

Become a Good Ancestor Podcast

Ep005 Radical Friendship with Kate Johnson

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

book, love, people, practice, writing, relationship, friendship, centres, friend, meditation, feel, communities, radical, read, life, world, Buddhist, question, taught, part

SPEAKERS

Kate, Layla, Reema

Layla 00:22

Hello and welcome to episode four of the 'Become a Good Ancestor' podcast. I'm your host, Layla Saad, and this is the place where inner work meets social change. Today I'm speaking with a Buddhist meditation teacher and writer, Kate Johnson. Kate's work integrates embodiment, justice, and the practice of wise relationships. Kate has taught meditation and creative movement practices as social change methodologies for almost two decades in public schools, community health centres, activist organisations, and performance collectives. She has been a dedicated practitioner in the western insight Theravada Buddhist tradition since 2008 and was fully empowered as an independent Dharma teacher through Spirit Rock Meditation Centres after a year of teacher training in 2020. Her debut book that we'll be talking about today is called 'Radical Friendship: Seven Ways to Love Yourself and Find Your People in an Unjust World'. It's published by Shambala, and it's our July book club selection, drawing on her experiences as a leading meditation teacher, as well as her personal stories of growing up multiracial in a racist world. Kate Johnson brings a fresh take on time-honoured wisdom to help us connect more authentically with ourselves, with our friends and family and within our communities. To find out more about the book and to join us for the discussions of the Book Club, visit www.becomeagoodancestor.com/bookclub.

Welcome, Kate. It's so good to have you here. We've been wanting to have this conversation for a long time, and I can't wait to dive in because I've never read a book on friendship. This is going to be a first for me, but before we dive into the conversation, can you tell the people where they can find your work online?

Kate 02:42

Thank you for asking. You can find me on my website, www.katejohnson.com. I'm on Instagram as [@hellokatejohnson](https://www.instagram.com/hellokatejohnson). You can find my schedule on my website as well. I am often online, around the country and at various retreat centres.

Layla 03:10

That's awesome. That's wonderful. Our very first question we ask every guest is, who are some of the ancestors living or transitioned, familial or societal, who have influenced you on your journey?

Kate 03:26

I love this question. One that immediately comes to mind is my great grandmother, Theodosia Yueda Nelson, she raised my dad, and she was a Baptist officially but also pretty magical. He was raised on an island off the coast of Honduras where there was a lot of influence from the indigenous, North American, Caribbean and African diaspora religions. I feel like her tendency towards interdisciplinarity and not fragmentation, but wholeness. Even with a spiritual practice that integrated multiplicity, I feel like that's part of her legacy and her gift to me.

Layla 04:24

I love that.

Kate 04:24

Yes, she was a force. I think about Deepa Ma, who is one ancestor of my Buddhist training. She was the teacher of several of my teachers, but I never met her in person. She was, by all accounts, like a pretty enlightened person. I mean, she could walk through walls and stuff like that, but she exuded love and was able to really transmit that quality of total unconditional acceptance to the students she was around. She was one of those people because she had such incredible powers. She could have a community around her where she sat and offered teachings all day. But she was a dedicated mother, she had a daughter and then became a grandmother and decided to stay in the city. She taught other mothers in her neighbourhood to meditate to the point of enlightenment. She would teach young mothers how to meditate while they were breastfeeding their kids and as new moms, and as a total community person. I know my path is certainly a householder path of everyday enlightenment, and of finding the sacred in daily life is something that I really look to for support and motivation. You know that awakening isn't somewhere else it can be just here in my everyday life.

Layla 06:07

That's beautiful.

Kate 06:09

Can I have two more?

Layla 06:11

Yeah, you can have as many as you want. Bring them in.

Kate 06:17

One other person from my tradition who is more a Western insight, tradition teacher, but one of the first generation of teachers here, his name was Eric Kolvig. He started the LGBTQ affinity group, which are meditation retreats that happen at these large centres around the country, where I sometimes teach. He was a champion for making space for queer folks to come and sit together, to practise together and what it is to have an affinity space where folks who are usually at the margins can be centred. How much easier it can be to relax into ourselves with spiritual practice when we're not more or less worried about encountering microaggressions because I think he understood that when we come to the cushion, you know, some of what we come to heal from is patriarchy, white supremacy, heterosexism and transphobia. He comes to mind because I had the opportunity to sit with him a couple of years ago,

and he was talking about his own friendship and practice. Someone asked him how he practices now because he's older and he was remarking he couldn't sit in meditation as long as he used to. He explained his mind started to change, memory and things of that nature. He said the way he does spiritual practice now is to treat every being that he encounters as a friend, such as being a human being to a child, to a rock when he meets them, for example. To allow this is that when he sees them, he extends his heart to them. I think it's such a beautiful intention and one that can help us. You practise love all day long.

Layla 08:12

It has me smiling from ear to ear. I just feel that from within.

