Sidedoor Season 6 Ep. 4 Life is Hard, Let's Meditate Final Transcription

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Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

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Lizzie Peabody: It's February, 2021, almost a whole year since I've actually seen the inside of Sidedoor's recording studio. Instead, at this very moment, I'm sitting inside my closet, talking into a microphone, surrounded by the very work clothes that I no longer wear. Recently, a lot of friends have been texting me these articles about hitting the pandemic wall and, broadly speaking, things are okay. I have a job I can do from home, health, safety, but even so, I have hit the wall. Full speed collision, Wiley coyote style, trace me in chalk on that cinder block wall. I am struggling and it sounds like pretty much everyone is struggling, staring down more months of isolation and uncertainty stretching out before us like an endless road.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Maybe because looking outward feels so daunting, a lot of people have started looking inward. In December, my brother gave me a book on mindfulness and meditation. I always associated meditation with religion. Buddhists and Hindus meditate. But more and more, I'm seeing it promoted in podcasts, ads for apps, and even web MD as a recommended way to reduce stress. Mindfulness is having a moment, but in all of this silent self-reflection, there's not much discussion of religion. And it made me wonder, how is this pandemic affecting the spiritual practices of others? Like, what's it like for the actual Buddhist priests?

Myokei Caine-Barrett: It's been rough. I belong to an interfaith group of faith leaders here in Houston. We met this morning and were talking about the fact that it's nice to have a group where you can sit down and talk to people and say, "Yeah. Everything's cool, but I'm not okay." (Laughs). That it's hard. It's been hard.

Lizzie Peabody: This is Buddhist Priest, Myokei Caine-Barrett. And she likes to think of Buddhism this way.

Myokei Caine-Barrett: I call it an adult religion that asks you to look at yourself, to go deeply into spiritual contemplation, to examine what makes you tick, what triggers you, what makes you happy? All of those things, so that you can understand how to deal with your life.

Lizzie Peabody: Here in the U.S., Myokei is pretty high up on her Buddhist orders, org chart. She's a Bishop.

Myokei Caine-Barrett: First American, first woman.

Lizzie Peabody: And the first African-American Bishop in an order where most of the group's leaders are Japanese men. Myokei is a Bishop in the Nichiren Shu order, a sect of Buddhism that started in Japan about 800 years ago, but in the last 50, it spread a lot throughout the West.
And what about Nichiren Buddhism in particular? What distinguishes it from other forms of Buddhism?

Myokei Caine-Barrett: The chanting primarily, I think. We chant Namu Myōhō Renge Kyō, which is the title of our sacred book, “The Lotus Sutra.” And it's a simple chant that we can do any time, any place, anywhere, even walking.

Lizzie Peabody: Can you share a little bit of what that sounds like? Would you feel comfortable doing that right now?


Lizzie Peabody: What does it feel like when you chant in that way? How does it make you feel?

Myokei Caine-Barrett: It's a different kind of connection to your body with the vibration of the drums.

Lizzie Peabody: Huh.

Myokei Caine-Barrett: Because you can feel it when you’re chanting it. And then, the drum is just kind of making it go deeper, almost kind of like a massage even. And I think it's kind of a way also of learning to take yourself away from what you're feeling physically and having your mind be able to master that pain. It's part of the whole thing that attaches to mindfulness these days, is that you can manage pain because you're able to move your mind away from the pain, so that it doesn't become a problem.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: And since moving my mind away from the way I'm feeling sounds pretty good to me, this time on Sidedoor, we explore two spiritual paths, starting with Myokei Caine-Barrett's personal journey from the church of her childhood to her career in Buddhism. Then, we follow the path many Americans are taking out of their churches, mosques and temples and away from organized religion altogether, toward a kind of secular spirituality. Though, as Myokei says, all paths aspire to the same elusive destination, peace and happiness.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: So, this episode's spiritual journey started in a conversation with Teddy R. Reeves.

Teddy R. Reeves: So, prior to coming to the Smithsonian, I was an Executive Pastor of a church, but I currently serve as the Museum Specialist of Religion at the Smithsonian National Museum of African-American History and Culture.

