

Life As It Is

Episode #6 with Sister Clear Grace

“On the Road to Awakening with the Traveling Nunk”

January 26, 2022



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James Shaheen: Hello and welcome to *Life As It Is*. I’m James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. On September 15, Buddhist monastic Sister Clear Grace Dayananda set out across the United States in the Great Aspiration, a Chevy van she has converted into a portable meditation hall. This mobile monastery is the centerpiece of a project she calls the Traveling Nunk, which aims to make dharma teachings accessible to marginalized communities. Through chanting in public parks, collaborating with local faith groups, and giving out meals to those in need, she aspires to act with compassion and equanimity.

In today’s episode of *Life As It Is*, my co-host Sharon Salzberg and I sit down with Sister Clear Grace to talk about her travels through the American South, the practice of meeting people where they are, and how we can learn to love those with whom we disagree.

James Shaheen: I’m here with Buddhist monk Sister Clear Grace Dayananda and my co-host, Sharon Salzberg. Hi, Sharon. Hi, Sister Clear Grace.

Sharon Salzberg: Hello.

Sister Clear Grace: Hi, Sharon. Hi, James.

James Shaheen: Sister Clear Grace, you’ve been traveling around the country in a minivan spreading the dharma teachings in a project you call the traveling nunk. Can you start by explaining that term “nunk”? What is a nunk, and what is a traveling nunk?

Sister Clear Grace: This traveling project is a mobile monastery, and the name of it and the vision is the Great Aspiration. It holds the power of being able to meet people where they are and

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taking our dhamma practice off of the cushion. If we look at 2,600 years ago, even in the time of the Buddha, there were these unprecedented times or these troubled times. I think the practice is how do we meet that where it is, and what have we been practicing for? What has the dhamma taught us, and where are we at with that, and how do we engage that? So I think after a year of pandemic and being behind the television screen, and seeing just the likes of police violence, and pandemic, and different injustices of the world, our response sometimes can look different if we're practicing for this all the time. And that's what this vision was, that's how this was inspired. It was to go there to meet those things and to really be present with those things that are in front of us.

“Nunk” was the term that me and one of my best monastic sisters used. When we would go into town to do the shopping every week, people would come up and say, “What are you? Are you a monk? Are you a nun?” We have these certain things in the monastery where the female practitioners who have taken ordination are nuns and the male practitioners are monks, and we would determine whether you're a nun or monk and nuns live in the nuns quarters and have the nuns precepts. If we can just expand and be without the boundaries and transcend certain things, the dhamma gives us this opportunity to meet things where they are. We have the chance to bring this to the people. So this was the term we're like, “Yeah, I'm a monk, I'm a nun. I'm a nun, I'm a monk.” Please call me by my true names. The venerable Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, or Thay, has this wonderful poem, “Please Call Me By My True Name.” So all of those things and none of those things at the same time. If we can hold things that way, I think that we would come to see the dhamma in a much lighter way. So it's just a reminder of that.

Sharon Salzberg: I'm curious about when you started the project, and I'm very taken with your description of your inspiration, because it's sort of like a movement towards suffering, which of course, so many of us are taught all our lives, “Better avoid that if you can.”

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Sister Clear Grace: September 15 was the day of the launch of the pilgrimage. I had been working on the van, converting it for about three months, just getting it out, and then rebuilding it with the help of a friend, John Calhoun, who is a carpenter. He was able to help me build some of the walls and do a lot of the planning. We worked hard on it from early morning until the end of the evening, and it was really an act of compassion. There was this energy that came from the dhamma. I was beyond mental capacity, beyond my knowledge of having to build a home inside of a van, and there were days and times where I was just moving and going, and I had to look back and it was like this was not me—this is just the power of the dhamma. A lot of research, a lot of YouTube, and a lot of mistakes, sparks flying and learning electricity and plumbing and insulation, ceiling, flooring. Even though it’s a small space, you still have to build a home. So that’s where the project had just come. Living in different monasteries and training under different teachers, seeing the dhamma, like you said, it is an act of moving towards suffering. A lot of us in the dhamma, we come for that self-reflection or turning in, those inward practices of lovingkindness. We take on really high dharmas like emptiness or the brahmaviharas. But if we come to see those things in our meditation practice, at some point, they should catapult us into the suffering because now we have a higher capacity to see all things and to hold things without being carried away, this practice of endurance, this *kshanti* practice that we take up.

