

The Core of Belonging by Tami Simon

Tami Simon: Welcome to Insights at the Edge, produced by Sounds True. My name's Tami Simon. I'm the founder of Sounds True. And I'd love to take a moment to introduce you to the new Sounds True Foundation. The Sounds True Foundation is dedicated to creating a wiser and kinder world by making transformational education widely available. We want everyone to have access to transformational tools such as mindfulness, emotional awareness, and self-compassion, regardless of financial, social, or physical challenges. The Sounds True Foundation is a nonprofit dedicated to providing these transformational tools to communities in need, including at-risk youth, prisoners, veterans, and those in developing countries. If you'd like to learn more or feel inspired to become a supporter, please visit soundstruefoundation.org.

You're listening to Insights at the Edge. Today I'm so pleased that our guest is Reverend angel Kyodo williams. Rev. angel is a Zen priest, author and founder of the organization Transformative Change. Her work centers on the essential link between inner work, wholeness, and social transformation at scale.

With Sounds True, Rev. angel has created a new audio program, it's called Belonging: From Fear to Freedom on the Path to True Community. In this conversation, Rev. angel and I talk about how belonging is often something we give other people the power to define for us, and instead what it means to take back belonging. In Rev. angel's words, belonging belongs to you. Take a listen.

Rev. angel, you begin your new audio series with Sounds True on belonging by saying, "I've spent my whole life navigating belonging." And as a way to both introduce you better to the podcast audience, and also to give people a sense of what you mean by belonging, share with us what you mean, "I've spent my whole life navigating belonging."

Rev. angel Kyodo williams: Yes. Thank you for asking that. I feel we're in this broader conversation, I think, nationally and globally, in which we're trying to understand race more. And so, I'll preface it by saying that it has to do with that. For those of you that can't see me and have never seen me, I'm kind of like in the middle of the range of brown. And so, on my mother's side of the family, they're considered a black family. They're mixed heritage. They have white family in the racial background but they're all fair skin. They're pretty fair skin.

On my father's side, they're darker skin and so I'm kind of right in the middle. And that set up a dynamic in colorism that I'm kind of in-between. My parents didn't stay together and so I sometimes belonged to my mother's side of the family, I sometimes belonged to my father's side of the family, and in that in some ways didn't belong at all. I grew up

early in my life in Rego Park, LeFrak City in Queens. For those of you that are familiar, I think of it as kind of a United Nations, lots of different people, lots of different backgrounds.

And in that space, I felt a lot of belonging, but I, early on, somewhere around fourth grade, I was moved to Brooklyn in which there was quite a large divide between West Indian blacks and American blacks. And so again, it kind of pulled back and forth. I didn't belong to either group in a strong way. I was far more comfortable in mixed spaces.

And so through these ways... And then I went to junior high school in a, like, 90% ethnic Chinese school which I felt a sense of comradery and connection with people, but belonging was odd. And so, for many reasons throughout my life I have found myself straddling these locations of a kind of in-between. I'm nebulous, I'm nebulous-looking, I'm nebulous in terms of my appropriate belonging to a particular demographic that happens in race, in class.

I grew up in Tribeca in New York and had a lot of access culturally and understanding and really a far-reaching sort of Bohemian cultural values, progressive lefty stuff that didn't accord with the neighborhoods that I simultaneously lived in, like in deep Flatbush, Brooklyn. And so, I have lived this strange kind of stratified, not-quite-belonging existence for a really long time.

TS: And I'd like to know more about a statement you make, also right towards the beginning of this audio teaching series, and your journey to come to this place, which is you say, "Belonging belongs to you." And when you said that I had a moment, I thought, "Gosh, I think most of us think that belonging is defined by the external things. I don't fit in, I have a different sexual orientation, I'm of a different mixed race, belonging's about how I relate to all of these external groups. Am I part of the in-group? Am I not?" And yet you're saying belonging belongs to you. How did you get to that place to make a statement like that?

RaKw: I think that if... Every single one of us has someplace in which we feel that tension of external belonging and trying to navigate it. It's the hallmark of our existence as human beings that our sense of belonging defines us as human beings, and being able to locate that. Now if you add to our maturing adult selves coming into adulthood, the fact that we are going to be pulled in some ways by marking our territory, if you will, as to where it is that we find ourselves belonging that through my spiritual path and I would say even before my... Actually, I would say that this determined my spiritual path.

I realized that I had to have a fundamental belonging that was not predicated on something external, because if that were the case, I would always be in tension with what is going on outside that I actually can't control. So that if I'm going to have any sense of self-agency, of being able to be in alignment with myself and understand my own truth—not pulled by the external forces, by the waves of outside, by what people say, by the fashion, by the time, by the era, by gender, by the prescriptions of society, the prescriptions of my family, the prescriptions of my church, my culture, faith, all of those things—I had to get to someplace that was going to be essentially my own. And so I have this concept of one's own belonging, of belonging to oneself first and foremost, and cultivating that as the reference point for discernment about all of the other ways in which

we belong.