Lizzie Peabody: Teddy thinks a lot about religion, which is part of the reason he says he moved away from the organized Christianity of his youth.
Teddy R. Reeves: I grew up Christian, but I also know that there are some harmful theologies in those spaces that didn't serve me anymore. And so, I had to begin to really re-imagine what I believed and how I engaged with my faith very practically.

Lizzie Peabody: Teddy still identifies as a Christian, but instead of going to church every week, these days, he's assembled a spiritual practice that he's tailored to his own needs.

Teddy R. Reeves: So, for me, that looks like I get up every morning and I meditate. And then, I pray. That is a quintessential part of what I call my spiritual ritual.

Lizzie Peabody: Teddy told me that he also journals and spends time outside.

Teddy R. Reeves: And so, what better place to be in is to be back in the space that existed before I existed. It's something that I believe God created.

Lizzie Peabody: You sound like what I aspire to being with the journaling and the meditation. Do you do yoga?

Teddy R. Reeves: My partner does.

Lizzie Peabody: Okay.

Teddy R. Reeves: She is down there every day doing yoga. I have not gotten into it. I want it. It's on my vision board.

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs).

Teddy R. Reeves: It is on my vision board to start doing yoga.

Lizzie Peabody: You even have a vision board. I have homework to do tonight. (Laughs).

Teddy R. Reeves: (Laughs). I hope to get to do yoga at least one time this year.

Lizzie Peabody: Teddy says his move away from organized religion fits into an emerging trend. Americans, and millennials in particular, are leaving organized religion more than ever before. The Pew Research Center has found that in the last decade alone, the share of Americans who described themselves as Christian has dropped by 12%. And at the same time, the number of people who are religiously unaffiliated has gone up by 10%. So, Teddy wanted to know...

Teddy R. Reeves: Who are these millennials? What are they experiencing? Where are these spaces that they're going to if they're leaving organized religion?

Lizzie Peabody: And Teddy, who's a millennial himself, says that there haven't been many efforts to really understand how black millennials think about their faith. To get some answers, the National Museum of African American History and Culture organized a series of panels called, “God Talk,” hosted by Teddy.

[MUSIC]
[AUDIENCE CHEERING]

Speaker: I consider myself a seeker of all things.

Speaker: I was raised Pentecostal. Then, I became agnostic atheist.

Speaker: And I was raised in a non-denominational Christian Church and I identify as a believer in God and spiritual and ever evolving.

[MUSIC]

Teddy R. Reeves: I like that.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: By all metrics, African-Americans remain the country's most religious demographic, but Teddy says one thing that keeps coming up in his God Talk conversations is this, what millennials want in their spiritual diet is increasingly not served by the churches of their parents. So, many are picking practices from a kind of spiritual buffet.

[MUSIC]

Teddy R. Reeves: Well, we have millennials who are Buddhists, who are Christian, who are Muslim, who identify as witches, who would identify as Sikh or atheist or agnostic, who may be in these limbo spaces of pulling pieces from different trajectories. They may meditate. Right? They may chant. They may take parts of crystals and African spirituality.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: All to satisfy their spiritual needs in a modern world that is constantly demanding productivity and engagement.

Teddy R. Reeves: You are seeing this rise of mindfulness and meditation, and many of the tenants making their way into spiritual practice for African-Americans. Not just millennials, but African-Americans in general.

Lizzie Peabody: Which brings us back to Myokei Caine-Barrett, who joined Teddy on a God Talk panel. She's not a millennial. She's a baby boomer, but like Teddy, she began her religious journey as a kid, going to church with her family. And for a while, she was really into it, to the point where she felt a calling to the religious life. And as they say, the Lord works in mysterious ways. For Myokei, it was through Hollywood.

Myokei Caine-Barrett: I was going to be a nun like Audrey Hepburn. I was really into movies and I saw the nun story. She had a fabulous life as nun. I thought, "I want to be like her." (Laughs).

Lizzie Peabody: What appealed to you about her life as a nun?

Myokei Caine-Barrett: It just seemed so romantic, I guess. (Laughs). I don't know what I was thinking at 11. Just the act of taking care of people. And then, I fell in love with Jesus.
Lizzie Peabody: But not that Jesus.