Kate 08:17

As an older gentleman walking down the street, he sees people as a friend, and he definitely wants to bring him into this space. Then last, I have to name Bell Hooks, who recently transitioned, as you know, was a black feminist and a Buddhist and who I've always wanted to be when I grew up. I feel reading her work taught me how to write, how to think and how to love.

Layla 08:46

Yes, I love that. I'm actually in a programme at the minute by the School of Radical Healing, which is led by Adrian Moses, and we're going to be studying Bell Hooks' books. It is all about love as part of this trauma-informed training. This is aimed at BIPOC facilitators. I love that you named her because I've been wanting to read the book for a long time. It was like I need to be in the right place to read this, a really important body of work. It feels like it is the right environment for doing that. I love that you've brought her in because she's sitting in my heart right now. That's wonderful.

In your book, you share all the different teachers that have influenced you and that are part of your lineage, whether DNA lineage or philosophical, and I would love to hear a little more about your upbringing. What you would consider your cultural background, the influences while you were growing up, and what were the themes that formed your values? Who is right? How did you show up in the world and then how did you come into the world of Buddhism and meditation?

Kate 10:11

I'm from Chicago originally and grew up there Chicago in the '80s. I have a White American mother who is from Missouri and a town literally called Boonville. I don't know if you've noticed, but in the States, we pejoratively refer to small towns in the country as the boonies, or that's what we did. A very small town where white and black people literally lived on the opposite side of the tracks, train tracks that ran through the town. Her ancestry is French and recently discovered she is also Ashkenazi Jewish. Then my father is from Honduras, from an island off the coast of Honduras, Roatán, at the time. He's black and Afro-Latino. My parents met in Chicago in the early 80s and that's where I was born. I grew up in a city that was and still is deeply racially segregated. I lived in a primarily Latinx neighbourhood and I would say race was a concern for kids of that era. It really dictated who you hung out with, where you went to school, and what kind of music you liked. I think I was aware of this at that time. I would say my experience was one of not belonging, not feeling like I belonged anywhere, or searching for where I belonged. A real longing for a space where I felt I could be myself and all of me was included. I was

having a hard time finding that and I think now I know that regardless of my racial and ethnic background, which is how pretty much everybody feels, I think to provide...

Layla 12:33

A universal experience of it. Right? That longing.

Kate 12:37

...searching for where we fit in and trying to connect. To be in a relationship where we are seeing the way we feel inside. It's part of the human condition, but I felt because of my circumstances, my birth, and the sight of my birth, I have like an extra dose of the human condition.

Layla 13:02

A super-superhuman.

Kate 13:07

I started becoming interested in Buddha Dharma, but really all spiritual traditions early on. I don't know if I wrote about this or not, or what got cut, but there was an Encyclopaedia of world religions in my basement. My parents had tonnes of books, and I used to go down there and just look at the images even before I could read the very small print that would tell me about what the traditions were. I was particularly drawn to Tibetan Buddhist iconography, it resulted in me shoplifting *'The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying'* by Sogyal Rinpoche.

Layla 13:49

Not shoplifting that book, no.

Kate 13:57

Not stealing, anyway. I would read it in my closet when I was about 11-12 years old, and I resonated with the core teaching, then the language around understanding suffering as a path to freedom. It's also refreshing to me to see someone acknowledging there's a lot of suffering in this realm, and in the home, in life and in a culture where it felt like particularly for children, people were asking you to just kind of put a smiley face on it and keep it moving and not ask too many questions about why things were the way they were in the family, but also society. I mean, this was the Reagan years, at the height of it. At the height of that era, societal injustice and individualism were rife, and I have such respect for the intelligence of children now, and I think then I had a lot of questions. What I mean is that he made adults uncomfortable. I found a refuge in his books, and I wouldn't have been able to articulate that at the time or to call it that. There was something deeply healing for me just an acknowledgement of that, but there's a lot of discomfort in this, this earthly realm that we live in, and also that freedom is possible, and an inside job that doesn't necessarily require all outside circumstances to be exactly as we want them to be. It'd be free inside, regardless of conditions, and that inside of freedom can help us work for greater freedom in the world.

Layla 15:52

Buddhism and Buddhist teachings are a huge part of your life and sown into the book. They are the foundation of the book. When I first saw your book, I think, scrolling on Instagram, the algorithm just

throws stuff up. I saw the title, and it was like my nervous system, just relaxed. It felt like I had been carrying something that I didn't even know I had been carrying. Then I saw the title, 'Radical Friendship', and my whole nervous system just took a weight off and relaxed. I think it's because some part of me recognised that was something I wanted for myself, as well as something I truly believe the world needs, in order for it to be the world that we want it to be, a liberatory world, a world of equity, a world of radical love. I immediately saved the image to come back to later. The next thought that came to me after the huge sigh of relief was, how do we do this?

I would like you to tell us a little about what this book is about. How did you come to write it? You share in the intro the story of how you came to write this book. Set our audience up if they haven't heard about 'Radical Friendship' before?