I’m very privileged to have wheels and transportation and to be able to move around the country where many of my friends on the streets that I am coming in contact with don’t have that opportunity. Car culture has become such a thing in our country because of the economy, so housing is forcing people to live in their cars and in their vans. There’s a community of folks who have taken this up, and not by choice. During the pandemic, we’re at home for a year. We’re watching television, we see what’s happening. We see the country taking their last breath on television, “I can’t breathe,” and I think as dharma responders, our reaction in watching these kinds of things in the pandemic and natural disasters and all of the things that come to us by way of injustice and those types of sufferings, we often pull back or think that we need to go back to the cushion. It should catapult us in the midst of that suffering to bring that peace, to bring that

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presence, to meet it with one, to come with the wholeness, this wholeness that we practice, without having a view. And that's the hard part. This work that I do is very challenging because the self, Sister Clear Grace, I'm here in community, a lot of times with my friends on the streets, really just about being able to meet them where they are.

This reminds me of the sutta, “Fear and Dread,” which is one of my favorites suttas of the Buddha, where when we have these residues of fear and dread because we're not pure in body in mind, we as monastic dwellers would go to the forest and sit at the foot of a tree where there's venomous snakes and tigers, and here we have black bears. So we go and we sit at the foot of the tree, and when that fear and dread arises within us, the Buddha teaches us to stay and to stay in that position. If I'm standing, to stand, not to walk or to sit down or to lie down, until I can subdue that fear. A lot of practitioners who voluntarily take on this practice, we'll see this a lot of times with the Thai monks taking on long pilgrimages. For me, I have been on a pilgrimage in India. But I hadn't been on a pilgrimage right here in my own country, where there is a lot of suffering and there's a lot of healing that needs to be done, and there's a lot of insight. If I could walk across the bridge of the Civil Rights Movement or go down and bathe in the Mississippi River where many ancestors have been thrown over into the waters. The Buddha's teachings are full just as they are, and we don't need to change them to fit our life or the suffering that we're seeing. But they do give us that energy and that power to go into the suffering, so when we are faced with it, we're ready for it. We have been training for these times. We're practiced well.

James Shaheen: I just want our listeners to get a sense of what I'm seeing right now. I wonder if you could walk us through the van that you've built, and I also have a question about building it. But how have you set it up? What's in there?

Sister Clear Grace: I have the temple doors open up to the left, I have my altar here, and then I have all of my dharma collection, all of nikayas and the Pali suttas here. I have a place for shoes as we enter, and then I have sort of a Japanese sitting space. It's my bed as well. I didn't turn it

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over this morning, so I'm looking at it like, OK, that needs to be turned over. But it's also a sitting platform where I do my sitting meditation, or if somebody would like to come in, they can sit. I have dhamma books. There's another library over the top. I have a kitchen, I have a small fridge, a stove, a sink, and I do have a full bathroom as well. Just all of the things that I would need to dwell in a place and to be able to have conditions conducive both for study and for the practice and the pilgrimage that I do walking during the day.

James Shaheen: Years ago, Bernie Glassman talked to me about how they started Greyston Bakery. Several people said, “Well, we don't know how to do a bakery. We don't know how to do anything related to a bakery.” He said that they had to figure this out. It reminds me of what you did. You watched YouTube videos, learned about flooring, insulation, wheel wells, all sorts of things. So what was that like not to know how to do something and then just be determined enough to learn and do it?