TS: Yes. So that's what I want to know more about this fundamental sense of belonging. How do we know when, "Oh, I think I know what that means. I know what it means because..." If you could finish that out, like what it means to have a fundamental sense of belonging.

RaKw: All right. This is the path of deeper practice, is we are all shaped. We are shaped by all sorts of conditions and causes and circumstances and time and era and place and location and so on. And so, I theorize that something has to transcend that, something has to transcend all of the various ways in which we're shaped, otherwise, how do we transcend everything that we've inherited since we've essentially inherited everything, right?

We've inherited and been shaped by everything outside, but something has to be pervasive. And that's where I start with like, so how do I find that which is pervasive? For me, the way that I know it is, first and foremost, by developing the habit of being able to return to myself, to be able to return to myself. And from that place of having been able to return myself to feel this sense of OKness, like, "I'm OK, this is OK, this being, this person, this moment," there's OKness that goes beyond all of the waves that are happening in my life externally.

So maybe right outside the surface of my skin, there is sadness, but even my sadness is OK. Like there are circumstances that are upsetting or that I wish that wasn't the case. But in a single moment of returning to myself, there is, some people might call it being at peace, some people may call it being aligned, some people may call it all sorts of things, I call it basic OKness, right?

Basic OKness with me as I am in this moment as it is. And that is a practice. We have to develop that practice in order to be able to attune to what it feels like in us, but I know that every single one of us listening to this does have a reference point for what that is. And the reason I know we have a reference point is because we know when we're not OK, right? So that we know we're not OK is predicated on the fact that we have a sense of there is a place of being OK.

TS: First of all, I love that phrase, "basic OKness." It feels extremely accessible. When people talk about being at peace and things like that, I don't know about that, but basic OKness, that really works. Now, I know you emphasize the relationship between embodiment, and I want to understand more what you mean by that, and having this sense of belonging or basic OKness. Why put such a great emphasis on embodiment, and what do you mean by that?

RaKw: We have a lot of theories and ideologies, as I like to say, that are inherited meaning... I have a dear friend, Greg Snyder, and he says, "We don't have personal thoughts, we have private thoughts." And by that, he means that all of our thoughts come

from someplace else. They come from the ideas of the time and the era and the space that we're in.

And so we tend to attach ourselves to the thoughts that we have, to the thoughts that we have received as if they're real. And so we need some kind of an arbiter of truth. And for me, that's the body. The body is the place that we have to inhabit for good, bad, or indifferent. And so the body is actually where we can discover what is the truest of the true of the true to us. I don't mean whether the sun is yellow or whether the sky is blue or anything like that, I mean, what feels true to us, our own truth. And that is discovered and inhabited in the body, because the body is where we live.

And so, to be embodied is to be in tune with our body's own, our... And when I say body, I mean a mind, body, the connection of a mind, heart and bodies, some use the term soma, right? Our soma. Our entire bodily systems reality. What is true for me in this particular circumstance, this convergence of time and space and age and race and class and so on. No one has what is true for me, I'm the only one that can be the arbiter of that. But if I'm in the arbiter of it only with my mind, then I'm using other people's ideas. My body becomes the place that I can find resonance with what is true for me.

I can't explain it more than that because everybody has their own, right? Like everybody has their own. And it's that place where you go, "Oh, this is true." Like falling in love and you're just like, "Oh, that's true." There's no argument. There's no fighting. It lands in you as this is what... We move from, "I think it's true," we move from looking upward and into our head and dropping down somewhere. Generally, it's often around in our belly. We talk about gut instinct. We know it to be true for ourselves. So to be embodied is to be able to get in tune with that and hopefully to return to that truth over and over again.

TS: OK. Let me ask you a couple of questions about this that may seem obvious, but I don't think they're necessarily obvious to the listener, which is, how do you know when you're disembodied in some way? How do you know what are the signs that you know in your own experience?

RaKw: That I'm not able to feel comfortable in my own skin. That being in my skin there's a constant state of being pulled by my mental activity and so that I don't feel settled in my body and in my skin.

TS: And when you discovered that experience, I presume it still happens. At times you find yourself this happened, that happened, maybe a bunch of things happened really quickly all at once, and you're like, "Holy God," what do you do to re-embodiment?