Myokei Caine-Barrett: Jeffrey Hunter and King of Kings. So, those two things (laughs) together, I thought Jeffrey Hunter was it. And that's how I always visualized Jesus. (Laughs). What did I know? He was gorgeous. (Laughs).

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs).

Myokei Caine-Barrett: And they have this scene in the movie where his whole face and then down to his eyes, just fill up the big screen. So, they do it deliberately, right?

[MUSIC]

Speaker: For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever and ever.

Lizzie Peabody: Myokei’s love for Jesus of Hollywood gave her a hunger to know more, but she wasn't getting answers at church.

[MUSIC]

Myokei Caine-Barrett: Because I was an incredible reader at the time and I read the Bible from cover to cover.

Lizzie Peabody: Wow.

Myokei Caine-Barrett: And I wanted to know things. And I was always told, well, we don't ask questions. You just have to believe it. And I'm sure it was difficult for grown people to have to talk to a kid who's asking these questions. (Laughs).

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs).

Myokei Caine-Barrett: It's like, "What do you know?" I don't, but I have questions.

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs). Around the same time as Myokei was asking critical questions and not getting answers, she received another message, but this one wasn't from God. It was from her friend's mom in the form of an invitation to attend a Buddhist meeting a few hours drive away.

Myokei Caine-Barrett: And actually, she had invited my mother to go and she wanted nothing to do with it. And so, she said that I could go and keep my friend company.

Lizzie Peabody: But before she left, Myokei's mom gave her a warning.

Myokei Caine-Barrett: And she said, "Don't join anything."

[BELLS CLANGING]

Myokei Caine-Barrett: For me, it was like a red flag in front of a bull, like, go for it.
Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs).

[BELLS CLANGING]

Lizzie Peabody: At the gathering, Myokei says she was captivated by the Buddhist chanting and incense. She was totally swept up in it.

[BELLS CLANGING]

Lizzie Peabody: So, you became a Buddhist, which is a funny form of rebellion. How did your parents react to your conversion?

Myokei Caine-Barrett: My dad in particular was very keen on all of us having at least some foundation in faith. And so, as I grew older and he realized that that was my path, he supported me a hundred percent.

Lizzie Peabody: That's wonderful.

Myokei Caine-Barrett: My mother, on the other hand, was upset that I had joined, but it didn't interfere too much with our lives.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Myokei joined a Buddhist community in the 1960s, but like with any religion, it took a little while to find the group that was right for her. The first one, she joined...

[MUSIC]

Myokei Caine-Barrett: There was a lot of racism, and homophobia, and misogyny, all of that stuff. And I started just being a troublemaker, basically. (Laughs).

Lizzie Peabody: What do you mean by troublemaker?

[MUSIC]

Myokei Caine-Barrett: I started a group for people of color. And then, I had a group of people I interacted with who were lesbian and gay. And I would be told that you're opening up a can of worms and it's like, "No, I have to because (laughs) these are people who came seeking the teachings of the Buddha. And if it's for everybody, it has to be for everybody." And so, I left and then I found Nichiren Shu. And that's when I started the journey toward the priesthood.

Lizzie Peabody: So, Nichiren Shu felt more like home to you in the Buddhist community.

Myokei Caine-Barrett: Yeah. Because the first person I met was a gay priest. (Laughs). So, I was like, "Okay, they got gay priests and he's an American priest." And so, that was like, "Okay, I'm in the right place."

[MUSIC]
Lizzie Peabody: In 2007, she became a Buddhist priest ordained in the Nichiren Shu order. And coming up after a quick break, Myokei Caine-Barrett shares some of the wisdom she's gained in her decades of Buddhist practice.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Myokei Caine-Barrett wants to dispel a common myth about Buddhism.

Myokei Caine-Barrett: Most people tend to think of Buddhism as sitting silently. We just don't do that.

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs).

Myokei Caine-Barrett: We make a lot of noise. So… (Laughs).

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs).

Lizzie Peabody: Myokei grew up in the Christian Church, but before she was even a teenager, she turned to Buddhism. Today, she's among the 1% of black Americans who are Buddhist and she's a Bishop in her Nichiren Shu community. Myokei says that when she was young, she was initially drawn to Buddhism's chanting and decades later, it remains an important part of her practice.