Sister Clear Grace: There was a time with the electricity. I hit the switch and stick in these heat guns, and I'm sitting here wiring it. I'm going back to the video and pausing it and making sure that I've got the white and the green and the black and the ground, and I'm thinking, “OK, this is pretty dangerous. I know nothing about this.” But I go and connect everything and I hit the switch and it comes on, and there was just this overwhelming joy, a sense of pride. This is all for the fruit of the dhamma. And there was just something about that. Like I said, I lived in monasteries, and we built kutis, and we built lotus ponds, and we built meditation decks and often worked really hard to build our temple. And that's what this was about. This was an act of love and compassion for the people, being able to meet them where they are and to walk out the dhamma in a way that I see fit.

Sharon Salzberg: Wow. I want to go back to you calling the van the Great Aspiration. It brings to mind the Buddha as a bodhisattva before his enlightenment, sitting under that tree, taunted by

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Mara. Mara was trying to dissuade him from his aspiration, which was to be a completely free being and not to get up from under the roots of that tree until he had attained that. I wonder if you could say something more about that name and how it was having that deep and pure aspiration. Did it sustain? Did it change in the course of your journeys?

Sister Clear Grace: The great aspiration is always growing. I hope that it continues to grow. Just living by the bodhisattva vows and also the bodhisattva path, what's coming to mind for me is the second mindfulness training, true happiness: “Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing, and oppression, I vow in my compassion and generosity to share in generosity in my time and my acting and my very way of being.” This was about bringing ease and relief of suffering to those in my reach, in my space, in my view, in those that I meet and those that I come across. It really was about acting out the dhamma and putting the dhamma in practice and leaning into that. That's what the great aspiration was, and that's what it is now. I sometimes serve coffee at the encampments. I really do have a vision to have some type of service truck to serve food to those that are hungry, maybe people that can offer up donations of coffee or grits and oatmeal, especially during the winter months, warm soup. I ran several operations in the restaurant industry, so I do have the skill set in that, and I would like to have a food truck or a trailer where I'm able to live and practice at the same time and go around the country and offer those things that are needed. Sometimes it's clothes or shoes, just whatever it is that we can offer to those that need it.

James Shaheen: I'm curious about what your day is like. So you show up in a town. So what's the day like? How do you reach out to people? Do you connect with other people who are serving the community? And how do you connect with people?

Sister Clear Grace: A day can kind of look like anything. Planning is really difficult, and knowing what's going to happen is really complicated. Van life is very complicated. But I will

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say that I'm coming to this town. I often ask for support, needing a place to hook up electricity or maybe to fill up the water tank. These basic needs and challenges are struggles in the van life and also for our friends that live on the streets, just finding water to clean or to bathe or even to drink, having electricity to stay warm or to charge their phone for safety, just these simple needs. I do often send out a message ahead of time that I'm coming. If you have a driveway or parking lot that I can park in safely and plug up, that would be most appreciated and very supportive to the vision. Often I don't know anybody or there aren't any dhamma practitioners or maybe they just don't know or whatever the situation may be, and I'll spend a lot of time right at the core downtown. Usually between a Broad Street and Main Street and a Martin Luther King Street, it's really not hard to tell which directions our communities are in. It can look like just a walking meditation, just walking downtown greeting everybody, smiling and saying hello. As their curiosity peaks and they say, "You're not from around here," or "What's that get-up? Who are you?" I'll just practice being present, not bringing in my misperceptions or my views or my fear or my judgments or my ideas as well, just truly meeting them where they are. Often, in that greeting or in that smile, people are able to welcome me and to greet me back. Sometimes I will visit the visitor center and see if there's any churches doing any work, or I'll reach out to the churches on Sunday. Often they're serving food, those types of things. I do go to those places I think that we tend to overlook or there's fear to walk down into those towns. That's where we need to be. That's where we have the power of the practice in the dhamma: to be able to walk, there should be no direction that we should not be able to turn in.