Kate 17:37

I'm so happy that the title had that impact on you. I think that's a really deep intention. How can this book actually be a friend to people in communities that I care about? That I'm a part of. The book is structured around a classical Buddhist text called the Metta Sutta. There was something that felt good to me about just being unapologetically Buddhist. There were some questions in the development process around. Can this potentially be a more secular book? Would that help it be more accessible to folks? I think maybe. But certainly, having this strong backbone of this ancient text, and the many, many modern applications of those teachings and a world that I think probably would not even be imaginable during the Buddha's time, was interesting and life-giving to me. Something about knowing this is a tool that has deep roots and is explicit about those roots. The teaching itself is a description of the qualities of what the Buddha called the Kalyāṇa-mittatā or spiritual friend. The word is spiritual, and I translated it as radical friendship because I think that to apply those teachings in our modern-day context is a radical act. It's saying we're engaging in a relationship where we're committed to showing up for our own and each other's liberation. That's not just about hanging out. It's not just about taking cute pictures. I mean, that you should do all those things to get your nails done. You can also be in a relationship in a way that creates this mini enlightened society. Between the two of you, we can actually kind of embody some of our deepest hopes for the world just in this microcosm of our relationship. This can be a relationship between two or more people that can accompany each other on our path to liberation, freedom which we're healing from.

The impacts of societal oppression, childhood trauma, who know, where we're becoming free internally. Then we're also working for freedom and justice in the world. The text offers seven characteristics of a spiritual friend. As Kalyāṇa-mittatā, the Buddha said the spiritual friend gives what is hard to give, does what is hard to do, endures what is hard to endure and that the spiritual friend is someone to whom we can tell our secrets. The spiritual friend is someone who tells you their secrets and keeps your secrets when misfortune strikes the friend who won't abandon you. When you're down and out the friend won't look down on you. It basically said, these are the seven qualities that you should aim for when you see someone with these qualities connect with them and you know, stay together, that these are the qualities of someone capable and someone who's developing this practice of enlightened relationship or wise relationship.

Layla 21:15

I love to read that passage several times, what you just read out to us the seven spiritual policies. I had to read it several times, because I was like, this is so simple, its timeless wisdom, but very hard.

Layla 21:49

I appreciated the simplicity of it. I think they are easy things to remember. Each statement rang true, those statements were very true. I'm glad you stuck with it being explicitly Buddhist in this tradition. Tell us how it came to be a book.

Kate 22:20

Well, I gave a talk at a Buddhist conference almost 10 years ago, that was under fire the previous year, for their conference tagline being 'The New Face of American Buddhism' or the like. It was almost entirely white men who were presenting at the conference, but the conference no longer runs. At the time, it focused on the intersection of Buddhism and technology and neuroscience. The communities of colour who practise Buddhism, the heritage and the Buddhist communities of Asian American Buddhists, and BIPOC Buddhist communities were not pleased, not to see us represented there, although not surprised. The organisers, to their credit, the following year, made a significant effort to invite other folks, and I was one of them. It was early in my teaching life, although I had been practising for some time. I gave a talk using the idea of technology really loosely and said mindfulness is technology, it's a spiritual technology that we can actually apply to wake up to the implicit biases in ourselves and to wake up to the ways that we have replicated cultural norms within our Buddhist communities. That nobody wants, that are only replicating the societal structures that we've been trying to become liberated from, and that's a really good thing to do with our practice. It was kind of like a call to action to this group of predominantly white male meditators saying don't just use the meditation as a way to become calmer, to become more focused at work or to pursue this path of individual enlightenment, but that path of individual enlightenment doesn't actually exist. That we can't expect to heal our anxiety when the world around us is struggling so profoundly, and the path of calm is actually through compassionate action.

So it was like, you know, it was kind of like this "let's do it ya'll". Let's use our this and this" and find our way, and it was podcasted, then picked up by an editor at a publishing house who got in touch and asked if I would like to write a book about the talk. I knew you were supposed to say yes. It was such an honour. I didn't feel like I had a whole lot more to say about this issue of how we use mindfulness to wake up to implicit bias; I had taken it as far as I personally could, as someone who's not a neuroscientist, who doesn't really know the intricate details of how perception moves into thought and action, and what that pathway is like. I knew of a couple of other people who are writing something about it, like Rhonda McGee, who's an incredible meditation teacher also, anti-racist meditation teacher who was reading the book on the inner work of racial justice. I thought she might write this book a little better than I. But what I could write about was this relational piece around why, why would even anyone want to do that work because I was so slow?

Layla 26:13

Yeah.