RaKw: Well, I call it dropping in or returning to myself. And in order to do that and get it out of the woo-woo space where it sounds like, "What does that mean?" I've chosen to bring my attention to a particular location, which is in my belly. And to have that... A lot of people refer to as their core in my lower belly and I bring my attention back to my lower belly and kind of sit there, right? It's almost like you just sit down right there in your low

belly and take a moment of resting there with my breath.

And so that's the whole activity. Like I return to myself, I drop in, I pull my attention away from the external and draw my attention inside into my low belly and with my breath, and I rest there for a moment. And if I can manage it, I rest there again. If I can manage it, I rest there again. And so that dropping in for me is a returning. People get weirded out by the term "self" and they go, "Wait a minute. Is there a self?" I'm not getting into that. I'm just talking about in this physiological being that there is a point of returning to myself that I find clarifies the external goings on including the external goings on of my mind.

TS: Rev. angel, you're a gorgeous meditation teacher and I wonder if, as part of this, you could actually guide us, guide our listeners right now in that practice that you just described related to resting in our belly. And part of it is, you never know, people come to a conversation like this, what level of embodiment are they experiencing as they listen? And I want to go even deeper with you into this topic of belonging, but I think it would be great for all of us to be more embodied as we do so.

RaKw: Yes. Thank you. And I want to share, Tami, that the reason that I developed this particular practice, and I call it a point meditation, is precisely because I realized that so many of us are asked to do practices and invited to do things and our ability to discern what is right for us and what is true for us just doesn't exist because we're not even comfortable being with ourselves or we don't have the capacity to return to ourselves, to even have discernment about what we're being asked to do and how we feel about it and how it's landing with us.

So it's all theory until we can actually have a point of reference for, "How is this for me?" And this returning to a point of reference away from the distractions of everything else is my prescription, if you will, to undergird any other kinds of practices we have, right? To be able to return to ourselves and be the arbiters of our own truth, to have our own belonging is the way that I feel that every single person would then have a way to discover what works for them.

So the practice is meant to be really simple, and I'm going to say what it is, and then I'm going to walk us through it. It's really as simple as this, we're choosing a point where our attention awareness is at and everything else is other than point. And that's the practice. So we choose a point. That's where our attention awareness rests and everything else is other than point, so that when we find ourselves at other than point, we simply come back to point. We don't argue with it, we don't judge it, we don't concern ourselves whether we were getting it right or not, we just come back to point.

So here's how it works. So I invite you to find yourself a comfortable space of being upright and present. Even if you're walking, this is about really choosing to be present for this duration of time and bring your attention to your breath, wherever it is that you notice it in your breath, in your body. And of all the places that your attention could be now that you've located your breath, allow your attention to flow with your breath down into your low belly, just beneath the navel and just behind the navel.

So just right at that kind of midsection of our body, we call it the core. And take a moment and let your attention just rest there on your breath as it is in the low belly, because we

get a little caught up and we think, “Oh, if I’m focusing here, it gets really tight.” We’re just going to add a sense of awareness so there’s some spaciousness around that area. So it doesn’t have to be super precise. It’s just right there, basically your attention awareness on your breath resting in the low belly. Once you feel like you’ve kind of dropped in there a little bit, we’d just call that the point and everything else is other than point. And thoughts are other than point. Worrying about the past or the future is other than point.

And when you find yourself at other than point, because you will, just pick up your attention awareness and return it gently and firmly to point, which is your breath as it rests in the low belly. So if you find yourself fantasizing, you can return to point. If you find yourself doing a to-do list, return to point. Over and over again, however it is that you find yourself at other than point, you simply gently and firmly bring your attention back to point.

And that’s it. It’s as simple as that. And then you can bring any formal practice of a point meditation to close by some kind of gesture that just allows you to release any tightness around it or any sort of overly tight focus and maybe sometimes people just touch the palms on their legs or touch their heart or they bring their palms together, whatever it is that works for you.

The main thing is that really anything can be point but we start with this particular location because physiologically it does quiet our nervous system, and it kicks in our parasympathetic systems so that we begin to feel a sense of relaxation and ease. That was not just my speaking, that is actually the way your body responds to returning to that particular location in your body.

TS: Rev. angel, I can say from my own meditation experience what you’re describing in terms of bringing our attention and awareness down into the lower belly has this huge calming effect. I’ve never understood why, though. So as you’re saying, it’s relates to how our physiology and nervous system operates. Can you explain that to me?

RaKw: Yes. So we have a sympathetic nervous system, which is reactive. We want to see what’s going on and it makes us overly alert. And we have our parasympathetic nervous system. They call it the relax- and actually it’s also for our digestive system- so relax and repair, right? So relax and repair, or get ready to fight like you’re ready to flee. So fight or flight, repair and relax. And so, parasympathetic nervous system is induced, first of all, by attention on our breath and also in our core, in our gut, which is where our digestive system is.