James Shaheen: Do you ever feel fear going into places that you don't know and filled with people you don't know?

Sister Clear Grace: Very rarely does fear arise. Fear is in our mind, and that feeling in the body, subduing it as the Buddha teaches us, but also knowing that this is not me, this is not I, this is not mine. The same thing with those things that I think to be fearful or that I know to be fearful

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because of the media or because of the way something might look or the way something might feel or the way something might sound, I have to be really careful not to pick that up in the presence. If I am not pure in conduct in body and mind, then I will also invite those things. So it's there, it's there everywhere. Everywhere we are, there is danger, or there could be fear or harm, but the practice is to really walk in a way that it's not with us. Otherwise I would be doing a great injustice to everyone, so it's really important that I walk in with this love and this compassion and that I'm imbuing that practice and I'm imbuing this peace that the dhamma gives us. This peace is what I want to share and bring to the community, even in places where I think that I may not be welcomed. I go into certain towns where I may not be welcome, somebody who looks like me, walks like me, talks like me, is a Buddhist monk or whatever it is I appear to be to someone. I have to remove that. That's the work that I have to do, removing that view as I walk into a neighborhood or into a community, because it's about meeting the people where they are. It's about shedding the self and then coming fully present to meet them where they are.

James Shaheen: You've been on the road for a few months now. First, where have you been, and second, I wonder if you could share a few of your favorite moments from your travels so far? What has surprised you? What has delighted you?

Sister Clear Grace: Really just meeting the people of all walks of life and receiving dhamma. So many people are full of wisdom and full of dhamma. I'm really enjoying Tennessee. It's my first time here. It's a very beautiful state. There's a lot of things going on to help the people in the community in different towns. I've been to Cosby, Gatlinburg, and Knoxville. I'm in Chattanooga at the moment, and there's just a sense of community. There's truly a sense of community here. I went into Tent City last week, and there was this man named James. He was taking a machete and clearing out the overgrowth in the tent area in the encampment. We were giving away sleeping bags, and I said, "Hey, we're giving away basic needs over here. Please

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come over and gather anything that you need,” and he said, “Excuse me, ma’am?” I said, “Yes?” He said, “My name is James. I have to watch the tents, and I’m trying to clear out a new plot.” He’s just over there working really, really hard. Of course, from the conventional first looking at this individual with his jewelry and his piercings or whatever, we can have an idea or a view of what he may be about. But he’s just working really, really hard. I found in my heart that he was clearing out this lot for people coming in to put up their tents, and being able to bring him back a sleeping bag was just a great joy.

The gift of giving is so much bigger when we’re doing the work and we’re giving. So often I feel that I’m receiving much more. I think especially as a monastic, we have certain ways and vows and precepts that often we don’t serve in this way. We serve in a different way. We take up the dhamma, we take up the practice, we take up our vows so that we can continue the dhamma. Our heirs and our ancestors have been here before us to keep the teachings of the Buddha alive, and this is a great thing. So in order for me to be able to bring this man who needs a place at night to sleep in a warm sleeping bag to help him and the community stay warm, it’s just a wonderful gift. I’m so blessed to have the fortune to be able to do such a thing.

There was another wonderful lady who just needed 60 cents to buy a can of Vienna sausages, and I was given a gift card, so I was able to offer her this gift card. I think she bought \$8 of groceries in the Dollar Store, and she invited me to have lunch with her. This is the highest offering. So I’m sitting down in the back of the van, and on the bumper, we share a meal where she has her chips and her Vienna sausages. Of course, I’m thinking, “Oh my goodness, this is not a meal. This is not food. We’re supporting the dollar store and food capitalism.” But again, these are the things that I have to shed. I’m here to have a meal and to be present with her at this moment. So all of my views and all of my ideas have to go out the window, and this practice of being present and sharing in the meal with her is my work.