Kate 26:14

It can be so unsettling coming face to face with how each of us may be caught, may have internalised messaging, or beliefs from our environment that we didn't intend to incorporate. But suddenly we hear a

voice in our head, and we're like, who else? Slowly you bring those into awareness in such a way that they can be transformed. Acknowledging how we've made mistakes, that work is hard, that work can be painful, why would anyone want to do that work? Then I was looking around at the work that I was doing at the time, which was mostly in meditation, and yoga communities, helping organise those communities in service of social justice movements within New York City. I thought friendship would be a reason enough for someone to try to do this work. I saw that people who were coming into meditation spaces also come into movement spaces, a part of it was they wanted to find more peace and calm, they wanted to, in terms of movement work to be a part of something was a catalyst for change in the world. But people were also coming because they wanted better friends, they wanted to connect with other people who cared about the same things they did. We were working with a model of change that included personal work, relational work, and systemic work as these kinds of three pillars of what is really needed to make social change happen. We have a lot of material around. How do I work with my mind? We had a lot of material around. What's the societal theory of change? There wasn't a lot supporting this relational piece.

Layla 28:11

Yes. Right.

Kate 28:12

It was recognising that need for longing within myself, a big part of why I'm here is because I want to connect, I want to love and be loved, and I want to feel safe and to belong. It was exhilarating to realise that, within the spiritual tradition I was already teaching in there were these honoured teachings about how to relate with one another, how to be faithful, how to be kind, even when it's difficult, how to show up, and how to be generous. That elevated that kind of relational practice to the level of practice we do when we're on the cushion with our eyes closed, watching our breath. They're not separate and two are not lesser. That wasn't the vibe I got when I came into meditation centres. I would come in and I would see no one was talking to each other. Everyone with their eyes closed, no one was chit-chatting or asking how your day was it was very individual.

Layla 29:22

I've just come to get my enlightenment, and then I'm out.

Kate 29:26

Then I plug in, I fill up; I get up and I go back into my life, and I don't even tell anybody I'm meditating. I felt like this opportunity to reclaim something is part of the tradition. I think I got a little bit lost in translation when Asian Buddhist cultures were "translated" by predominantly white teachers in the West.

Layla 29:53

That's such an important point because culturally where the practice is originating from, they are indigenous practices, those ancestral practices, and the ways of being in community with each other and being in society with each other, look very different to the white supremacy culture. When we interpret something that is giving enlightenment, but it's through the lens of a culture where there's a hierarchy, there's supremacy, there's capitalism, there's all that kind of stuff, it's going to be interpreted

in a certain way. Something gets lost in the translation. That's why you end up with situations like the conference you talked about. How are you not seeing the disconnect here? Between what this is about and how it's being interpreted? Here? That's such a key point.

I want to say as well, that I think your book is such a perfect companion for anyone doing or reading 'Me and White Supremacy'. For a number of reasons, I think first, I started in the work of anti-racism. You spoke at a conference, and the article I wrote went viral. I was speaking to spiritual white women and saying, 'how is it you have these practices that you do from these cultures that you're appropriating from, essentially, you have this deep connection with these mindfulness practices and these transformation practices, change-making practices, but you're not translating them into social change?' The work of white supremacy, you thought, why would anyone want to do this? I pretty much say that at the beginning of 'Me and White Supremacy', it is hard, and nobody's going to reward you for it. It has to be of your own volition. This is why I ground my work in this philosophy of good ancestorship because I think if there is a higher principle or a principle that transcends our individual gripes and pains and complaints, here's something bigger than we're living for, then that can be the impetus to push us forward. To keep us going, especially when times get really hard. I see these as great companion pieces. I know many people are coming through 'Me and White Supremacy' because they're looking to be in the practice of allyship, which I think is another word for this spiritual radical friendship that you're talking about.

Kate 32:33

I love thinking of our books as companions. I appreciate the work you've done and also wrestling with this figure of allyship and how can it be more than this kind of strategic thing showing us depth experience.

Layla 33:06

Can we speak about this? Let's speak about this.

Kate 33:12

I mean, performative allyship is certainly better than outright harm.

Layla 33:24

Although sometimes performative allyship can be indirect harm as well. Saviourism can be harmful.

Kate 33:36

I think that's right and how can it be something that's a genuine relationship and deeply satisfying for everyone involved? It's something I'm wondering about, too. I primarily focus on race and racism in the book, at least at first, because I can't talk about everything at the same time. Although I struggle with that, like really capturing this perspective on intersectionality and finding, I was only able to talk about the different parts of identity one at a time. I am learning about it a lot you know, and how I experienced privilege in this world, and it got easier with time from the way I was born and raised, for example being light-skinned and mixed-race, being able-bodied, and cisgender. I think another reason why I wanted to write this book is that I needed a book-length piece of paper to be able to write out what I feel is the spiritual practice of holding in our awareness both the ways that we are privileged and the ways that we've been oppressed by society. Learning how to be in the right relationship with other people who

also have their own constellation of privileges and oppressions. That is a mindfulness practice. It takes tension and a lot of love. The opportunity here is that we get to wake up to how we're no longer free or yet to be free. I think that can only happen in the rub of a relationship.