When we bring our attention to our gut, we’re basically telling the whole system we’re OK. And so the distinction in the point practice... And I want to say this because a lot of people may be thinking, “Well, I do that and then I name...” There’s no naming involved, right? There’s no noting, there’s no anything else. It is literally just there’s a point and there’s other than point and everything else is other than point is what you come back to point for.

And the precision of it and the simplicity of it, which is what is so gorgeous. And for me, it tells me that we have available to us all of what we need to be able to generate a feeling and a quality of belonging to ourselves. And it’s right there. And it’s so simple and it’s so

precise. And in an era in which many people have been, I want to say, distracted by external forces or overly placed their attention on teachers that have maybe gone astray and made people question their own practice, I felt like we all need a practice that is entirely our own.

TS: Beautiful. Now I want to ask a question that I could imagine is part of the space right now listening to this. So belonging belongs to me here, the belly, feeling embodied, feeling at home. But look, when I get up off of my chair or stop walking in nature being in my belly, I'm facing a world where there's so much injustice, where I'm clearly being considered part of the out group and discriminated against, and there are structural systems in place that say you don't belong. We can't just describe this conversation as a type of self-belonging and embodiment practice. So how do you put that all together, Rev. angel?

RaKw: Well, I'll say if you don't know me, I'm black, I'm female, I'm queer, I have a disability, I've got all the little markers for being out group, marginalized, oppressed, and all of the things. And I developed this practice precisely for that reason, because I needed to be able to have a way in which my belonging is inherent, that it is not about what other people think of me, what other people are telling me about who I am, about what I can accomplish, what I'm allowed to have, that intrinsic sense of the human desire to have a sense of belonging to not just people, but belonging to existence.

This practice, for me, was my way of developing the capacity to situate myself in that. And to situate myself in that not only when I'm doing the formal practice, but also when I get up off the cushion and I go out in the world and things feel shaky and someone is threatening my sense of belonging to a group or to a situation, an institution, a sitting group, whatever it is that I have that, that that is with me and it is with me all the time. It doesn't leave me because it is me.

And one could say it is a deeper version of wherever you go, there you are. There I am belonging to myself. It's inherent and it can't be taken away. And I will say and we have been taught that somehow our belonging is predicated on what someone else says. And I think that that is faulty and we need to return to ourselves and be able to have that and that is most essential for people that feel themselves marginalized in all sorts of ways.

TS: One of the sessions in the series is focused on forgiveness. And I want to bring that up because I think one of the things that can happen is people can think of, "OK. This is kind of up to me, but I'm still really mad. In fact, outraged and grief-stricken, all of that because all of the ways early on in my life, I wasn't given a setup where I belonged," early attachment wounding, other kinds of wounding. And I want to understand more the emphasis you place on forgiveness and speaking directly to that person who says, "Yes, there's a lot for me and no, I haven't forgiven."

RaKw: Well, I want to give a little bit of background about this practice in particular because it was my practice and it was what I did, and I shared it with some people. And

actually, we got a group of people going still to this day at the beginning of the pandemic. And this body of people from all sorts of backgrounds, all ages, some people had a practice of meditation before, some people had none, all queer from their 20s to their 70s, all sorts of people, people that have been wounded in many different ways.

And so, I will share that consistently that this practice has allowed people to get underneath the response to the wounds and the ways in which their families, their communities, their moms and dads did not create a space, the societies and institutions did not create a space of belonging for them. And it has helped them get in and come back to what they're feeling that is underneath that, which is the sense of rejection, fear, all of these kinds of wounds that come about as a result of that.

And by reconciling with one's own feeling, one's own experience, by coming into contact with one's own feeling and own experience, a lot of the ways that we then turn our attention to what the other people have done, it dissipates. It goes away because what we're really wanting to do is to have some healing around the hurt that that has caused us. And the fact is that if we have to wait for everyone that has done something to us to come and we have to reconcile with them and fix it and have them say they're sorry, we have a long journey of suffering ahead of us.

And I'm about liberation. I'm about us being able to be free in and of ourselves enough to be able to move through our lives in a way that allows us to be as thriving and powerful and dignified and OK as we can possibly be.

So the forgiveness is actually our way of ritualizing permission to move on, to not have our ability to reconcile pain and difficulty be incumbent on working it out with the other person. So it isn't about forgiveness- I go and get them and tell them that now I have forgiven you- but it is a self-practice of releasing ourselves from the dynamic in which we're wanting something from the other person that we can't necessarily ever get. If we do get it and that comes about, that's great.

But for me, liberatory practices are about what we can do for ourselves, how we can get ourselves free of the ways in which we are caught or stuck in the dynamics of the past or fixations on the future and allow ourselves to simply be present.