Sharon Salzberg: You’ve had a companion on the journey as well, your cat, whose name is Upekkha, or equanimity in the Pali language. You’ve talked about equanimity a lot as we’ve

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been here together. You talked about not rejecting a person because of their views and having a heart big enough, wide enough to hold it all. You've talked about being able to hold all kinds of different experiences in your heart as well. So I'm wondering if every time you glance at your cat, you have a reminder of that quality of equanimity.

Sister Clear Grace: Every time I glance at the cat, I have the reminder of dukkha and the great attachment of suffering. But yes, the practice of equanimity, coming without discrimination, not differentiating between this or that, really is the practice. It's just a reminder for me as I do enter into the world in this way and walk in a way of the world that's very challenging, that is truly the practice.

Sharon Salzberg: I've been asked about this a million times, and I'm sure you have as well. The word discrimination, like all of these words, as we struggled to put these concepts into English, to not have discrimination or bias does not mean having no discernment. We recognize that of course, actions have consequences and cultivating greed, hatred, and delusion will likely lead to a lot of suffering, and cultivating lovingkindness and compassion will likely lead to a lot of joy and freedom. I don't know if you want to say anything about discernment.

Sister Clear Grace: Yeah, this is huge. This mindful alertness and being able to see the dhamma as we do in our spiritual practice in meditation as we are in the world and of our own nature, our own nature of those very things that you mentioned, of greed, craving, all of these desires, our sensual pleasures. We have to know where we are, and we have to be honest with ourselves. This is also the biggest practice. We have to know what we can enter into, we have to know our capacity, but we have to also be willing to do the work, to be able to come to the fullness of the measure so that we can see the fruits of our practice and that we can transcend a lot of these things in order to reach the deathless. We can transcend a lot of these things that we do have biases or discriminations or views about. One of the bigger things about traveling and traveling

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in the South is this political violence that is in front of us all day long, regardless of what view we hold or what flag we hold or what bumper sticker is on our car. If I have a Buddha bumper sticker or a Buddhist flag or a gay flag or a political flag, at some point, we're picking up one side of the stick so that there is somebody who can pick up the other side of the stick. We should be really careful with our views, even our Buddhist ones or our practitioner ones or the ones that we feel to be righteous. This is one of the biggest practices. Being in the South, this is in front of us all day long, whether it's a news channel or a bumper sticker or somebody's T-shirt or somebody's hat, as soon as we say, "Well, that's not my view," or "I have this other view." And it will also allow us to not enter sometimes. Because of our discrimination, we think, "Oh, I'm not wanted there, I don't need to be there, that's not where my love needs to be, or I got work to do, I'm not ready yet," but we should be, we should be. With the power of the dhamma, we can come to that. That is the goal is to work towards that, so we can start by practicing in small ways, and that's family members during the holidays. Let's go practice with our Auntie or uncle at the holiday dinner.

Sharon Salzberg: It seems like the challenge, perhaps, would be to love and disagree. We're not talking about giving up our sense of principles or our sometimes very hard-earned sense of right and wrong. But there can be love there anyway.

Sister Clear Grace: Absolutely. And this love, it's so powerful. It contains so much. It's the vastness in connection. And knowing that those views are there, right? There's not an ignorance or a suppression of them. It's knowing that those views are there, and they're OK, and we can hold them right where they are. But right now, there's this love and there's this connection and there's you and I and I am here, and you are there. That moment right there, being able to cultivate that moment, has been some of the biggest learning lessons on this journey with everyone, with people that I come to meet or that I think I might not have met. So when those clinging attachments arise inside of me and I am making them to be about me, I, mine, as soon as