Myokei Caine-Barrett: You know when you get into really good music that you just kind of flow, and this has that quality of flow, that when you're really chanting and into it, that it takes you somewhere else. It's very transcendent. It's energizing when you need it to be energizing. If you're angry, it's a good time to chant to get rid of the anger. And if you're happy or joyful, it's a good time to chant and just express that joy, even sadness. So, there's no restriction on how you chant. Just that you do it.

Lizzie Peabody: Myokei says that chanting helped her focus and it's become a tool she turns to in times of pain, like this one time after a bad breakup.

Myokei Caine-Barrett: I thought we were going to get married because he had taken me to meet his family. And even his mom thought he was serious. (Laughs). He came to me one day and asked me to introduce him to my girlfriend, so he could take her out. And I was like, "What?" (Laughs). And I was really upset, but I thought, "You know, if this is the best I can do, then I really need to chant about this to find out what it is in my life that brings that kind of a person into it."

Lizzie Peabody: What is it about chanting that enables you to come to a new level of understanding? Is it the meditative quality or the vibration? What about it lets you hear your inner self?

Myokei Caine-Barrett: I'm not sure because that's the mystery of it. We're often talking about polishing the mirror of our lives, so that what we're reflecting out is cleaner. And so, you don't get to have all that negative stuff coming at you.

Lizzie Peabody: Polishing the mirror of your life?
Myokei Caine-Barrett: Right, so that what you see in your environment is a reflection of your life. There's that mysterious thing that happens, I think, in terms of how we interact with each other, because the more you learn to love and respect yourself, the more you're able to love and respect others and how you treat people becomes different. And the barriers to that are what we tend to try to overcome in our lives.

Lizzie Peabody: You mentioned that Buddhism is about seeking happiness and I think that's what sends a lot of people to therapy. Do you think that therapy, like talking to a licensed therapist, has taken away some of the centrality of religion in young people's lives?

Myokei Caine-Barrett: No, because I think that the part of Buddhism is that transcendence from your issues and I don't think you get that in therapy.

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs). I haven't yet. (Laughs).

Myokei Caine-Barrett: (Laughs). One of my old leaders used to tell me that our problems are around us all the time. That most of the time, they're just like flicking at your ear or poking you in the eye or something. We usually don't look at it until it hits you upside the head with a two by four. And by that time, it's so bad that you're willing to drop everything to take care of it, because until you actually deal with an issue, it will keep coming back until it's resolved and your life is always talking to you that way. We just have to pay attention.

[MUSIC]

Myokei Caine-Barrett: Sometimes you'll see that it's in your family, even, that it's an historical problem that you could say it's like karma that transmits from generation to generation until one person says, "Okay, I'm done with this. This is the end. It's not going to go any further than this."

Lizzie Peabody: Yeah.

Myokei Caine-Barrett: That's really the whole point of Buddhism, to be able to look at your life because if you can look at it and make the corrections you need for your own happiness, then you're actually making corrections for the whole world because we're all interconnected. We're all related.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: That makes so much sense. Wow. So, none of this is in the mindfulness and meditation book my brother gave me last year and this made me wonder, what does Myokei make of non-religious meditation's popularity? So, one thing that Teddy and I talked about is how parts of Buddhist practice, and I think particularly things like mindfulness and meditation, have sort of become separated from the religion and now, they live in these spaces of "wellness" and sort of generalized spirituality. So, as someone who's spent decades doing the work to understand Buddhism, how does that sit with you?

Myokei Caine-Barrett: Not too good. (Laughs). It's a conversation we're all having right now. A lot of us, especially those of us who are ordained because it's a problem in the sense that people don't get the foundation of the teaching that explains to you why these things are happening. At least, that's how I've tended to view it. I'm studying it more now because I want to
really understand what people get out of what I consider unanchored teachings, secular Buddhism.

Lizzie Peabody: Why do you think it’s important that people follow a single religious tradition as opposed to what you call secular Buddhism?