TS: OK. Rev. angel, I'm going to ask you a question. I've asked this question before, and I do feel I'm making progress. It's slow, but I still get to ask it again, which is when it comes to forgiveness, I used to ask the question and I say, "Well, what if you were to get like 80%, but it's just that last 20% you can't let go of, you can't move on, you can't find the real actual freedom that's possible." And now I'll say, what if you're at like 97% but there's some part of you that's still just holding on. You can't quite fully say, "I'm moving on now. I'm only holding myself back by continuing to roll through the narrative." What do you do with that, I'll just say, 3%, I might be exaggerating, 5% that's left?

RaKw: I mean, I think one of the things I love about the point practice is that it is really about being present with what is. And so it's not a bypass, it's not a suppression. And so it's like, "OK, you know what? That's where I'm at." And so we can hold that with a sense of kindness and consideration for ourselves. It's amazing. You all are 97%, good. Right?

And then, say, acknowledge for ourselves that this 3%, I'm still working with that. I'm good with it. I'm OK. Right? I'm OK and I'm going to move forward with that, because that includes us and it doesn't situate us in some kind of aspiration to going beyond exactly where we are. We can say, "Yes, I would like to do this and right now I'm good, and I'm also acknowledging that that 3% I'm still working with it. I'm not quite ready."

We have people say that all the time. They're like, "Yes, I'm still working with this and I'm good." And there's an amazing power in being OK with even the places in which we wish that we could do something different, or maybe somebody is encouraging us, we can be okay with that too. This is not a sport where we're trying to get some kind of brass ring and accomplish and sort of overcome ourselves, this is about being present with the truth of where we are, being able to face that, seeing if there's something that we can work with and whatever feels like, no, this is just where it is right now, we can be OK with that too.

TS: OK. And in the midst of doing this belly point practice, if what comes up is some type of intense emotional experience of some kind, we're going back to just being with the point. That emotion isn't really to be part of the object of our meditation, is it? Or how do we work with the intense emotions that might come up?

RaKw: Yes. So intense emotions are bound to come up and so what we're doing is actually being embodied. And so we're coming, actually, back to the sensation that surrounds the emotion. Emotion arises as a reaction to the sensation. So what we're doing is we're coming back to the sensation, not to have a dialogue or discussion about it or how do I feel about it, but rather the sensation itself.

If it feels too intense, just back off a little bit, right? Just have a little bit of space around it, where it's like, OK, I can kind of get next to it, I can sit right down next to that sensation. But I always say to people, "If your path to liberation is creating contraction," and I think contraction and suffering are synonymous, "then you're not generating liberation, right?" And so back off and allow yourself the space to say like, "This is as close as I can get right now," and that's what we're returning to.

We're not trying to overcome. Maybe therapy is for that, maybe there are other practices, in this point practice, all we're doing is presencing ourselves with what is, coming back to point. And anything else that is not presencing ourselves with what is, we're simply letting that be. If we are finding that we are creating contraction in returning, then just ease off, right? Move a little bit further away from what that point of intense emotion feels like, just set a little bit to the left or a little bit to the right.

And that's why I call it attention awareness, which is awareness has spaciousness and allows us to move. Attention is precise, but awareness has some spaciousness and it's like, "Oh yes, I can get kind of close to it and I can look at it from here and feel comfortable and at ease here." That doesn't mean that we're not able to sit with discomfort. We can sit with discomfort, but if the discomfort is creating new suffering, then that's not a path to liberation.

TS: Now this is a very powerful statement that for you suffering and contraction are synonymous, how did you come to that and what do you mean by that?

RaKw: About a year, two years ago... Time is all funny now. About two years ago, I was at Upaya Zen Center and they gave me the opportunity to do some classic Buddhist teaching. And so in the Buddhist teaching, there's this fundamental idea that life is characterized by what is called a dukkha. And dukkha is often translated as suffering. A lot of people are like, "Wow, these Buddhists are weird. They're always talking about life as suffering."

And so it's really characterized, right? Life is characterized by suffering, but I realized people get confused by that idea. And so it sounds like a bummer. And so in order to bring it to an embodied understanding, I was like, "Well, what is that? How do we know suffering? How do we know big suffering, little suffering, in-between suffering?" And I realized in an embodied way, the way we can recognize it empirically in our body is contraction. That when we contract, when we move away from life, when our body is pulling in away from life, that that is suffering, that that's suffering. So that contraction is suffering.

When we are thriving, we move towards life. We allow ourselves or we are present in it. And our bodies, our nervous system can be relaxed and at ease. Once our nervous system begins to contract, we can describe that as suffering. And so it is my embodied way of speaking about what can begin to become a theoretical space of suffering.