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I go that direction, I know that I'm picking up a view, and that's also not mine. But if I choose to pick up that stick, then I know that somebody is picking up the other end. The love can no longer be as it needs to be. When I can see all of its parts, to know that it's there, to come to the fullness of understanding it, to lean into it, to see all of its parts, there's compassion on all sides, and there are no more sides, then I'm able to come to that place in my wholeness, in my seeing all of the dhamma, and say, "Here we are," and meeting that individual where they are. In that connection is where we can begin to love our way through those views or those disagreements. But until we can get to that point, and it may not be on both sides, it may just be my work to do this. It may just be me entering into this conversation. But the thing is to not allow for it to be an opposite view or an opposing view or another side, and not in an oppressive way. So this is about seeing all of its parts and coming to the fullness of its measure. This is an active leaning in, a destructing or a dismantling, and then being able to be there and be present, so not needing it to change and not needing it to be different. But what needs to be different are those parts that are within me and how I can work on those parts, how I can remove those taints and those defilements within me, so that I can come to the fullness and love and expand my heart in the presence of those things without feeding the separation.

Sharon Salzberg: So you've also had a lot of experience living on the road even before this project. Can you tell us something about your experience growing up and how it influences your work now?

Sister Clear Grace: Sure. So as a single child of a young mother at 17, we often moved from place to place, whether it was trying to find better rent opportunities or running from domestic violence situations. My mother often worked two jobs, so a lot of times she wasn't home. I was just at home with either the television or a bowl of cereal, and we would be moving, so the next thing you know, my mom would come in, and she'd say, "OK, we have to go," and we would just take what we can in a small amount of time, and we would jump in the car, and we would

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live in the car. For me, it was an adventure because it was time alone with my mom. It was this stealth mode, traveling in new places and great ideas. Of course, later, I started to miss my best friends and teachers and being stable and staying in one place. But again, this was often an adventure and time alone with my mom, which I truly wanted as an only child. We did that a lot. I was born in Monterey Bay in California, and we traveled up and down the coast all the way to Los Angeles, where I grew up and all over the state of California.

James Shaheen: Why don't you tell us how you first came to Buddhism?

Sister Clear Grace: It was a difficult time in my life. There was separation: I had lost a younger sister, I had lost a best friend, I was just coming out of a relationship and moving into a divorce. This is over a span of many years. The relationship had lasted maybe 19 years, and looking back on that time, it was this samsaric circle of grasping, so there was the job and the career and the promotion and the house, the marriage. It was all of these things. Now we need to have children, and all of these types of things were happening. As those things started to fall away, the values in my life started to change, and I looked inward. I basically came to the five mindfulness trainings, which were a wonderful saving for me. I leaned right into the dhamma, and I knew then that the path for me was to be a nun. I worked really hard within that year to change my life so that I could move to the monastery and become ordained.

Sharon Salzberg: You also have a program called Alms for the People, which I'm very curious about. I'm wondering if you can tell us more about that project.

Sister Clear Grace: As monastics, we go on alms. Everything that we do is by the community of the people, and so this van, the Great Aspiration, all of it is powered by the community of the people. Alms for the People is an opportunity for us to seek help and to gather up the basic needs of those that are around us or those that are in need or those that have less or those that are

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suffering. It's a project that we're hoping to continue, especially during the winter months as people are taking to the streets in the extreme weather elements and conditions, to offer a sleeping bag, a warm cup of soup, coffee. Sometimes I will just pull up the van and make coffee. I don't need much. All of my requisites have been met at the moment, and anything that's left, I offer to those that are in front of me to share in giving. So that's what Alms for the People is. It could look like anything. In some of our communities, the children need shoes and jackets. Hunger is one of the biggest things in the day, just whatever it is for the needs of the community.

James Shaheen: You also offer courses and opportunities for sutta study, which you describe as a mobile learning platform. Among the other things that you do, I've been watching you read from the Pali canon on YouTube. So what is the relationship between the mobile monastery and this mobile learning environment?