Layla 35:29

You say at the outset of the book and word to word, 'this is a book about finding your freedom, finding your people, and the possibility that these are two parts of the same spiritual path'. You were saying earlier about personal work, systemic work, and then in the middle is this communal relationship work. Oftentimes, I think it's work we avoid because personal work is between me and myself. I can do that in my time, and nobody has to see that really, I can do that in my journal, I can do that in my therapy sessions. It's about me. The systemic work is about changing the systems. We often don't think of systems and institutions as individual people, we think of them as things. The work of one-on-one relationships, or one with a group of people or one with a community, where there is both the deep desire to belong and then also the deep fear of rejection. It's like, I want it, I want it, but I don't I want it but it's risky, but I want it, but I need it. But it's hard. What if things go wrong? What if what happened with that relationship in the past happens again, in this one? What if I give my trust, and its abuse, and all of those things, which are so hard, but that middle piece is the human piece that I think that's what makes us human is our relationships with other people, but we really want to avoid it. You say that when you first heard the passage that had these seven practices, you said, *'I instantly knew three things when I heard it. One, I wanted to be that kind of friend. Two, I wanted to have that kind of friend. Three, nothing in my experience or education had adequately prepared me for either of these things'*. This is training that we don't even know that we need, like how to be a friend and how to have a friend.

Kate 37:55

I saw on social media the other day, that there was this hilarious meme of a person smiling on a beach. It was like another day without using sine, cosine, or tangent, all these we didn't learn a lot in school. I didn't learn this, but that's a whole other conversation about education. Don't get me started, with actually preparing us to be an adult, it's good to be able to take the reins on my education. I love what you said about our relationships make us human. What it is to be human is something I think about a lot lately, especially as we enter a different era and technology, a different era in the economy, and one in which before the pandemic, the World Health Organisation was talking about a loneliness called a loneliness pandemic, or an epidemic of loneliness. I think that's what capitalism is. One of the first things we lose in capitalism is our relationships with other people because they become transactional. Because there's a way in which corporations, companies and businesses really benefit from us feeling isolated, separate, and alone, and then they can sell us material things that they say will solve our problem. It's getting back to what we know to be true, that humaneness is priceless, that it's part of our purpose here and it's worth the risk. That it is important for us to have some kind of lifeline, tether, or compass to navigate relationships because they are messy, and people do get hurt. I've been hurt in relationships, I'm sure I've harmed other people, I know that I have and, and part of what I love about this particular Buddhist teaching is how practical it is and how it gave me something to hold on to when I was navigating relationships, while I was working on the book, it's funny when you work on a book like this, because...

Layla 40:16

It brings up stuff, right?

Kate 40:17

I realised I don't have any friends. I'm a terrible friend. To be in deep, competent contemplation. I will say it is my practice, it is not something that I perfected, friendship is my practice.

Layla 40:36

I just wanted to say as well that the book is deeply practical. You have a number of practices that are part of mindfulness practices, and these friendship practices. But then you also weave your own experiences and your own stories and your own trying, fumbling, and stumbling and continuing through that process. There was one that you identified, you said, *'On a good day, I know that the pace of real friendships, friendships that challenge hierarchy, and connect us with what's really important in life is always slower than we think. All people have their own rhythm. And if we listen, well, we can hear it.'* Then you say, *'one activity of radical friendship is a tuning to the cadence of our beloved others and shifting our own rhythm to move with theirs'*. Now I read this, and I was like, no, I don't want to do that. Then I looked at the chapter name, and it was *'Giving What is Hard to Give?'* I realised this is hard for me to give, and maybe that's a space in which I'm being invited to give what is hard to give, but I love that it was it felt like such a simple invitation, but powerful. I want to ask you if there were three practices you would suggest to people who want to cultivate this practice of radical friendship, and they were starting brand new. What are three simple practices that you might encourage them to practice?

Kate 42:30

I would say, one would be to know meditation is not enough. One practice I would encourage would be some kind of mindfulness of the body if that's possible, or mindfulness of breath, practice where, you'd spend time, a few minutes a day, just paying attention to your own body and the sensations in your body as it comes and goes. Some people find that working with their breath is calming and being able to connect with the sensations of the breath as it inhales and exhales as much as possible. Attend to the changing sensations in the physical experience with the eyes of love with non-judgmental awareness, really treating our own body as a friend. It has never given up on us that it is best to be healthy. To show up is one of how we can show love to ourselves by just paying attention to the body. This is what one of my teachers taught me the body actually receives our attention as a form of love and while meditation alone isn't enough to dismantle the prison industrial complex, like reform, election politics or any of the things that need changing in our world. It can be an incredible template for how to show up for other people and other people who are also changing, who are imperfect and also beautiful and holy. To be able to regard ourselves with that kind of tenderness is incredible daily training. I would say another practice that comes to mind they're all kind of like rushing in at the same time.

Layla 44:48

And of course, it was all of them.