TS: It also seems like there are some really good moment to moment practice instructions or life instructions in what you're describing.

RaKw: Yes, definitely. So even in a moment, if I notice that the top of my belly slightly to the left gets that little feeling of pulling in, it's like, "Oh yes, there's some contraction there." And if I check in with that feeling, it's a sensation of contraction. It's like, "Oh, I don't like the way that person said this thing to me." And every emotion that we have is traceable to a sensation in our bodies, by the way, in case that's not apparent.

So every emotion we have, actually, it is an emanation of a sensation. And so everything that shows up for us, if we can trace the sensation in our body, then we can find some relationship with it. The other way I think of suffering is to be out of relationship, right? When we're out of relationship with ourselves then suffering arises, contraction arises and we use a phrase, "I found myself."

Well, when we find ourselves, it means we're away from ourselves and so this idea of coming back to ourselves so that we... Not that we don't leave ourselves, but when we do leave, as soon as we recognize it, we come back. So that's an embodied way. And as you described in our pointing to, it's a way that we can have a moment-to-moment practice of being aware of our experience, of suffering not as this big thought space, but rather here it is right here in our body. I'm contracting, I feel my buttocks tightening. I feel my legs tighten. I feel my toes curling up, right? I feel my shoulders drawing up. I feel the back of my head getting tight. I feel this in my body. We're embodied beings. And so our suffering

happens in the body and our liberation happens in the body.

TS: Now, one of the things, Rev. angel, I wanted to understand more has to do with the subtitle of the series, From Fear to Freedom on the Path to True Community. And it's this notion of what is true community that I'd like to understand. I hear from so many people, "I'm looking for community, I don't have community. There's an epidemic of loneliness. There's no such thing as community. It's a myth. Online community, come on, that's not community." What do you mean by true community?

RaKw: For me, true community is you have a feeling in the presence of others which begins with yourself and it has to begin with yourself in order for you to know what is true for you, right? So you have to know what it is in yourself to feel at ease in your body and to not feel as if you have to cut a part of yourself off or leave a part of yourself behind in order to feel that sense of belonging. So true community is when you can be present with others and you do not have the sense of having had to check part of yourself at the door in order to gain access to membership to that community. I would say that that is a club, it's not community.

And we all know some ways in which we just take it as a given that if I want to be a part of this group, community, family, I have to leave this part of myself, I have to leave the queer part of myself behind. I have to leave the racialized part of myself behind, the part of myself that speaks colloquially in this way, the way that I speak with other black folks. I can't say folks, I have to say people, right? Like my voice has to get a little bit tighter. I have to hold myself in a certain way.

And so that leaving part of ourselves behind- before we know it, we don't know who we are anymore. And so true community are spaces in which we feel that we are accepted in the wholeness of who we are. And that doesn't mean that every part of who we are is expressed in every given moment, that's not possible. But that the body, the collective of people that we are in relationship with, there is no request to leave a part of ourselves behind in order to be accepted in this group of people.

TS: And this is a difficult question to ask, but I'm going to ask it on behalf of someone who might be having this experience. What if someone says, "I don't have true community anywhere in my life. I don't have it with my family. I can't bring my full self there. I don't have it at work and I don't have a kind of intimate partner that I feel I can bring all of me to. I don't have a true community, Rev. angel."

RaKw: Yes. And that's why you have to begin with developing that sense of your own belonging because when you are... The closer you are- and it's ongoing-the closer you are in relationship to yourself, the more that you will generate connection with people that allow for you to be who you are. We get into dynamic with your family and there is underlying agreement, a tacit agreement that this is how we be together. And you leave that part and as long as you leave that part and leave that part behind, then we can get along here. As you become more aligned with yourself, it no longer becomes tolerable for

you to leave parts of yourself behind. And as a result of that, you will generate relationships and you'll seek out and you will find relationships with people that will be comfortable with allowing you to be who you are.

That is tolerable for you is the first thing that needs to shift. And it will shift as you become more comfortable within your own being. And there are plenty of people that are out there. We all find our ways to those kinds of communities, but first we have to have the commitment and impulse to go and search for it and that commitment comes because we're committed to ourselves. We're committed to becoming whole, we're committed to the healing of those parts of us that have been left behind.

TS: Well, one of the things you teach on, you brought up this phrase in the series that we can come upon these crossroads of belonging in our life and that these are these crossroads where we have to make some tough decisions, as you're describing here, telling ourselves the truth. And I thought, for myself, the biggest crossroads I ever came upon had to do with academia. That I had to admit I don't fit in the academic world. I think differently. I feel differently. I write differently.