Myokei Caine-Barrett: I think you have to understand what you’re throwing away before you do that. A lot of the transmission from East to West, missed part of the cultural pieces that came with it, but I think our individualistic culture is the reason it doesn't happen so well in many cases.

Lizzie Peabody: Although it's happening also, I think on a generational level, we're seeing Americans under 40 moving away from organized religion, but maintaining a spiritual practice.

Myokei Caine-Barrett: Right.

Lizzie Peabody: What do you make of that?

Myokei Caine-Barrett: As the spiritual practice hasn't kept up with the way people are growing. I think all the rules and regulations that we've had around our spiritual lives have been designed to help us become better people, but they didn't allow for individual growth and to provide a safe space for people to explore and understand who they are and be accepted.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: And this is something that Myokei Caine-Barrett and Teddy Reeves do agree on, the idea that many organized religions haven't kept up with major cultural changes in the last few decades.

Teddy R Reeves: Many of our faith and spiritual communities have not evolved necessarily with the time. And so, millennials and gen-Zers have begin to flock out of these spaces because of the restrictors on sexuality, because of the restrictors on leadership, because of scandals in religious spaces, because of the inability of these spaces in their minds and their opinions to meet the needs of the communities they’ve been called to. So, many of them are walking away from these communities because they no longer serve them. They’re saying, "Why would I be in a space that will not affirm me, that will not love me?"

Lizzie Peabody: But Teddy does have a few tips for people who sample from the spiritual buffet.

Teddy R Reeves: Yeah. I guess my advice would be to really study, to know what exactly it is that you need to feed yourself spiritually, emotionally, and physically.

Lizzie Peabody: And once you figure out what lets you get in touch with your inner self, Teddy encourages developing community to guide you on your religious or secular journey.

Teddy R Reeves: Doing their research, ensuring that if you're going to take something from a community, that you know about that community, that you've talked to some folks in that community, that you create accountability in that specific community, whether that is friends,
whether that's mentors, whether that's teachers, pastors, e-moms, rabbis, spiritual leaders, presidents, whoever it may be. You need some form of accountability.

Lizzie Peabody: So, what do you think someone is missing by collecting one prayer from Christianity, another from Islam, a bit of meditation and chanting from Buddhism and then a sprinkling of tarot cards on top?

Myokei Caine-Barrett: On one hand, I think a whole lot and then on another, I think that most faith paths are seeking the same thing and the expression is different, but what we're after ultimately is truth and understanding of the reality of all things. And there's also a passage in one of the Sutras where Buddha says, "I've appeared in all different forms, in all different places, to all different kinds of people, according to their capacity." And that was key for me because it helped me to develop a respect for other paths, because it said to me, "Okay, so he could have come back as Jesus, as Muhammad or whoever and they're all saying the same thing according to the capacity of who's listening. So, the words might be different, but the truth is what we're all about."

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: For now, at least, the pandemic isn't going anywhere. So, if you're surviving your pandemic wall through prayer, solitary meditation, or just lying awake in bed staring at the ceiling, we all have to find ways to check in with ourselves and our communities. And for me, I think I'll take a bit of inspiration from Teddy and dust off my yoga mat that has been sitting in the bottom of my closet underneath my work clothes that I no longer wear.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. If you're interested in seeing more about God Talk, you can check it out on the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture's Facebook page. We'll also link to it in our newsletter. I want to give a special shout out to Teddy R. Reeves and Myokei Caine-Barrett for their time, as well as their spiritual guidance. Thanks also to Cierra Jefferson at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture.

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Lizzie Peabody: Our podcast team is Justin O'Neil, Nathalie Boyd, Sharon Bryant, Ann Conanan, Caitlin Shaffer, Jess Sadeq, Tammy O'Neill and Lara Koch. Extra support comes from Jason and Genevie at PRX. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Episode art is by Dave Leonard. Our theme song, and other episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder. If you want to sponsor our show, please email sponsorship@prx.org. I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.

[MUSIC]

Teddy R. Reeves: I bought the clothing.

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs).
Teddy R. Reeves: That was the first step and-

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs). Got to have the wardrobe, yes.

Teddy R. Reeves: And I'm like, "One day I'm going to put them on and I'm going to join you." I have a mat too.

[MUSIC]