Kate 44:51

There's a practice around equanimity that I think is really helpful. Again, this is a kind of individual practice. Where near the invitation of equanimity, which is the heart quality and in Buddhism, is to amplify the heart of love that is connected to wisdom. That is capable of both loving and letting go at

the same time. In the book, I bring up equanimity, I think in the chapter that's around identifying, even with the identity of the good ally, or the good friend, or understanding...

Layla 45:45

...or the good ancestor, yep.

Kate 45:47

That is one that I am going to have to work on, even good allies make mistakes. When we make a mistake, what will often happen is we sit down in meditation for a while, we're sitting there, we're connecting with our breath. The flood of memory, regret and wishing that things had been otherwise. When we notice, either in a moment where we've put our foot in our mouth or made some kind of relational blunder or even serious harm. When we're on the cushion, we remember something to be able to I'm checking with the contemplation of times in our lives where we've caused harm, and also the times in our lives we've really been able to show up for others. To hold them both at the same time, so that we know that even when we make a mistake, we are not a mistake. There's something good about us and something that's still worthy. That deserves care, even when we've unintentionally hurt someone else. Then a third practice, this one isn't in the book, but it's something that I've been thinking about since I wrote the book, especially as so much of my learning happens through making mistakes, through kind of screwing up and learning more about it. I think at one time, my editor asked do you have any friendships that worked out. Or are you just like nothing ... My friends...

Layla 48:05

This is just a book on what not to do. That's all.

Kate 48:07

I think a lot of folks, especially in their science community, have talked about how our minds tend to default noticing the things that are like...

Layla 48:25

That is wrong, that is off.

Kate 48:27

Things that are not quite there yet. Particularly for people who are working on spiritual development, who are working on being good ancestors, who are working on being good allies. There can be this relentless kind of, oh, I'm not there yet. Oh, I missed the mark there. I think noticing moments when we're in a relationship with someone; we feel that sense of true connection, intimacy, true friendship, to be able to not miss those moments, but to know them, when we're having them and soak in the pleasure of being connected with someone in a way that's not hierarchical, that's not transactional. I truly want you to be free. I can tell you want me to be free, and we're going to be honest with each other, we are going to be generous with each other, and we're going to be patient with one another. Those moments come and go within relationships, even one that we will say is my deep spiritual friend. There are going to be times where we're misaligned. In the moments where we are aligned, we are experiencing the kind of intimacy which in the Zen tradition; they talk about intimacy as a form of

awakening. We have those moments of liberation with one another, don't miss them, but cherish them to let ourselves register. This is what freedom can feel like. We know it when we see it. We start to gather more of those experiences around us and orient towards those kinds of relationships.

Layla 50:03

Love that we have a practice in our team good ancestor. On our Slack headquarters every Friday we have celebrations, and this is for us to individually share what are we celebrating about ourselves that whatever we survived that week, thrived, achieved, or learned. You come to the realisation of championing ourselves of being that friend to ourselves, and then being that friend to each other by celebrating and acknowledging each other. I think it's so important because we focus on where we haven't arrived yet, or what's not quite right. Especially as people who experienced marginalisation, we're so attuned to that because it comes from is going to help me stay safe. We use a lot of willpower and a lot of strength, a lot of resilience to achieve a lot of stuff and also survive it. We don't give ourselves credit for that. We become very tuned to where I don't fit in or where I haven't got to yet. It's so important to do that. I love that you've shared these. Thank you.

Kate 51:23

Thanks for the question and thanks for naming that kind of perfectionism and relationship is itself an expression of white supremacy culture. How can we dismantle that, by taking time to celebrate what's working right? Where do we have it?

Layla 51:40

Absolutely. Well, on that note, I want to bring in a member of Team Good Ancestor now. I'm going to ask Reema Zaman, who's our book club facilitator, to join us because she's going to be leading discussions about your wonderful book in our book club throughout the month of July. This is a book that is very book clubable. I know Reema is going to enjoy holding space for this discussion. So welcome, Reema.

Reema 52:11

Thank you for writing it. It is a wild romp of a book, it's a wild joy to read it. It's very humbling and challenging. You write with such a beautiful melodic voice, but you're shaking me the entire time. It's an amazing dichotomy. It's a real testament to how books come into our lives exactly when we need them the most, in this last year and a half. I grew up in a Buddhist community; I grew up in Thailand from the ages of six to 18. Therefore, Buddhism, whenever people have asked me, are you spiritual? Do you align with any kind of practice, I've always said, Buddhism, and in this last year and a half, all the things that I've been able to practise so easily were really challenged because of a particular character that came into my life in the last year and a half. The best way to describe it is they are a collaborator in the life I have always wanted. Therefore, I don't want to reject them, because to reject them would be to reject this beautiful life I have worked so hard to arrive at. All of our Buddhist practices were really tested for me. When I read the title, *'Radical Friendship'*, immediately my brain said, loving-kindness, and radical acceptance of self. Going through your book has just reaffirmed for me that the most challenging people in our lives are because they trigger so many of the things we value and identify with. My continual practice is what is the gift? What is the gift of this trigger? What are they? What are they showing me, revealing to me, revealing to me? That's how I'm trying to navigate my way through?