I'm not an academic, but at 20, that was a big, terrible crossroads for me because everything in my upbringing had prepared me to be a successful professor and that's not was happening, actually, if I told myself the truth. And I was wondering, for you, Rev. angel, what would you say have been the big crossroads of belonging? When I ask this question, do you think of one or two crossroads that you had to go through, and what was that like? How'd you make it through?

RaKw: Yes. I'll say one very early one is as a person that was mixed in sort of my locations and how people related to me, the question that you asked right at the beginning about this choosing places of belonging and having to find your own belonging. The crossroad that I had to make for myself is that part of what it meant to be a part of black communities, at least the ones that I was a part of at the time, was that I had to, kind of like, make fun. It was like there was a thing about making fun of other people, right? And I grew up with a lot of Asian people. And at the time there were lots of jokes about Asian people. We're always making jokes and it was sort of part of the culture at the time.

And Chris Rock would make jokes about Chinese people and so on. And I really wanted to be a part of the black crew and be down with the folks. And I just realized that I couldn't do this. That that wasn't going to be how I was going to create my sense of belonging was on the backs of other people. And as a person marginalized and as a person oppressed, that was a critical decision for me to say that I'm not going to let the overarching society and the demand to try to claw your way into belonging mean that I was going to stand on the backs of other people.

The other one is- and I'm going to actually change my mind midstream about the other one- the other one that was really critical for me and it's actually connected to my sense of forgiveness and how I built my understanding of forgiveness is I was abused when I was a child. And I had, it was a woman that was my father's girlfriend at the time and she was quite abusive. And then later I went to live with my grandfather and he lived near where she lived and I was moving through my life in this way in which it was like you just didn't deal with stuff like that, you just kind of like put it aside and you just kept moving. And

that's what I was always told is you just keep moving.

But I had to decide that I was going to confront this person and go back to them so that I could feel at ease in my own body, even though that meant disrupting in my family this secret that was like something that nobody wanted to talk about anymore. So through that, I confronted both forgiveness, which is I forgave that person so that I could move on, and I also allowed myself to disrupt the secrets in my family that many people in the family wanted to keep quiet.

TS: I want to talk a little bit more about going through these crossroads of belonging because I want to hear from your perspective, but just to share, one of the things I found is that a tremendous amount of human capacity is developed when we go through a crossroads and we are true to ourselves. We talk about a way to grow yourself, there is nothing like it. I mean, it's kind of walking through a fire and I'm wondering how you see that, what happens when you actually choose, in your language, true community, instead, like, "No, I'm not going to be part of this thing, it's not true for me."

RaKw: The way that I feel that it happens in my body is that I find greater resonance with myself, right? So I find more ease in my body, I find less contraction. That's what I mean by more ease. I find that the arguments that I have about like, do I do this or do I do that? Do I let this happen or do I let that happen? In other words, do I let other people and external things determine my path, right? And what happens for me is that every time I go through crossroads, I become more and more clear that I am the only person that can live the life that I have, and that any time that I am not living in a way that is true to myself, even if it upsets people that I love and that I care about, that the fact is that I'm not giving them the whole of who I am to begin with.

And so that the only way that I can have true relationships with people is to be true to myself. And the only way to be clear about what it means to become true to myself is to move through those crossroads and to make the difficult choices of perhaps losing people, losing face, losing position, losing access, losing things that are external in favor of that resonance with a belonging to myself. That I have to be able to tolerate living in my body and in my existence.

And that that is paramount and more important to me than anything else not because I'm selfish and because I just don't care about anyone else, because that's the only way that I can actually be true in my relationships in my life. It's the only way that I can have true community is to be true to myself.

TS: All right. I just have two more questions for you, Rev. angel. The first one is to understand a little bit more about true community for you within your Zen lineage. You're the second black woman to be named a Sensei, which is a term for a Zen teacher in the Japanese Buddhist tradition. And I thought to myself, "How is it that you've been able somehow to work within your lineage in a form of true community?" And I'm saying that because I think a lot of people find a lot of difficulty with various aspects of these Eastern traditions and the culture that came with the traditions, and how are you working this out?

RaKw: I mean, I didn't, is the truth. My exploration of belonging, the thing that I was almost going to say about the crossroads was actually coming to the crossroads of having to decide that being true to myself was more important than my titles and all of the things that seemed to be required of me in the conventional Zen lineage.

And so I was a breakaway, I broke away and decided that staying true to myself was more important. And so I broke away from the priestly path as I was supposed to do it, I broke away and started my own community. I broke away when my teacher at the time of resisted that, and felt that I should not be supported. As a result of that, I just kept going my own way. And eventually, I think either they've realized that they weren't going to be able to contain me, I ended up being, I want to say, being received by particular people in the community and they just had to live with it.

