. It was great talking with you, as always.

**Sallie Tisdale:** Thank you, James. Thanks for having me.

You've been listening to *Tricycle Talks* with Sallie Tisdale. We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at [feedback@tricycle.org](mailto:feedback@tricycle.org) to let us know what you think.

*Tricycle Talks* is produced by As It Should Be, Sarah Fleming, and Julia Hirsch. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!