What is the opportunity for deeper compassion? What is this is an opportunity for deeper empathy because it's very easy to be empathetic toward all human beings when I'm sitting in the safety of my controlled environment, right when I get to control the entire cast of characters in my life, that I'm sitting on a lotus leaf. I have so much love and don't get to control your cast of characters. That's what we're really tested on. Your book is one of those seamless books where you're like, oh, it must have been, it's written, and it reads in such an effort. It took so much effort to create that seamless list because both Layla and I were authors as well. We know anything that appears seamless required so much work to arrive at that Milotic Gate. You mentioned early in the book in the introduction that the first draft of the book centred whiteness, and it required heavy revision to get to the final draft. My first question for you is, in what other ways did the first draft change into the final manifestation?

Kate 55:50

Thank you for your thoughtful read, and effort in drawing so many connections to what's been happening in your own life in the last couple of years. I had never written a book before, and this is my first one. I've always loved writing. It was something that I didn't center in my life until I was going to write this book. I learnt to write in predominantly white schools, to a predominately white group of teachers who needed a certain amount of explanation. The words came up again, translation of the ideas that I had in the context that I was coming from in order to make it legible for them. They required that as a part of what good writing was. I think that was part of it, like learning to write and being taught to write by white teachers who said that good writing was that. That centered white cultural experience and understanding. I think part of it, too, is the internalisation of those voices, where I joke about it now, but when I was writing, I really felt like I had these two people will talk about their inner critic, I felt I had two full-on critic committees. In my office, and one of them was this kind of a white academic, Buddhist mafia, who I was worried would just go through the book and say that I didn't translate something right or interpreted a sutta wrong and discredit the entire thing saying it wasn't correct, it wasn't perfect. Therefore, it didn't matter; it was trash. I feel that's a fear that kind of comes with me. I'm still working on healing, this worry that people don't think I'm smart, or they don't think that my ideas matter. Feeling that I had to kind of prove that.

When I was writing with an awareness of that critic committee, my writing took on a really academic tone that was much more removed than what I wanted to achieve. I wanted the book to be the voice of a friend. When I started writing with that committee in mind, it sounded like a dissertation; it sounded like I was almost writing defensively as if I was trying to prove a point, rather than coming to the page with the confidence that these people that I'm writing for, actually already know what I'm talking about, and reminding them of things that they already know, that will just comfort them to hear and it put in a different way. As I was writing, I was dismantling it in the process of writing for the other side, I think I was also social justice mafia voice. This cycle of publishing is so long as both of you know, as authors. Between the time the ink dries on the page, and the time it's actually put into the world can be like a year and a half. My fear was okay, friendship is cool, but what if, by the time my book is published, friendship is cancelled, and we're not talking about that. We're talking about something else, and it was again partially the perfectionism and this feeling I needed to perform a certain amount of radical reality in order to satisfy and be fiery, young, a black Buddhist teacher of colour or that is the expectation. Some parts of the book weren't so fiery and fierce, and I think there was something in there too that was healing, that allowing myself to be soft, allowing myself to be a gentle person, allowing myself to be true. My own personality, experience and taking myself seriously. Even if I take myself seriously, in a

way that didn't, I didn't always have to be a super-serious writer, but I could just be authentic to what felt like me. I think over the course of writing the book, what started to happen is I could hear when those two voices would come in. It was almost when you hear a sound that's a little bit sharp, like in a piece of music, it grates on you. You feel that's not right, I would hear it when those voices started to come in. I would be like, got to stop, got to take a walk, got to call a friend, got to take a bath, and then come back to the page. I could hear when it was me again. That my voice started to get stronger as the book went on.

Reema 1:01:21

Which is wanting to argue with this, performing almost for permission to own the page, and instead just claiming the page. In the process of that, it sounds like you permitted yourself to be earnest. That's one of the things I've found very soothing, and therefore the healing parts, not just parts of the aspects of your writing in your voice. I find that when I read a poetic voice, that, in and of itself, is both healing and empowering. That is your voice. Thank you, thank you for writing. It's a challenging aspect of writing and what was the most freeing or most joyful? Most challenging?

Kate 1:02:53

I think I touched on the most challenging part of the process, which was learning that I couldn't write from a place of feeling defensive or feeling. I had something to prove, and to learn that in the process, for me, I had to take a break at that moment and reconnect with myself to do something that will help build resilience and rest. Hanging out with someone that I love, willing to pause and to know that went faster than me sitting and trying to like duke it out with the critics in my head. I think another challenge came in just around the reflection and life review that happened around my relationships with the writing of the book. I feel the book, this teaching, continued to be a teacher for me and continues to be a teacher for me and a big part of my practice. I wanted to write about friendship, because it's something I've struggled with, it's something I've longed for and struggled with. I think that the commitment to working with this text and working with this teaching over the last couple of years that I was writing really calmed me to a central relationship in a world that doesn't reward that, the reward was really intrinsic. I think that was what actually leads to the joy of it thinking; I learned to really make time for my relationships and not to have them be kind of a side dish to the main course of my life, but actually invest in them as something that is part of what makes life meaningful. Even to the point of just scheduling out my Google Calendar, just friend time, not for a specific friend, but anyone who shows up on that day and calls or anyone that I feel is on my mind and I want to call. It permitted me to let them be the centrepiece of my life and...