But I had to break a lot. I broke away a lot and it was not easy. And it went against everything about how we were trained, about how it was supposed to be, but I already had from the incidents that I shared with you earlier, I already had the sense that like, "Well, the only way that I can be true, I don't need to be a Zen teacher or a Zen anything if I'm not going to be true to myself." And so I really put all of the work and practice and the movement that I had attained in that lineage on the line in order to be true to myself.

After you become a Sensei in the Zen lineage, there's a tacit agreement and I think also an explicit agreement, that then people have to leave you be, to do what you will do. And so I'm pretty unbothered by what other people have to say as a result of that. I want to say to people, "I've made a habit of being true to myself, right? I've developed a habit, a consistent habit that feels more natural to me than anything, than not being true to myself. And you can do that. Every single one of us can do that and I think we're all entitled to do that."

And so I've caused disruption, I've pushed back. I have caused fissures in that process, many times painful, painful breaks in relationships with people, but I feel clear and I feel true to myself and I wouldn't have done it any other way. I wish there weren't so many moments of pain for people, but I wouldn't have done it any other way.

TS: Breakaway Sensei.

RaKw: Exactly. And people have asked that quite a few times. They're like, "Wow, how have you done that?" I've had to give up a lot. And at this age and at this moment, it can seem like from the outside like, "Oh, you've got this and that, and you wrote your own book and done all of these things," but I have given up access and entitlements over and over again. Income, so on and so forth, you name it, I have given it up in favor of being true to myself.

TS: Well, I just want to take a moment and recognize you from my heart and really a deep bow, deep, deep bow, because I know something in some small amount at least of the

courage that it takes to be a breakaway. So, how totally awesome Rev. angel is.

RaKw: Right. Thank you.

TS: All right. The last question I want to ask you is in this series on belonging, you share that you've held, really for yourself, this question about developing a deeper understanding of the process of change, how people change, how people commit more to themselves in the context of this conversation in a path of liberation, what are some of the key points you found about understanding the process of change that can help people in that process, wherever they might be as a listener?

RaKw: I found the main reason that people don't change is because they don't want to. [laughs]

TS: That's pretty good. That's pretty gosh darn good.

RaKw: No matter what they are saying. And what I mean by that is that we have ideas about changing, but if you look deeper and you're not changing, or you're not moving along whatever path it is in the way that you want to, it's because there's something that you value more and that you are more committed to, that you may not be acknowledging or you may not just be in touch with.

And so that's one- that the only reason people don't change is because you're not committed enough or you have a higher order of priority or commitment, whether explicit or implicit. And so if you go searching for it and figure out what it is... I love to give the example of I think about running in the morning, but I have a higher priority of sleep. I have an autoimmune illness and sleep is the thing that allows for the most healing. So I prioritize that.

Mostly it's hidden. So what it ends up is I get to five o'clock and I go, "Wow, I didn't run again." It's because I chose something over it. The other thing that I find and it is, again, why I developed the point meditation is because actually most of the practices of rigor that are required for any kind of change practice are predicated to us being able to be aware that we're off track. And if you don't have a practice of coming back to yourself, then you will not have a practice of being able to understand that you're off. So you have to actually be able to return in order to understand that you're away.

In other words, you have to be able to have point in order to understand other than point, because the whole juice of any meditation practice is not in being on point and it's obviously not in being other than point, it's actually being aware and then taking an action and coming back. And so in order to have any change practice and process unfold, you have to be able to be aware that you are somewhere other than where you intend to be. And if you don't have a practice that enables you to take action at that very moment

that you realize that you are other than point, then your practice of change is going to fall apart. And then that deeper commitment, right? That being able to sort and discern, what is it that matters? So I talked about that place in our belly, in our core, and returning to that.

The other reason that it's the core, that low belly that we return to, is because the core in the yoga tradition, that it's the third Chakra or the dantien or the hara. In all sorts of systems, it's our seat of power. It's where action comes from. And so if we return to our seat of action and we couple that with an awareness of what it is that matters to us, we can couple what matters to us and be clear about what it is that matters to us most so that we can take action on it. And if you're not clear about what it is that matters to you most, you will not be able to take action.

TS: I have to say, Rev. angel, this conversation has been really healing and empowering for me and I'm sure for our listeners. I just want to thank you so much.

RaKw: Thank you so much. It's really a pleasure to talk to you. And I wish we could do it more.

TS: Yes. You and I, we're going to do that. I've been speaking with Rev. angel Kyodo williams. With Sounds True, she's created a new audio learning series, it's called Belonging: From Fear to Freedom on the Path to True Community. Check it out.

For more inspiration, join this Saturday's Awakin Call with social justice activist Alexie Torres, "Cultivating the Soul of the Movement," more details and RSVP info [here](#).