Sister Clear Grace: It's about being able to just practice and share wherever I'm at in places that we might not see temples, making it accessible. Often I will just go into a park, a busy park. When I was in Asheville, it was a great place to do this. I would pull up the van and open the doors and read a sutta or sit down and have a meditation, and I have a few people come and join me. When I was in Charlotte, I also did this at a park and had several people just come up and they would sit. I wouldn't know who they were, or they might not be there when I was done sitting. The greatest part of the sharing has been in the parks, being able to invite the bell or to chant. Sometimes, I'll just sit there and chant or people will come up and ask questions about the dhamma or about who I am or what I am and mostly meditation practitioners. So it's wonderful to see that too in community.

James Shaheen: It's only been a few months, but have you remained in touch with any of the people that you've met?

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Sister Clear Grace: I have. Miss Sharon will call me every once in a while. She'll call me every Friday, and she'll say, "How you doing?" She's 65 years old, and she's facing eviction. She is actually the one who shared lunch with me on the back of the bumper in the mobile monastery. She's originally from Virginia, and she moved here with her daughter who got married. That relationship fell apart when her daughter got married, and she's kind of been on our own ever since. She's in a wheelchair. There's also Mr. Frank Prescott, who is also in a wheelchair. I met him in downtown Knoxville, Tennessee. He also keeps in touch and just checks in on how I'm doing and where I'll be. He's waiting for some documentation from the VA so that he could get housing and get off of the streets. I was interested in knowing how he was going to navigate that and find a place. Often their belongings are stolen. Having documentation in order to find housing is a challenge and a difficulty.

I've also stayed in touch with dhamma practitioners. A sangha will call and say, "Oh, Sister Clear Grace is here, the traveling nunk is here. What can we do today?" One or two people will come with me, and we'll go into the city and we'll just walk. We'll just kind of be, or we'll just greet people in the practice of bringing our presence. That has been a great joy. That has been a lot of fun. Of course, being in sangha warms my heart, and it's welcoming to know that they're there, and that has also been the great connection. It's not of any one tradition. It's just everybody.

James Shaheen: I can't help but think about my dad. He used to take meals to people in underpasses and Los Angeles. I used to wonder the same thing: "Dad, aren't you afraid? Isn't something going to happen to you?" Like you, he was pretty sure of himself and that what he was doing was the right thing, and he didn't seem to have any fear at all. I'm always impressed by this.

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Sharon Salzberg: I was going to ask you also about bringing these different communities together because it seems that you have a sense of community. It's everybody. It's very inspiring. I'm wondering if you could say something about the sense of community that you've developed.

Sister Clear Grace: I think we've been through a lot as a nation, and I think we're all looking for that outbreak in each other, that smile. I'm meeting a lot of the spirit of Christ here on the streets, and definitely in the South. It's empowering. It's inspiring. I met this one bodhisattva in Knoxville, Marty. She opened up an empty parking lot with a chain link fence, and she offers showers and food and places for people to charge their phone every Sunday. She's with the church, and they offer prayer. The churches in Knoxville serve food every day of the week. In some communities, it's just on Sunday because it's downtown, there's no parking, and people are off at work. But these churches, they take up a day of the week so that there is a free meal every day, so somebody will volunteer on Monday, Tuesday, and so on, and all these churches work together. This bodhisattva Marty said, "Here, Sister Clear Grace, come with me, I just want you to see what we do." She welcomed everybody. She knew everybody's name, helped people come back into their bodies, whether it was mental health or drug addiction or all of these things that we experience on the streets.

There's COVID, there's fear, maybe an idea of separation, even the unknown, but in that moment, she was just present and she was there in all of her fullness. She would greet them, and they'd show that they got a job at Domino's or whatever. She said, "This is what we do." One woman was saying, "I need a cigarette. I need a cigarette." In the spirit of Christ, Marty was just being there, but not offering the cigarette but also not saying, "No, it's not good for you, or we're not going to do this" and none of her views or her judgments at that time. She goes, "Let's eat a banana. You really need to eat something." So she gives her a banana. She goes "OK, now let's get some water inside of you. You're doing great, you're doing great." How can we bring that practice? Seeing at this moment the teachings of Christ in action, or Jesus or the Buddha, this is what I was witnessing. To me, this was the brahmaviharas in action for those that are suffering or

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for those that are in need in front of us. It takes great work as a practitioner to be able to be there fully and to be present without our views and our judgments and our ideas. In that moment, community is community. It's just human beings taking care of each other in all ways.