Reema 1:05:14

The quality of our lives is the quality of our relationships.

Kate 1:05:17

It's made my life more vivid and beautiful.

Layla 1:05:23

I love your questions Reema.

Reema 1:05:27

My final question for you, which I think you already answered. Kate was, how did this writing inform, impact or change you in your or inspire you in your journey? I think he shared what it was. And I think the true testament of the power of a book is that it changes us in the way we hope it will influence or impact or move a reader. And that even though we go into a book thinking where the expert of the thing we're going to write about, it ends up humbling us and taking us to a deeper place, which is exactly what you shared.

Kate 1:06:10

I love you brought up Metta Sutta, earlier on in our conversation, because you know that Metta Sutta is loving kindness, it's a cultivation practice. Where we cultivate this heart of love that is boundless, that is able to in the text say it's the heart of love that rains down equally on all beings, it doesn't discriminate between this and the other. I want everyone to be free. I understand it comes from this deep understanding of interdependence. It's also a purification practice. Sometimes when we're intending to generate love for ourselves and other beings, what comes up is the ways we don't love ourselves or self-hatred and self-sabotage. I feel this book was purification for me and I hear that for some people reading it, there can be a little bit of that element of reading the book and feeling. Some of my friends felt judged just by the title. I'm glad that wasn't the impact for each of you. But the question comes up: am I a radical friend? Am I radical enough of a friend? I feel that my highest wishes, if there is any, are a small bit of challenge, in the reading of the text, around contemplation of our relationships, and where we've grown, but also where we struggle, that will be. It's not just a challenge for the challenge's sake, but it's a challenge of the nature of purification. Where it draws out everything that's not love, so that it can be released, and that there's kind of no way out. There's no way to do that other than to let it come up. But when the regret comes up, when the shame comes up, or when the longing comes up, we can notice it and establish a relationship that has what you're saying a relationship with others. I think that's possible for this particular kind of teaching. Something I've been really working on is recognising that so often when I feel rage, rages of grieving a broken expectation. To understand that at the moment, I can choose love or fear and my fear is driving that rage thinking that this incident or this person is a direct threat to my happiness and then to just really sit with that enough and ask myself, is that true? Or is that fear? To choose love every time is as hard as it is.

Layla 1:09:06

Thank you, thank you both so much. That was such a wonderful conversation to listen to and I know that room is going to be holding you to incredible questions like that for discussion in the book club. Reema will be holding space for a fireside chat with Kate at the end of the month as well. I hope people will join us for that in the book club. Kate, this has been such a wonderful conversation. I hope people go out and buy this book. This is a book for anyone who's wanting to cultivate a radical relationship of friendship with themselves, with other people, whether friends or family members even I think it can even transcend, maybe people we see as distant from us or see us so different from us as well. But it's an incredible, incredible book. I want to wrap up this conversation by asking our final question, what does it mean to you to become a good ancestor?

Kate 1:10:16

It's something I've been thinking a little bit about lately. I think having a kid has made me kind of understand my legacy. What I'm leaving behind a little differently. Doesn't always take that for other people to think about that. But for me, that's what it took. I think about being a good ancestor, when I think about what I hope to be as an ancestor, I think about continuing to be in a relationship with the living; I think about that with my ancestors now, how can I, even the ones that I didn't get to meet, be in relationship with them? How can I think about them? How can I ask them for help? How can I, when I am in meditation and paying attention to my own body, feel that they're right here with me, even in the DNA of my cells, and not forget about them, but let them be a part of my day, as I moved through the day, to invite them to rest with me to invite them to play with me, to hang out with friends with me, just awareness of them. Part of the reason I want that is because I feel we need their help now. We're at this kind of inflexion point in our collective life where we need all the help we can get, and the benevolence of the elevated ancestors is one that I relate to as the power that I think we can call on to help us stay point in our hearts and hope to move things in the good direction in the world. When I think about making a good ancestor, I want to be in a relationship. I want to be the kind of ancestor that my friends, loved ones and descendants biological and otherwise can look to for support. I want to be able to support the people who will inherit this earth from us in whatever way I can, you know, whatever words I leave behind, but also with whatever love and power that I can access on the other side.

Layla 1:12:22

I love that. Thank you so much, Kate. This has been wonderful. Thank you.

Kate 1:12:27

Thank you so much. I'm going to cherish this conversation for a long time.