Sharon Salzberg: Thank you for that. I was also thinking that James, your father was probably motivated by the teachings of Catholicism, right?

James Shaheen: Yeah, that's where he'd go. It was related to work that the church was doing.

Sharon Salzberg: Another thing I was thinking is the pandemic and how it's altered so many things like the communities we go to for inspiration or solace and how many of us either stayed home or at least were not able to go to the physical meditation centers and the meeting places that we were accustomed to. Everybody had to find an alternative way to practice.

Sister Clear Grace: Often when I was living at Deer Park monastery in the hidden mountain, this was the time around the Orlando shooting, and also not too far, about an hour away from San Diego at the border, children were being separated from their families. In every direction, there was police violence. We were looking at these things. As a young monastic and somebody who takes up renunciation and is practicing letting go of the self or the ways that we are in the world and the things that we identify with, this is a foundational training. This is huge. But at some point, when we come to the fullness of who we are, only then can we truly let it go. We can't walk away until we know that. So at some point, here we were up on the mountain enjoying tea, watching the mist come in in this pleasant abiding, but I hear the cries and the suffering of those at the bottom of the hill. Often, it's not those who come on retreat. I mean, it is, but there are others who aren't able to come on retreat, so they might not be amongst us as we're all pleasant abiding in the Oak Grove and the sun is coming through the rays, and we're washing the bird. How do we do that in the railroad tracks at the underpass or at the border where these things are

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happening? How do we bring that there? And then we come back and we practice, and we continue to come back, so it's this ebb and flow, this going back to our practice and bringing this. How do we keep expanding our heart, keep expanding until that residue is no longer there? And how do we do that with sangha and in community so that we can hold each other accountable and we can hold each other in our practice and that fear can lessen for us? We can stand up and be the dhamma in the way that we know it to be. So it was often about coming down off the mountain, and I think that's also what the vision of the Great Aspiration is. It just happens that, again, after the pandemic, this is also another way.

James Shaheen: We're running short on time. Sister Clear Grace, are there any other stories from your travels you'd like to share?

Sister Clear Grace: This is all the fruits of the community and the fruits of the dhamma, and I'm truly grateful to be able to walk out this vision and this mission and that you're all with me all the time. I'll often be doing a driving meditation and the leaves are turning and I'm on the highway waving at the person next to me, and it's such a joy. It's such a great fortune. I just want to express my deep gratitude again to my teachers, to all of the community who continue to support and to find this liberation.

James Shaheen: Thank you so much for joining us. I wonder if you could take us out with a short meditation.

Sister Clear Grace: Let us just ease into the sounds of the community and all that is there with us, falling into our breath, wherever it is, and bringing to mind all of the blessings, all of our blessings, blessings coming down like rain. As we receive those blessings, we can share our blessings with those around us and others, knowing that what I have, another has; what I don't

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have, another has. Together we have it all. How fortunate we are to have the teachings and to have the dhamma.

This energy, this love that is imbued in our hearts and in our bodies and on our face and in our smile, we can take that with us into the world and just see. Just see what that looks like, what that looks like in action. How can we share this today, tomorrow? How will we share this lovingkindness?

James Shaheen: It was great to see you both, and as always, Sharon, thank you for being my co-host.

Sharon Salzberg: It was lovely.

James Shaheen: Thank you so much, Sister Clear Grace.

Sister Clear Grace: Thank you, James and Sharon. May the dhamma hold you.

James Shaheen: You've been listening to *Life As It Is* with Sister Clear Grace. We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at feedback@tricycle.org to let us know what you think. *Life As It Is* and *Tricycle Talks* are produced by As It Should Be and Sarah Fleming. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!